Getting along with other people is an important part of life. Examples of social skills include cooperation, assertion, responsibility, self-control and empathy (compassion). Children and youth with epilepsy may find it hard to get along with others, partly because epilepsy may limit some activities (like physical activities) in which children learn rules and establish friendships. Other children may make fun of them. Parents may keep them from taking part in some activities for fear that they may have a seizure. Unfortunately, these patterns may end up teaching children to avoid activities or people.

The good news is that most children with epilepsy have nearly the same social skills as their brothers and sisters who do not have epilepsy. Problems with social skills may be the result of a learning disability and other family difficulties which may or may not be related to epilepsy.

Children with epilepsy sometimes struggle with social skills, especially children who start having seizures early in life (before age 8). The earlier the epilepsy starts, the greater the chance that it will affect the child’s social skills. This, in turn, can affect the way children act with peers and adults, making it harder for them to do activities that might be routine for other kids (for example, calling someone on the phone or recognizing other people’s emotional needs). The more severe, generalized type of epilepsy can have more impact on the quality of life. Sometimes parents recognize these problems early on, and sometimes they are recognized by the school or peers.

Some patients with epilepsy might also be diagnosed with different social skills disorders such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or pervasive developmental disorder. Also, up to one third of patients diagnosed with autism have had seizures. Children with ASD might be more sensitive to lights and sounds. Exposure to certain lights and sounds (including videogames) can increase the number of seizures. Talk to your epilepsy doctor if you are worried about your child getting worse after viewing certain television shows or video games.

The sooner the epilepsy is controlled, the greater the chance that social skills will improve. In patients with severe focal epilepsy who have epilepsy surgery, social skills greatly improve when the patients become free of seizures. The first eight years of life are key for social development; it is important to take advantage of the available resources early.

Special social groups for kids with epilepsy and support groups for parents, as well as summer camps, can be found through resources such as the Epilepsy Foundation. Some will focus on helping children socialize and take advantage of community opportunities. Resources through the local board of developmental disabilities might be available if the child is diagnosed with a cognitive impairment.

**What can you do to help your child who needs help with social skills?**

A good way to address this is to send your child to a social skills group run by a mental health professional, usually a social worker or a psychologist. In social skills groups, children and youth meet regularly with others to learn and practice how to get along more effectively. The mental health professional may present situations in which the child is required to stand up for him or herself and ask for ideas about
how to address the situation. Then, when a strategy has been worked out, the members of the group may take turns practicing how to carry out the strategy. Group members give feedback about how the child presented him or herself, and suggest what could be done differently to improve the communication.

Social skills development through rehearsal and feedback has been shown to help children do better with others. Living a healthy lifestyle and taking part in social activities, sports, and community events are key in the development of every child. Incorporating the child with epilepsy into the family activities also is very important.

For resources, see:
autismspeaks.org/family-services/epilepsy
videogameseizures.wordpress.com/2012/06/07/
canaries-autism-and-sensory-overload/
silentlyseizing.com/
autismspeaks.org/family-services/tool-kits