

Social Skills in Adults with PWS



Social skills are about more than making friends.

They include communicating, understanding emotions and intentions, navigating relationships, managing reactions, and knowing the unwritten rules of social situations.

Many adults with Prader-Willi syndrome are socially motivated and want to connect with others, but may need more direct teaching, structure, and practice to navigate social situations successfully.



Conversation

Trouble with back-and-forth or staying on a shared topic.



Social Cues

Trouble reading facial expressions, emotions, or other social cues.



Understanding Intent

May misread what someone means, take something personally, or feel hurt more easily.



Processing Cues

May need more time to process faces, voices, sounds, or other social information.

Why do social skills tend to be harder in PWS?

PWS can affect several skills involved in social interaction, including:

- Speech and motor planning
- Emotional regulation
- Cognitive processing
- Understanding social cues
- Perspective taking

Hyperphagia may also make social interaction harder when thoughts about food compete for attention.

What Helps Build Social Skills?

Add structure.

A shared activity, game, craft, puzzle, or planned outing may be easier to navigate than simply being expected to “sit and chat.”

Make expectations concrete.

Be clear about social rules that might otherwise go unspoken. Direct guidance can be more helpful than expecting someone to learn by watching others.

Practice reading social cues.

Talk through facial expressions, tone of voice, emotions, and possible intentions. Give time to process what another person may be communicating.

Talk through misunderstandings.

If someone feels ignored, criticized, or slighted, help them consider other possible explanations before reacting.

Practice in real situations.

Safe social groups and supported activities can give adults opportunities to practice skills and receive feedback in the moment.

Be specific about technology.

Set clear expectations for texting, messaging, and social media. For example: send one or two messages, then wait for a response.

Repeat and reinforce.

Social skills often improve with continued practice, repetition, and support across different situations.

Does PWS subtype matter?

People with PWS due to maternal uniparental disomy (UPD) may have greater difficulty with some aspects of social processing, including recognizing voices and interpreting facial information. However, social challenges can occur across all PWS genetic subtypes.



Featured Resource: Building Our Social Skills (BOSS)

A practical program designed for teens and young adults with PWS to build communication skills, read social cues, strengthen friendships, and practice real-world social situations.

<https://www.fpwr.org/boss-curriculum-lp>

