

# Improving Your Interpersonal Skills

by Del Suggs

What are interpersonal skills? These are the skills that enable you to get along with others without any personality conflict. These skills will help you build good working relationships with your fellow students, instructors, employers and business associates.

Working well with others involves understanding and appreciating individual differences. Therefore, interpersonal skills play an important role in determining how well you manage your interactions with others.

Interpersonal skills include the habits, attitudes, manners, appearance, and behaviors we use around other people which affect how we get along with them. We sometimes don't understand how important interpersonal skills really are. It's easy to laugh and make jokes about people who obviously lack interpersonal skills. But sometimes we need to examine our own impressions on others to better prepare for success in life as well as for a productive career.

The development of interpersonal skills begins early in life and is influenced by family, friends, and our observations of the world around us. Many of these characteristics are passed

along to us by our parents or guardians. Some aspects of interpersonal skills may even be inherited.

To improve our interpersonal skills, we must first be aware of what we are like from the perspective of the people who interact with us. Habits of which we are unaware, actions which we think go unnoticed, and other things about us that might affect other people are impossible for us to change if we are not aware of them. One of the things that teachers try to do, starting in the early grades, is to help students correct bad habits and to develop good interpersonal skills.

As we mature into adults, it becomes our own responsibility to initiate any changes in interpersonal skills that might be needed. These skills are more important than ever and they greatly influence both opportunities and success. It's just that rather than trying to change interpersonal skills, as is the case when we are children, adults tend to make judgments about one another based on interpersonal skills without explicitly saying that is the case.

Try these helpful tips for improving your interpersonal skills:

## ***Smile.***

Few people want to be around someone who is always down. Do your best to be friendly and upbeat with those around you. Maintain a positive, cheerful attitude about school and about life. Smile often. The positive energy you radiate will draw others to you.

## ***Be appreciative.***

Find one positive thing about everyone you deal with and let them hear it. Be generous with praise and kind words of encouragement. Say "thank you" when someone helps you. Make colleagues feel welcome when they call or stop to talk with you. If you let others know that they are appreciated, they'll want to give you their best.

## ***Pay attention to others.***

Observe what's going on in other people's lives. Acknowledge their happy events, and express concern and sympathy for difficult situations such as an illness or death. Make eye contact and address people by their first names. Ask others for their opinions.

## ***Practice active listening.***

To actively listen is to demonstrate that you intend to hear and understand another person's point of view. It means restating, in your own words, what the other person has said.

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In this way, you know that you understood their meaning and they know that your responses are more than lip service. Your friends will appreciate knowing that you really do listen to what they have to say.

## ***Bring people together.***

Create an environment that encourages others to work and play together. Treat everyone equally, and don't play favorites. Avoid talking about others behind their backs. Follow up on other people's suggestions or ideas. If folks see you as someone solid and fair, they will grow to trust you.

## ***Resolve conflicts.***

Take a step beyond simply bringing people together, and become someone who resolves conflicts when they arise. Learn how to be an effective mediator. If friends bicker over personal disagreements, arrange to sit down with both parties and help sort out their differences. By taking on such a leadership role, you will garner respect and admiration from those around you.

## ***Communicate clearly.***

Pay close attention to both what you say and how you say it. A clear and effective communicator avoids misunderstandings with others. Verbal eloquence projects an image of intelligence and

maturity, no matter what your age. And don't forget to "filter" yourself. If you tend to blurt out anything that comes to mind, people won't put much weight on your words or opinions.

## ***Humor them.***

Don't be afraid to be funny or clever. Most people are drawn to a person that can make them laugh. Use your sense of humor as an effective tool to lower barriers and gain people's affection. Just be careful that your humor is tasteful. Off-color jokes of any kind will repel people from you.

## ***See it from their side.***

Empathy means being able to put yourself in others' shoes and understand how they feel. Try to view situations and responses from another person's perspective. This can be accomplished through staying in touch with your own emotions; those who are cut off from their own feelings are often unable to empathize with others.

## ***Don't complain.***

One of my favorite bars has coasters that say "No Whining." There is nothing worse than a chronic complainer. If you simply have to vent about something, save it for your journal. If you must verbalize your grievances, vent to your personal friends and family, and

keep it short. Spare those around you, or else you'll get a bad reputation.

Interpersonal skills are how you are evaluated by everyone you meet, and everyone you know. Make sure that your skills create a good impression.

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