

The Liking Gap: Helping Kids Feel More Confident in Friendships

When I wrote my book about teen girls, *“Miss-Connection: Why Your Daughter ‘Hates You’, Expects the World, and Needs to Talk”*, I was astonished at how insecure girls felt in their relationships.

“I wonder if my friends really like me”, one girl confessed. She was not alone.

It turns out that it’s a *very* human challenge. We meet someone (or catch up with someone), and walk away from an interaction wondering if we said something silly or if the other person even liked us. This is incredibly common—not just for adults, but especially for kids.

Psychology researchers call it **“the Liking Gap”**—the tendency we have to **underestimate how much others like us** after an interaction. And research shows this gap starts young. Even children as young as four or five experience it - boys *and* girls.

Why it matters for your child

Think about your child at school:

- They meet new classmates.
- They wonder if they’ll be liked.
- They say something awkward—or worry they did.
- And then, they assume the worst.

This can lead to anxiety, loneliness, and even social withdrawal. Many kids believe their peers *tolerate* them rather than truly *like* them. Another girl in my book told me,

“I have a massive fear that everyone around me is just putting up with me until I leave them alone.”

The tragedy is, **most of the time, this belief is wrong**. The science is clear: people generally like us more than we think.

What the research shows

[A recent study from the University of Toronto](#) found that across thousands of conversations, people consistently *underestimated* how much their conversation partners liked them. And the more anxious or insecure a person was, the bigger the gap.

In other words, **your child is probably more liked than they realise—but they don’t know it**.

So what can we do?

3 Things Parents Can Do to Help Close the Liking Gap

1. They're Likely More Liked Than They Think

Children from about age 5 onward tend to underestimate how much others like them. When your child worries "nobody likes me," they're probably wrong! They won't believe you, but if you tell them to reverse it and ask them how much they like other people, they'll get your logic. When they understand the science, they are more likely to believe it.

Remind them that their natural tendency to miss positive social signals from peers becomes more pronounced as they get older, making tweens and teens especially vulnerable to social insecurity.

2. Focus on connection, not perfection.

Teach your child to stop keeping an invisible "friendship scorecard" in their head. Encourage them to focus on *being present*—listening, showing interest, and sharing kindly. Those are the traits people like most.

3. Build their confidence at home.

Self-esteem plays a huge role in the liking gap. Children who believe they have something valuable to say are more likely to connect with others and feel good doing it. Let your child's voice be heard at home. Ask their opinions. Validate their thoughts. Confidence in relationships starts in the lounge room before it shows up in the classroom.

One final thought

Most kids aren't struggling with being unlikable—they're struggling with *believing* they're likable. That's a mindset shift we, as parents, can gently guide.

Your child is probably doing better socially than they think. Let's help them see it.



Dr Justin Coulson is a dad to 6 daughters and grandfather to 1 granddaughter. He is the parenting expert and co-host of Channel Nine's Parental Guidance, and he and his wife host Australia's #1 podcast for parents and family: The Happy Families Podcast. He has written 9 books about families and parenting. For further details visit [happyfamilies.com.au](https://www.happyfamilies.com.au).