

# Book, app help teens with autism make friends

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Socially challenged teens and young adults, such as those with autism, often have trouble making and keeping friends and can become easy targets for bullying, a situation that challenges their coping skills.

Now, a new book written by a UCLA researcher can guide parents in helping their children become more adept at establishing meaningful connections with their [peers](#). An accompanying DVD and mobile application called FriendMaker is designed to provide real time advice and video demonstrations of appropriate behavior for the teens and young adults when they find themselves in a challenging [social situation](#).

The book, "The Science of Making Friends," and the app are based on research done in the UCLA Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills (PEERS) Clinic, the only evidence-based social skills intervention available for teens and young adults with autism, ADHD, anxiety, depression and other social impairments.

The strategies in the book, while geared to the socially challenged, could also apply to any teen who is trying to fit in or is being bullied, said author Dr. Elizabeth Laugeson, director of the PEERS Clinic and an assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at the UCLA Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior.

"Kids with special needs are already at a disadvantage. They have trouble reading social cues and interpreting the thoughts and feelings of others," Laugeson said. "Because of this, they are more likely to be teased and

bullied, and they don't always know how to respond appropriately. Kids with autism in particular often exhibit odd behavior, which sets them up to be teased and bullied. They also tend to be isolated and alone, making them even easier targets."

The book is the only research-based approach for helping socially challenged teens and young adults and provides a step-by-step guide to help parents, educators and others to provide social coaching. It includes concrete rules and specific steps of social etiquette identified through research that improve conversational skills, expand social opportunities, identify strategies for handling peer rejection and develop and enhance friendships.

Lessons are presented using teaching narratives, followed by the key rules and steps of social behavior. A DVD companion includes video demonstrations of the book's lessons using role playing. The mobile app, for use on iPhones and iPads, provides an overview of the rules and steps with embedded video demonstrations, something the user could access as a social situation is unfolding.

"We know we can help the kids that go through the PEERS program, but this book was written for families that can't access PEERS," Laugeson said. "Parents are with their kids the majority of the time and are in a unique position to be social coaches for their children. Parents give advice constantly, but it's not always the best advice. With this book, they're not just teaching what they think their children should do, but what we know actually works through research."

One such scenario is helping kids deal with teasing and bullying. Parents might advise their children to walk away, ignore their tormentor or tell an adult. However, those behaviors can make them appear weak and an easier target. Laugeson said research has shown that when teased, it's more effective to respond with a comeback that shows what the bully

said didn't bother or embarrass them.

"The Science of Making Friends" includes narrative sections for parents and shorter, kid-friendly chapter summaries for teens and [young adults](#) that outline the rules and social steps they should abide by, followed by chapter exercises and homework. Completing these exercises is critical, Laugeson said, because these are skills that must be practiced.

"Many people think of social skills as an art, skills that you are born with, that come hardwired," Laugeson said. "We think of social skills as a science, and we call this book, 'The Science of Making Friends' because we believe [social skills](#) are something you can study and something you can teach."

**More information:** The book is published by Jossey-Bass, a Wiley imprint, and is available on Amazon. The mobile app, FriendMaker, is available through iTunes.

Provided by University of California, Los Angeles

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