



Guide for Parents & Caregivers

DEAR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS:

Congratulations! You have made an important choice to partner with your child to help them learn and talk about what they experience in social and emotional situations and build skills and confidence to more courageously and effectively interact with others. How you show up for them will have an impact on the way they engage when they visit Connection Zoo®.

You've got this! Best wishes!

PURPOSE AND USE OF THIS GUIDE

This guide is designed to provide you with additional information to help you optimize your experience with Connection Zoo® and most effectively support your child(ren) as they learn and grow socially. You will find a portion of this guide along with other resources on our website: www.connectionzoo.com.

We recommend you read or at least skim the whole guide first. Then refer to it occasionally when you may need reminders about the ways you can optimize the impact of Connection Zoo®. Please share your ideas for making the most of your visits to Connection Zoo® with us!

REWARDS FOR PRACTICE AND PROGRESS

During play, you may decide to award points for completing conversation and practice activities. These points can be used to earn zookeeper badges, in progression from Apprentice Zookeeper to Zookeeper Mentor (see the Zookeeper badge card and stickers). You can also use the Connection Zoo® stickers and goals sheet (found at your Printables link) to reward practice and progress.

You may choose to set up your own reward system. You know your child(ren) so will know what they value and what motivates them. Determine the kind of rewards you'd like to make available and the point values required to earn them. Here are some ideas for rewards:

- Go to bed 30 minutes later than usual
- Eat dessert before dinner
- Wear their pajamas all day
- Go to the zoo (or another place they like to visit)
- Pick the music in the car
- Invite a friend over to play
- Pick out any food item next time you go grocery shopping
- Dress up like a superhero
- Choose what's for dinner
- Extra screen time
- Build a blanket fort and sleep in it
- Get creative!

PRACTICE MAKES PROGRESS AND EVENTUALLY BECOMES HABIT

Ultimately, you want to create a lifetime practice of awareness, calming, reflective thinking and skills. Overtime, this practice will become habit, leading to greater well-being. Creating new, healthy habits are possible if you make the habit easy and there is a reward (intrinsic and/or extrinsic). There are 3 critical elements to habits:

1. A cue or trigger. This is the part of the habit process where you are triggered to take some sort of action by an internal or external prompt. The Connection Zoo® animals can be prompts or you might use time as a prompt (like every morning after breakfast) or routines like brushing teeth or driving to school.
2. An Action. You need to actually take action on the habit you want to adopt. Starting small, with micro-habits is a great way to go. For example, picking one Connection Zoo® animal and reading the fun fact or answering just one question after before bed every night. Be aware of any barriers to success that exist and find ways to eliminate or minimize them.
3. Reward. We are much more likely to repeat actions when there is a reward. Rewards can range from a hug every time the new there is action on the new habit to something more substantial when bigger milestones are reached.

THE CONNECTION ZOO® LANGUAGE

We regularly hear from parents, educators and medical professionals that kids often don't know how to express what they are experiencing leading to feelings of frustration and helplessness for both kids and adults who want to support them. Once you and your kiddo learn about the Connection Zoo® animals, you will develop a language to help you talk with each other about what they're experiencing and how they can find success in social and emotional situations. You can use this language in your family and discreetly when others are around. Most importantly, you will better understand how to support your child when they are experiencing social discomfort or anxiety.

KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Social Connectedness

A fundamental human need. It is the measure of people coming together and interacting.

Social Anxiety

The fear of social and performance situations and activities. It is not the same as shyness or introversion. Everyone gets anxious sometimes, however, when it becomes regular, disrupts regular activities or interactions and/or is experienced as intense fear, the need for more intentional, over time strategies may be required.

Reflective Thinking

It is important to regularly think about how what we experience and discover what we learned.

THE LINK BETWEEN SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS AND WELL-BEING

Humans are social creatures. In fact, experts agree that "Social connection improves physical health and psychological well-being." It is important that we build and maintain close relationships and a sense of community. Being connected digitally does not provide the same well-being benefits as face-to-face human contact and intimate relationships.

John Cacioppo, Professor of Psychology from University of Chicago, and his colleagues identified three core dimensions of social connectedness that we can focus on to improve our social connectivity and have healthy relationships.

1. Intimate Connectedness: Comes from having someone in your life you feel affirms who you are.
2. Relational Connectedness: Comes from having face-to-face contacts that are mutually rewarding.

3. Collective Connectedness: Comes from feeling that you are part of a group or collective beyond individual existence.

Connection Zoo®™ encourages play-based learning that gives you the opportunity to build skills and confidence to improve social connectivity related to all three of these dimensions.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY

Encouraging your child to regularly engage in play is critical to their development. When they play with you, children can learn important social skills, such as how to follow directions, wait for their turn, listen when others are speaking, show empathy, celebrate success and others.

A 2018 American Academy of Pediatrics statement emphasizes the importance of parents providing young children with physical toys rather than digital ones. There are cognitive and developmental advantages, and this kind of play brings parents and children together. Dr. Alan Mendelsohn, an associate professor of pediatrics at New York University School of Medicine who co-authored the statement, says, “Spending some time playing with your child or reading with your child builds the relationship. It helps them as things get more complicated in later childhood and adolescence.”

Connection Zoo® gives you the opportunity to engage in imaginative play that not only helps develop your child but can also strengthen your relationship with them.

BUILDING A NETWORK OF SUPPORT

It is important that your child feels supported in all environments they spend time in, whether home, school, on a team, at other organizations you visit. Whenever possible, you should intentionally identify someone your child can use as a “go-to” person if they need support. This could be a peer, a teacher, a coach or group leader. Ideally, you and your child will talk with this support person to invite them to be a part of your child’s support team and share with them the forms of support that will be most effective.

As a parent or caregiver, it is important for you to have a support team as well. First, think about who is already in your network that you trust to support you. Start by sharing with them your need for support and inviting them to talk or spend time with you. Consider expanding your network by talking with educators, medical professionals and other parents or parenting groups.

Not only is building a network of support instrumental in effectively navigating social experiences with your child, having the appreciation for and ability to build networks is critical for social and professional success throughout our lives.

YOU’VE GOT THIS!