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Finding Their People

Helping your ADHD child make a friend, keep a friend, and bounce back when it hurts



By Megan Ryan

FOR PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH ADHD

Before We Start

Picture this. It's Friday, and your seven-year-old climbs into the car after school. Usually you get a shrug and a "fine" when you ask about his day. Today you don't have to ask. "Nobody played with me at recess," he says, staring out the window. "Everybody was playing tag and they said the teams were full." You ask what he did instead. "Walked around the fence." Twenty-two minutes of recess. Walked around the fence.

You keep your voice steady for the rest of the drive, and then you sit in the driveway after he goes inside because you can't quite go in yet.

If you have had a version of that drive, you know why this book exists. Of everything that comes with parenting an ADHD kiddo, the friendship piece is the one that gets us right in the chest. We can build a morning routine. We can learn to keep our own cool. But watching your child stand on the outside of a group and not know how to get in is a different kind of hard, because you can't do it for them.

Here's the good news: friendship is a skill set, not a personality trait. Skills can be practiced. And for kids ages 5-8, you still have an enormous amount of influence over who they spend time with, what those times look like, and how they recover when something goes wrong. That window narrows in the tween years. Right now it's wide open.

Each chapter in this guide teaches one strategy. I'll show you a real-feeling scene first, explain what's happening in your child's brain and body, then hand you a game plan, a way to practice it at home, and the words to try. You will also find a chapter on something most parents of ADHD kids notice long before anyone gives them a name for it: our kids take things personally. A friend picks someone else for a partner, and it's the end of the world. That's not drama. There's a real explanation, and there's a real way to help, and we'll get there in Chapter 4.

Quick version of who's talking to you: Hi! I'm Megan and I'm a Family and Consumer Sciences professional. I taught in a public school classroom for years, I designed curriculum for adult learners for decades, I have ADHD myself (diagnosed at 44), and my son was diagnosed at age 5. I have sat in that driveway. I have also watched my son find his people, slowly and then all at once, and I want that for your kid too. When I say "we" in these pages, I mean you and me. No judgment here. I have done most of the things in the "guilty as charged" lists myself.

So, let's see if we can get your child one good friend. One is enough to start. Progress, not perfection.

Why Friendship Is Hard for ADHD Brains

Making a friend sounds like it should be the easy part of childhood. Show up, play, done. For an ADHD brain, friendship asks for almost every skill that ADHD makes harder, all at the same time.

A recent review of the research laid out several reasons kids with ADHD struggle to make and keep friends (Neprily et al., 2025). The core symptoms themselves get in the way: an impulsive kid grabs the toy, blurts the answer, or changes the game mid-game. Executive function differences make it hard to stop, wait, and take turns (Kofler et al., 2024). Reading social cues, like noticing that a friend's face just changed, is harder when attention is bouncing between five things. Big feelings arrive fast and are hard to rein in (Shaw et al., 2014), so a small disappointment at recess can turn into a large one. And, the finding I found most interesting, kids with ADHD tend to pick friends who are a lot like them, which can mean two impulsive kids feeding off each other with no calm one in the mix (Spender et al., 2023).

The result is real. A systematic review found that children with ADHD have fewer friends, lower-quality friendships, and rougher interactions with peers than their classmates (Spender et al., 2023). Parents in a 2025 study named emotional dysregulation as one of the top challenges for their ADHD kids across the board (Sainsbury et al., 2025), and emotional dysregulation is exactly what shows up when a game goes wrong.

Your child's social world is shaped by a whole team of adults, not just you. At school, when you can't be there, how a teacher handles a group project gone sideways or a hard moment at recess has a lot to do with how classmates see your child. The research backs this up. When researchers pooled the studies on friendship programs for kids with ADHD, autism, and other neurodevelopmental differences, the programs that worked best involved teachers and classmates, not just parents (Cordier et al., 2023). So your job is to set up the conditions, coach your child, and get the other adults in their life working with you. That's why this book ends with a chapter about teachers, coaches, and other parents. You're the organizer, not the entire team.

Now for some good news. Research suggests that having even one friend may help protect a child from being picked on (Spender et al., 2023). Not five friends. One. We're going to aim for one.

Getting Ready to Get Ready: Your Friendship Toolkit

Three small things to set up before Chapter 1.

1 A friendship notebook (or a note on your phone)

You're going to be watching and jotting for a couple of weeks, the same way a detective would. Who does your child light up around? Who do they mention twice? What was happening right before a playdate went sideways? Nothing fancy. Just observations you can look back on.

2 A stoplight poster

Occupational therapists and speech-language therapists often use a stoplight to help kids notice how a social moment is going. Green light means the play is working: everyone's having fun, bodies are calm enough, turns are happening. Orange light means slow down: someone's getting too loud, too grabby, too bossy, or too silly, and the other kid's face is changing. Red light means stop and reset: someone is crying, hitting, or has left the game. Draw three circles on a piece of paper with your child, let them color the lights, and put it somewhere they'll see it. You'll use it in Chapters 2, 3, and 4, and your child will get better at spotting their own orange light with practice.

3 A short list of the adults

Write down the names of the grown-ups who see your child around other kids: the classroom teacher, the aftercare lead, the coach, the next door neighbor, the parent of the kid they like. These are your teammates. Chapter 5 is about them.

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CHAPTER 1

One Friend Is Enough

Finding the right kid, not the popular one

From the sidelines

It's a Saturday morning soccer game, and you're watching your six-year-old daughter from a camp chair. You've had your eye on a girl from her class named Harper for weeks. Harper is kind, calm, well-liked, the kind of kid every parent hopes their child will befriend. You've set up two playdates with Harper's mom. Both were awful. Your daughter got loud, Harper got quiet, your daughter got louder to fill the silence, and by the end Harper was reading a book on the couch while your daughter did cartwheels in the yard alone.

Meanwhile, there's a kid named Theo on the team who your daughter cannot stop talking about. Theo is a lot. Theo talks constantly, runs everywhere, and once got a yellow card for hugging the goalie. Every time the two of them are together, they are loud and happy and completely absorbed in some game they invented on the spot. You've been quietly steering her away from Theo, because two of them together seems like double trouble.

Under the surface

Most of us have a picture in our heads of the friend we want for our child, and that picture is usually a calm, well-liked, easygoing kid who will be a "good influence." That's a loving instinct. It also skips over the most important question, which is who your child actually connects with.

Kids with ADHD tend to gravitate toward other kids who move and think the way they do (Spender et al., 2023). To us parents, that can look like a problem waiting to happen. But a friendship where both kids feel matched, where neither one is exhausting the other, is a friendship with a real chance of lasting. Harper wasn't a bad choice. She was a mismatch. Your daughter spent both playdates working hard to earn Harper's interest and failed each time. That was hard on her and there isn't a reason to make her try again if it's not a fit.

The research on this is more balanced than "birds of a feather." A narrative review of friendship in ADHD recommends that parents help their child spend time with peers who have prosocial qualities, meaning kids who are generally kind, share, and include others, and that parents stay close enough to step in and problem-solve when things go sideways (Neprily et al., 2025). Notice what that does not say. It does not say calm. It does not say popular. Theo, the goalie hugger, is affectionate, enthusiastic, and inclusive. Those are prosocial qualities. He's also loud, which isn't a character flaw. Some really awesome people are just…loud.

The game plan: find the match, not the model

1. **Look for the light-up.** For two weeks, jot down who your child mentions, who they run to at pickup, who they ask to invite. You are looking for the kid who makes your child's face change. That's your lead.

2. **Ask the teacher one question.** "Who does she seem to gravitate toward at recess or in class?" Teachers see thirty hours a week of social life you don't. Most will answer this easily.

3. **Check for prosocial, not perfect.** Does this kid share, take turns most of the time, and include your child? If yes, energy level is not a deal-breaker. If the friendship is built on one kid bossing and one kid obeying, or on both kids egging each other into trouble, that's a different story, and it's okay to steer gently elsewhere.

4. **Match the setting to the pair.** Two high-energy kids need a yard, a park, a pool, or a trampoline place, not a living room with a glass coffee table. You'll build the actual playdate in Chapter 2.

5. **Let your child pick.** Once you have two or three candidates, ask your child who they'd like to invite over first. A friend they chose is a friend they'll work to keep.

Practice at home

Play the "who would you pick" game at dinner. Name three kids from class and ask which one your child would want on their team for building a fort, which one for a race, and which one for a quiet drawing day. Say what you see: "You picked Theo for two out of three." You'll learn a lot, and your child will start thinking about friends as people with different strengths, which is a skill in itself.

Another parent said

"I had a plan for who my son's best friend was going to be. It was the sweet, quiet boy from his class. My son wanted nothing to do with him. The kid he actually wanted was the one who got in trouble as much as he did. I fought it for a year. Then I watched them together at the pool, and I realized my son was a different kid with him. Relaxed. Funny. Himself. I had been trying to hand him a friend when he had already found one."

Dad of a seven-year-old

Guilty as charged

- Set up three playdates with the "right" kid and wondered why none of them took.
- Called another child "a lot" out loud, in front of our own child, who is also a lot.
- Judged a friendship on how it looked from the camp chair instead of how our kid felt inside it.

WHAT TO SAY

"I noticed you and Theo have a great time together. Would you like to invite him over to the park on Saturday?"



ONE SMALL STEP THIS WEEK

Ask your child's teacher one question: "Who does my kid seem to gravitate toward?" Then ask your child who they'd like to invite. Compare notes.

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CHAPTER 2

The Short, Structured Playdate

Set it up so your child can succeed at it

From the sidelines

You finally landed the playdate. Theo's mom drops him off at 1:00 and says she'll be back around 4:30. Three and a half hours. The first forty minutes are fantastic: Nerf war in the basement, shrieking, joy. By 2:15 they're arguing about the rules of a game neither of them can explain. By 3:00 your son has taken all the Nerf darts and locked himself in his room, Theo is on the couch asking when his mom is coming, and you are standing in the kitchen doing the math on how many more of these you can survive. When Theo's mom arrives, both boys are subdued, and your son says, "I don't think Theo likes me anymore."

Under the surface

An open-ended, three-hour playdate is a marathon, and we sent our kid in without training. Every hour of unstructured play asks an ADHD brain to keep regulating, keep sharing, keep reading faces, keep waiting, with no built-in reset. The dopamine that fueled the Nerf war ran out. The executive function that manages turns and rules ran out too (Kofler et al., 2024). What was left at 3:00 was two tired kids and a fight.

Structure is not the enemy of fun here. Structure is what protects the fun. Researchers who study friendship programs for kids with ADHD point out that the programs with the best results build in structured, planned time together, because kids with ADHD often know the social skill but can't perform it in the moment without support (Neprily et al., 2025). A short, planned playdate is that support, in your own backyard.

The game plan: short, planned, and ended on a high

1. **Ninety minutes, not an afternoon.** For a first or second playdate, aim for sixty to ninety minutes. End it while they're still having fun. A playdate that ends early and happy earns a second playdate. One that ends in tears rarely does.

2. **Plan two activities with your child.** Before the friend arrives, sit down with your kid and pick two things to do: one active (yard, bikes, sprinkler, Nerf) and one quieter (LEGO, slime, baking, a board game they already know). Write them on a card. Let your child choose which comes first. Movement first usually goes better, because a body that has run around is a body that can share.

3. **Front-load the stoplight.** Two minutes before the friend arrives, look at the stoplight poster together. "When you're both laughing and the game is working, that's green. If you notice you're getting grabby or your friend is louder than is comfortable for your

ears, that’s orange, and you can come find me for a snack break. If somebody’s crying, that’s red and we stop and reset.” Keep it light. You’re giving them a map, not a warning.

4. **Be the lifeguard, not the referee.** Stay in earshot and do something visibly boring nearby. Your job is to notice the orange light before they do. When you see it, don’t correct. Redirect. “Snack’s ready!” “Who wants to try the sprinkler?” A change of scene resets a dysregulated pair better than any lecture.

5. **Say what you see, out loud.** “You two figured out the rules together.” “You let Theo go first.” Plain description, not “good sharing!” Kids hear the noticing and do more of it.

6. **End with a ritual.** Ten minutes before pickup, give a warning and a closing activity: popsicles on the step, one last run through the sprinkler, a “goodbye high-five.” Ending well is a skill, and it’s the part the friend remembers.

Practice at home

Run a pretend playdate with a sibling, a cousin, or you. Set the timer for twenty minutes, pick two activities, and practice the orange-light break: your child says “snack break!” and comes to the kitchen, then goes back. Make it a game. See if they can catch their own orange light before you do!

Another parent said

“I thought a short playdate meant I was giving up. Like a real friendship was supposed to be all afternoon. Then I did ninety minutes with a plan and a popsicle at the end, and the other mom texted me that night asking when they could do it again. That had never happened before.”

Mom of a six-year-old

Guilty as charged

- Said yes to a four-hour playdate because the other parent needed childcare, and then paid for it.
- Sat in the other room on our phone, heard it going south, and hoped they'd "work it out."
- Ended a playdate with a lecture instead of a popsicle.

WHAT TO SAY

"You two had a great time and then it got hard at the end. That happens. Next time we'll keep it a little shorter and end with popsicles while it's still fun."



ONE SMALL STEP THIS WEEK

Plan one ninety-minute playdate with your child: two activities on a card, the stoplight on the wall, and a closing ritual you both agree on.

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CHAPTER 3

Body in the Group

Helping your child stay with the play

From the sidelines

It's the second week of Little League, and your eight-year-old is in the outfield. Except he isn't, really. He's twenty feet from where he's supposed to be, digging a hole in the dirt with his cleat and narrating something to himself. The coach yells his name. He looks up, jogs over, and thirty seconds later he's drifting again. During the team huddle, he's facing the parking lot. The other kids have started rolling their eyes when he's up. On the drive home he says, "Coach doesn't like me," and you don't know what to say, because you saw what the coach saw.

Under the surface

There's a phrase from occupational therapists and speech-language therapists that I want to hand you, because it changed how I talk to my own son. Body in the group. It comes from the Social Thinking work that a lot of school therapists use, and it means exactly what it sounds like: your body is close to the group, facing the group, and doing what the group is doing, so the other kids can tell you're part of it. The opposite, body out of the group, is your child twenty feet away in the dirt. He might be listening. He might be having a wonderful time. But the team can't see that, and kids decide who's "in" based on what they can see.

None of this is willful. Sustaining attention on something as low-dopamine as outfield is really tough for kids with ADHD, and a body that needs to move will find a way to move. The eye rolls, though, are real, and they are the beginning of the reputation problem we'll tackle in Chapter 5. So we work on both: helping your child keep his body in the group, and picking activities where his body has a fighting chance.

One more piece of good news from the research. Exercise itself helps. Regular physical activity is linked to better attention in kids with ADHD (Dastamooz et al., 2023). The right sport isn't just a place to make friends. It can be part of what helps.

The game plan: teach the phrase, then pick the right field

1. **Teach "body in the group" as a neutral phrase.** Not a criticism, a location. At home, when everyone's at the table and your child is halfway to the living room, say, "Body in the group, bud," the same way you'd say "shoes on." Then say what you see when it happens: "You're in the group." Over a few weeks it becomes a cue he can use on himself.

2. **Practice at the boring moments.** The team huddle, story time, the birthday song. These are the low-dopamine moments where bodies drift. Before the event, name it: “There’s going to be a huddle. That’s a body-in-the-group moment. Can you stand where you can touch the coach’s shadow?” Give him a physical target, not an instruction to pay attention.

3. **Use the stoplight for himself, not others.** “Green light: my body is with the team. Orange: I’m drifting. Red: I’ve left.” Ask him after practice, “How many orange lights did you catch today?” Catching one is a win. Say so.

4. **Move first, always.** Twenty minutes of hard play before practice, school, or a party. A GoNoodle video, a bike ride, a race to the mailbox. A body that has already moved can hold still longer.

5. **Pick activities that fit an ADHD body.** Sports with constant motion and short waits tend to go better than ones with long stretches of standing: swimming, martial arts, running club, gymnastics, climbing, soccer at the younger ages when everyone chases the ball. Individual sports inside a team (swim team, track, martial arts) let a child be part of a group without the outfield problem. And if your kid loves baseball, keep baseball. Just talk to the coach (Chapter 5) about positions with more action.

Practice at home

Family movie night, but with a twist. Everyone has to keep “body in the group” on the couch for one short episode, including the adults. Anyone who drifts gets a gentle “body in the group!” from the others. Your child will love catching you.

Another parent said

“Our OT said ‘body in the group’ at one session and I thought it was too simple to matter. Then I started saying it and now my daughter says it to herself. Last week she said it to me when I was checking my phone. Fair enough.”

Mom of a seven-year-old

Guilty as charged

- Yelled “Pay attention!” across a field, which has never once helped a child pay attention.
- Signed our kid up for the sport we played, not the one his body could do.
- Assumed the coach didn’t like him when the coach just didn’t know what he was looking at.

WHAT TO SAY

“The coach isn’t upset with you. He just couldn’t tell you were listening because your body was over by the fence. Let’s practice keeping your body in the group. You pick the spot.”



ONE SMALL STEP THIS WEEK

Teach "body in the group" at dinner tonight as a location, not a correction. Use it three times this week and say what you see each time it happens.

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CHAPTER 4

Feelings Are Real, Stories Are Guesses

Helping your child handle rejection, real and imagined

From the sidelines

Your seven-year-old daughter has a best friend, Maya. Maya has been her person since kindergarten. Today at pickup, your daughter gets in the car, slams the door, and says Maya hates her. You ask what happened. “She sat with Priya at lunch.” That’s it. That’s the entire event. Maya sat with Priya at lunch, and your daughter has spent the last two hours certain that the friendship is over, that Maya was never really her friend, and that nobody in her class likes her. By bedtime she’s sobbing and won’t let you leave the room. Tomorrow, Maya will run up to her at drop-off like nothing happened, because for Maya, nothing did.

Under the surface

If you’ve spent any time in ADHD parent groups online, you’ve seen the letters RSD, which stand for rejection sensitive dysphoria. It’s a popular term for what a lot of us see in our kids: an outsized, painful reaction to rejection, or to anything that feels like rejection. RSD is not an official diagnosis, and you won’t find it in the diagnostic manual, though some practitioners argue that it should be. What researchers are starting to document is how rejection sensitivity feels from the inside. In one small study, adults with ADHD described rejection as a physical thing: a drop in the stomach, heat, a kind of misery that makes them want to hide (Rowney-Smith et al., 2026). Many of our kids seem to feel that too. They just don’t have the words yet.

There’s also a newer idea in the research that I find hopeful. A 2025 paper argued that rejection sensitivity isn’t just wired in. It’s shaped by environment, and it gets worse in settings where a child is judged and corrected all day, and better in settings where they are accepted (Sandland, 2025). Think about how many small corrections your ADHD kid absorbs between 8:00 and 3:00. By pickup, the tank of “people are okay with me” is empty, and one friend sitting somewhere else tips it over.

So here’s what I want you to hold on to. Your daughter’s feeling is one hundred percent real. Her body is in real distress. The story her brain built around the feeling, “Maya hates me, nobody likes me,” is a guess. A fast, painful, very convincing guess, made by a brain with slow emotional brakes (Shaw et al., 2014). Our job is not to argue with the feeling. Our job is to sit with the feeling first, and then, gently, to help her notice that the story is a guess and that other guesses are possible.

One thing the research points to: how we respond matters. In a study of a parent coaching program for kids with ADHD, warmer parents tended to have kids who became less withdrawn over time, while more critical parents tended to have kids who became more aggressive, though the researchers call those links early findings (Smit et al., 2022). “You’re overreacting” is criticism, even when it’s true.

The game plan: feeling first, then the three questions

1. **Regulation before communication.** A dysregulated child cannot take in language. When the alarm system in the brain is on, the thinking part goes offline, and every word you add is just more noise. I think of it like a garage door coming down: once it's down, nothing is getting in until it comes back up. So before any talking, help the door come back up. Sit close, use fewer words, "I'm right here." Wait for the breathing to change. You cannot skip this step. The three questions below do not work on a dysregulated kid, and trying them too early teaches your child that you'd rather fix than listen.

2. **Name the feeling and make it true.** "That felt really bad. You saw Maya sitting with Priya and your stomach dropped." You are not agreeing with the story. You are agreeing with the feeling, which is the only part that's a fact right now.

3. **Ask the three questions, in order.** Once she's calm, and this might be at bedtime or the next morning:

    - "What happened?" Just the facts, like a camera would see them. "Maya sat with Priya at lunch."
    - "What did your brain tell you it meant?" This is the story. "That Maya hates me."
    - "What else could it mean?" Let her guess first. If she's stuck, offer one: "Maybe Priya asked first. Maybe Maya wanted to sit with both of you and didn't know how to say it." You're not proving her wrong. You're showing her that her brain made one guess out of several.

4. **Use the stoplight on the inside.** Green: "I feel okay about my friends." Orange: "Something stung and I'm starting to build a story." Red: "The story took over." Kids as young as six can learn to say "I think I'm at orange." That sentence alone buys time, and time is what a slow emotional brake needs.

5. **Plan the check, together.** "Tomorrow, what could you do to find out?" Maybe she asks Maya to sit together. Maybe she watches to see if Maya runs up at drop-off. Give the guess a way to be tested instead of a way to be believed.

6. **Repair with the adults in her world.** If the corrections at school are stacking up, that's a Chapter 5 conversation. A child whose tank gets refilled during the day has a lot more room for one friend sitting somewhere else.

A note for us parents, because I've been here: if you also take things hard, and many of us with ADHD do, your child will learn more from watching you do the three questions on yourself than from any script. "I got a short text from Grandma and my brain told me she was mad at me. What else could it mean? Probably that she was driving."

Practice at home

Play “the story my brain told me” at dinner with small, silly examples. “The dog walked away from me when I sat down. What did my brain tell me? That he doesn’t love me anymore. What else could it mean? He heard the treat bag.” Everyone takes a turn, adults included. Your child will start using the phrase on their own, and the day they say “I think that’s just the story my brain told me” about a real friend, you’ll want to write it down.

Another parent said

“I used to jump straight to ‘I’m sure she still likes you, honey,’ and it never helped. It made him madder, actually. Now I just sit with him and say ‘that stung.’ Then later we do the three questions. Last month he came to me and said, ‘My brain told me Jayden doesn’t want to be my friend, but I think it’s a guess.’ I had to leave the room so he wouldn’t see me cry.”

Mom of an eight-year-old

Guilty as charged

- Said “you’re being dramatic” to a child whose body was in real pain.
- Argued with the story while the garage door was still down.
- Texted the other parent at 9 p.m. to find out what really happened, before our own child had a chance to find out for themselves.

WHAT TO SAY

“That stung. Your brain told you a story about what it meant, and it might be right, or it might be a guess. When you’re ready, let’s figure out what else it could mean.”



ONE SMALL STEP THIS WEEK

Play "the story my brain told me" at dinner once this week, with a silly example of your own first. Keep it light. The heavy version will come on its own, and your child will already have the words.

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CHAPTER 5

Getting the Adults on Your Kid's Side

Teachers, coaches, and other parents are your teammates

From the sidelines

Your six-year-old son wasn't invited to a birthday party. You know this because the invitations were handed out in class and he came home asking why he didn't get an envelope. You've since learned that nearly the entire class was invited. When you mentioned it lightly to another mom at pickup, she got a look on her face and said, "Well, you know, he can be a bit much at parties." You smiled and nodded and drove home furious, mostly because some part of you knew she was describing something real. He did knock over the cake table at the last party. He didn't mean to. But it happened, and the grown-ups remember.

Under the surface

By first grade, most kids with ADHD already have a reputation, and the reputation is held by adults as much as by kids. Teachers, coaches, and other parents form a picture of your child early and then see everything through it. Once that picture is "the wild one" or "the one who ruins things," the other kids pick it up too, because kids take their cues about who's safe to like from the adults in the room.

That's why the friendship research keeps pointing at the adults. When researchers compared friendship programs, the ones that worked best brought in teachers and classmates and deliberately worked on how peers saw the child (Cordier et al., 2023). In my experience, classmates take a lot of their cues from the adults in the room. The way a teacher talks about a kid, and includes him, shapes how everyone else sees him.

You can't run a classroom program. You can do something almost as powerful: you can shape the picture the adults hold, one adult at a time, before the reputation hardens. And every adult you bring to your kid's side is one more room where his tank gets filled instead of drained (Sandland, 2025).

The game plan: front-load, script, and follow up

1. **Front-load the teacher, in writing, early.** In the first two weeks of school, or right now if you haven't, send a short email. Not a diagnosis dump. Three things: one sentence about what your child is like at his best, one sentence about where he needs help ("transitions and staying with the group are hard for him"), and one specific thing that works ("a two-minute warning and a job to do during the wait"). Then the ask: "Could we do a quick email check-in once a week? I'll keep it to two lines." Teachers say yes to two lines.

2. **Ask the teacher the friendship question directly.** "Who does he seem to connect with? Is there a way to pair them for a project or a job?" You're inviting the teacher to be a matchmaker. Most love it, and it's the closest thing to the classroom programs the research supports.

3. **Give the coach a job, not a diagnosis.** Before the first practice: “He does best with a lot of movement and short waits. If there’s a position with more action, or a job during the huddle like holding the ball bag, he’ll be able to stay with the team. Thank you for bringing out the best in him.” You’ve just handed the coach a solution and a compliment in the same breath.

4. **Script the party host before the party.** “He’s so excited. He does best when he has something to do with his hands, and he’ll do better if I stay for the first half hour. Is there a job I could give him, like handing out plates?” Most hosts are relieved. Then stay, be the lifeguard, and leave before the cake if the tank is getting low.

5. **Handle the “he’s a bit much” comment with one calm line.** You don’t have to defend or explain. “He’s working really hard on it, and he’s a great kid. I’d love for them to have a short playdate at the park sometime.” You’ve named the effort, reframed the child, and offered a low-stakes next step. Then let it go. You’re not going to win that parent over in a parking lot. You’ll win them over when their kid comes home happy from the park.

6. **Follow up, briefly, every time.** After a good playdate, party, or practice, send a two-line thank-you to the adult. “He had the best time. Thank you for giving him the plate job.” You’re building a team, and teams need to hear when a play worked.

Practice at home

Have your child help write the “what works for me” note for the coach or teacher, in their own words. “I do good when I have a job. I like to run. I need a warning before we stop.” A note in a seven-year-old’s handwriting does more for how an adult sees your kid than anything you could type.

Another parent said

“I used to apologize for my son before he even walked into a room. Sorry in advance, he’s a handful. I thought I was being considerate. Then I started saying, ‘He’s so excited, and he does great with a job to do.’ Same kid. Totally different reaction from the grown-ups. I stopped apologizing and started introducing him.”

Mom of a six-year-old

Guilty as charged

- Apologized for our child in advance, to people who hadn’t complained yet.
- Waited until the parent-teacher conference in November to mention anything.
- Argued with the “he’s a bit much” mom in the parking lot and got nowhere.

WHAT TO SAY (TO YOUR CHILD)

“You didn’t get an invitation this time, and that hurts. It doesn’t mean nobody likes you. It means we’re still finding your people. Let’s invite Theo to the park on Saturday, and I’ll talk to your teacher about who else might be a good match.”

@myadhdkiddo



ONE SMALL STEP THIS WEEK

Send one two-line email to one adult this week: what your child is like at his best, and one thing that works. Then ask your friendship question.

The Framework, If You Remember Nothing Else

If you only take one page from this guide, take this one.

Find

- One friend is enough. Look for the kid who makes your child's face change, not the one you'd pick.
- Prosocial beats calm. Kind and inclusive matter more than quiet.
- Ask the teacher: "Who does my kid gravitate toward?"

Set up

- Ninety minutes, two planned activities, movement first, a closing ritual.
- Stoplight on the wall: green is working, orange is slow down, red is stop and reset.
- Be the lifeguard, not the referee. Redirect, don't correct.
- Body in the group: a location, not a criticism.

Recover

- Regulation before communication. Sit with the feeling first.
- Feelings are real. Stories are guesses. Ask: What happened? What did your brain tell you it meant? What else could it mean?
- Warmth shrinks withdrawal. Criticism grows aggression.

Recruit

- Front-load every adult with what your child is like at his best and one thing that works.
- Ask teachers to be matchmakers and coaches to give jobs.
- Stop apologizing in advance. Start introducing.

And underneath all of it: they are having a hard time, not giving anyone a hard time.

Before You Go

You made it to the end of this guide, and I'd guess you read parts of it with a lump in your throat. We know our kids are different, but we also know they are awesome. Sometimes the rest of the world is a little slower to see beauty in our kids, so we can help them along a bit!

Remember, you don't need to nail all five strategies by Friday. Pick the one that matches where your child is right now. If they don't have a friend yet, start with Chapter 1 and one question to the teacher. If they have a friend but playdates keep blowing up, start with Chapter 2 and ninety minutes with a plan. If they have friends and still come home crushed, start with Chapter 4 and "the story my brain told me." Let the rest wait.

Some playdates will still go sideways. Some parties will still not include an invitation. That will not mean you're back at the beginning, and it will not mean your child is unlikable. It'll mean they're still finding their people. It'll happen.

Kids do well when they can, and their parents do too.

Need More Help? Let's Connect!



Megan Ryan

If friendship is not the only place you feel challenged as a parent, that’s normal, and you don’t have to sort it out on your own. I know how heavy ADHD parenting can feel. If you want to talk through what’s going on in your house, or you’re curious about working together more closely, I’d love to hear from you.

Drop me an email anytime:
megan@meganryanadhd.com

Check out my website: www.myadhdkiddo.com

Follow me on Instagram: @myadhdkiddo

Thanks for reading! Cheers, Megan

References

Parenting advice is everywhere and can oftentimes be contradictory. Here's where the research in this guide came from, noted in the text right where each claim is made.

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