

What Can Help Improve Social Interaction and Development?

Supporting social interaction is an important piece of the student's educational plan, as increasing social interaction and competency are vital to overall progress. The desire to interact with others is often in place in individuals with autism, but the processes that allow social interaction to occur can be so overwhelming that they do not know where to begin. **Take care not to interpret social deficits as a lack of desire or avoidance of social interaction.** Keep in mind the issues of timing and attention, sensory integration and communication, and recognize that to build social skills all of these issues will need to be addressed. Social development encompasses a range of skills that can be built and layered to improve social competence (and competence breeds further interest) and interaction.

Sometimes, the mere unpredictability and noise of the presence of others can be disconcerting and working through the sensory issues is the first place to begin, such as with a young child still learning to develop parallel play. Social ability builds on skills of imitation and reciprocity. While communication issues are critical to eventual social competence at a typical level, even a child with significant receptive and expressive language challenges can work on social referencing and attending to the behaviors of those around him—without understanding the words of the teacher's directive, he can learn that when the class stands to salute the flag, he stands and salutes too!

It is critical to recognize that social challenges in autism are bidirectional—they may manifest as deficits (such as a lack of social initiation) or excesses (such as one-sided conversation in a highly verbal student with Asperger's Syndrome). In both instances, the need for support and teaching is real, as appropriate social behavior requires social understanding. Some individuals on the spectrum *appear* highly social, initiating social interaction but lacking reciprocity by being one-sided and overbearing; since they are then aware of their inability to conform and be accepted by others, individuals with high functioning autism and Asperger's Syndrome often suffer the pain of rejection and loneliness.



What are Some Things to Consider When Addressing Social Skills?

- Extend a feeling of welcome to your classroom, lunch room, or gym and model for the other students that the student with autism is a valued part of the group
- Get to know the student and meet him where he currently is in terms of both social skills and interests, and be ready to work from there. Reciprocity, the give and take of an interaction, is a critical social skill necessary for developing a relationship. Typical individuals build strong relationships on reciprocity and socially demand it, and relationships are not based only on one-sided giving. You come to expect a friend to call you back, return a favor, etc. To create true reciprocity, it is important to engage a student on his terms and interests, not just expect him to engage on yours. (See [Gernsbacher](#) article)
- Appropriate social behavior requires social understanding; be aware of the need to build foundations and scaffold skills in appropriate developmental sequence, expecting growth through supports, practice and direct teaching.
- Be aware that free play, recess and other unstructured times are the most difficult times for children with autism; think about how to impose structure on activities; this also applies to older students, though with needs for age appropriate supports and structure.
- Focus on social development in areas of interest and competence for the student—not where language, fine motor or other challenges will create an overwhelming experience.
- Recognize that a student with autism is likely to have anxiety before, during and after social situations, which can result in avoidance or inappropriate behaviors. Building competence is essential to reducing this anxiety.
- Use care in expectations of appropriate eye contact, shaping this over time. Often students with autism have a difficult time maintaining eye contact and insisting on eye contact can cause discomfort and additional stress. It is often best to begin with requiring the student to direct his body toward the talking partner, then after significant practice in social situations and increased comfort level as a result of supports, eye contact develops or can be targeted more directly.
- Note that the social challenges, while very real in each instance, will be decidedly different for individuals along the autism spectrum. Whereas a student with limited verbal ability or word retrieval issues might have trouble contributing to a conversation, an extremely verbal and single-minded student might have trouble allowing a conversational partner to get a word in edgewise. As such, it is generally not effective to pair students with these disparate needs in social skills classes or speech groups, as it becomes even more challenging for the needs of either of them to be met.



- It is important to note that students with autism, especially more verbal students who perform well academically and are therefore less inclined to have consistent adult supports, can be the target of teasing and bullying. As a result of their social challenges they often do not “pick up” on non-verbal cues such as tone of voice or the hidden intention of a request or comment. Students with autism often go along with the teasing and/or bullying because they do not identify that it has a negative intent. The desire to make friends, coupled with the difficulty in doing so, means they often encounter peers with dishonest intentions. It is important to be on the lookout for this and to respond quickly if teasing and bullying become an issue. See [Strategies for Bullying](#) for highlights of useful strategies from *Perfect Targets*, as well as suggested reading in [Resources](#).
- Many individuals with autism are very logical and will play according to the rules *always*. If the rule is that basketballs are not allowed on the playground during recess, a student may become agitated when a special activity for PE includes basketballs on the playground. Similarly, he may not understand special circumstances in game play such as penalty shots, and his insistence on following the rules as he has learned them may become problematic.
- Generalization and flexible thinking are often challenging for students with autism. So, for example, playing dodge ball is usually not a wise idea: you are asking the child to understand that the ball can be thrown at other children, but not adults, and only during this game—confusing!

Are there Specific Strategies for Supporting Social Skill Development?

- Reinforce what the student does well socially—use behavior-specific praise and concrete reinforcement if needed to shape pro-social behavior
- Model social interaction, turn taking, reciprocity
- Teach imitation, motor as well as verbal
- Teach context clues and referencing those around you—e.g., if everyone else is standing, you should be too!
- Break social skills into small component parts, and teach these skills through supported interactions. Use visuals as appropriate. See example for [face washing](#) from the Kansas Autism Spectrum Disorders website
- Celebrate strengths and use these to your advantage. Many individuals with autism have a good sense of humor, a love of or affinity for music, strong rote memorization skills, or a heightened sense of color or visual perspective—use these to motivate interest in social interactions or to give a student a chance to shine and be viewed as competent and interesting.



A Success Story:

A student with a great interest in numbers but not sports was kept occupied at the basketball net with a peer by shooting from sequential numbers chalked on the floor. After several sessions of this activity, he got off the school bus one day and asked to “shoot hoops with Jason!”

- Identify peers with strong social skills and pair the student with them so he has good models for social interaction. Provide peers with strategies for eliciting communication or other targeted objectives, but be careful not to turn the peer into a teacher—strive to keep peer interactions as natural as possible.
- Create small lunch groups, perhaps with structured activities or topic boxes. (Teach the group to pull a topic out of a box and have the students discuss things related to this topic, such as ‘The most recent movie I saw was.....’ This can be helpful for students who tend to talk about the same things all the time since it provides supports and motivation and the benefit of a visual reminder of what the topic is.)
- Focus on social learning during activities that are not otherwise challenging for the child (e.g. conversational turn-taking is not likely to occur if a child with poor fine motor skills is being asked to converse while cutting, especially if it is in a room with overwhelming sensory distractions.)
- Support peers and student with structured social situations with defined expectations of behavior (e.g. first teach the necessary skill, such as how to play Uno, in isolation, and then introduce it in a social setting with peers)
- Provide structured supports or activities during recess. If there is a group of students playing YuGiOh each lunchtime, consider teaching YuGiOh to the student with autism who likes to play cards.
- During group activities it is beneficial to help the student define his role and responsibilities within the group. Assign a role or help him mediate with peers as to what he should do (e.g. Sallie is the note taker today.) Be sure to rotate roles to build flexibility and broaden skills.
- Remember that if you leave it up to the class to pick groups/ partners, students with special needs are sometimes chosen last, causing unnecessary humiliation.
- Educate peers, establish learning teams or [*circles of friends*](#) to build a supportive community – See *Resources: With Open Arms*



A Success Story:

What a circle of friends can do: Andrew has Asperger Syndrome, and the kids on his school bus have been teaching him to call other kids vulgar names. Andrew has no idea what the words mean, but likes the attention he is getting from his peers.

Hannah, a girl from his Circle told the teasers to stop it, but they wouldn't. She made Andrew's Circle facilitator aware of the situation. The kids who were teasing were then dealt with by the adults at the school. Also, both Andrew's parents and his resource teacher were made aware of the situation so they could teach him how to identify when he was being made fun of and strategies to use to deal with the problem.

(from "With Open Arm"s, p 85)

- Use video modeling—see [Model Me Kids](#)
- Teach empathy and reciprocity. In order to engage in a social interaction, a person needs to be able to take another's perspective and adjust the interaction accordingly. While their challenges often display or distort their expressions of empathy, individuals with autism often do have capacity for empathy. This can be taught by making a student aware — and providing the associated vocabulary — through commentary and awareness of feelings, emotional states, recognition of others' facial expressions and non verbal cues.
- Use social narratives and social cartooning as tools in describing and defining social rules and expectations. Developed by autism consultant Carol Gray, she describes: a '*Social Story™ describes a situation, skill, or concept in terms of relevant social cues, perspectives, and common responses in a specifically defined style and format. The goal of a Social Story™ is to share accurate social information in a patient and reassuring manner that is easily understood by its audience. Half of all Social Stories™ developed should affirm something that an individual does well. Although the goal of a Story™ should never be to change the individual's behavior, that individual's improved understanding of events and expectations may lead to more effective responses.*' Source: [The Gray Center](#).
- Develop listening and attending skills and teach ways to show others that he is listening.
- Teach a highly verbal student to recognize how, when and how much to talk about himself or his interests. Directly teach the skills relating to what topics to talk about with others, being aware of the likes, dislikes and reading from the body language and facial expressions of conversational partners.
- Teach social boundaries—things you should not talk about (or *whom* you might talk to about sensitive subjects) and maintaining personal space (an arm's length is often used as a measurable distance for conversation.) A social narrative example from the social narrative bank at [Kansas Autism Spectrum Disorder](#).

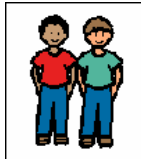


Body Space



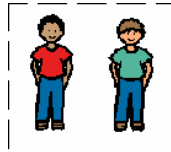
Sometimes I stand too close to people.

I am almost



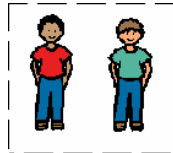
touching them.

This bothers people.



I can stand near people.

I leave a little space



between us.

I will try not to stand too close to

people.

- Teach Relationship Circles to assist in understanding social rules and boundaries, and how these vary based on how well you know someone. Source: *With Open Arms* p 67-70 [James Stanfield](#).
- For older students, it is important to learn about the changes that take place in their bodies and appropriate hygiene as they grow, and communication supports and visuals should be employed to help explain and teach. See [Resources](#).

