



JM Mental Health

Independent Child and
Adolescent Psychiatry



Autism and making friends



Did you know?

The social development of autistic children can lag 2-3 years behind their peers

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Introduction – autism and making friends

Friendships are an important and fulfilling part of life. For children and teenagers, friendship helps them develop socially and emotionally. It's where they learn about give and take, negotiation, co-operation and managing emotions.

In general, children and teenager on the autism spectrum find social situations and interactions more difficult so can struggle to make friends. The social development of autistic children can lag 2-3 years behind their peers. Where others somehow manage to understand the signals and unspoken rules of how to engage with each other, it can be confusing, stressful and exhausting for a child with autism.

Display of autistic behaviours in children and teenagers

Let's look at some of the behaviours that children and teenagers on the autistic spectrum can display. They can:

- prefer to play (engage in enjoyable activities) alone/or obsess about having friends
- appear withdrawn/or very social and talkative
- seem indifferent to others/or having opinions about what almost everyone does
- accept contact if initiated by others but not initiate contact themselves
- be difficult to comfort if upset
- use very formal language and want to stick rigidly to the rules

Masking and mirroring

Some children, particularly girls, are good at disguising (masking) their autism by copying (mirroring) the behaviour of their peers, helping them to blend in. However, this puts a huge strain on them and can result in meltdowns when the need for masking/mirroring ends; for example, after a day at school.



Theory of mind

'Theory of mind' describes the ability to understand the feelings, beliefs, desires and intentions of others including understanding that other people will not necessarily share the same feelings, beliefs, desires and intentions as oneself. It's a skill that typically develops in children around the ages of 3-5.

For some individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), they experience challenges in developing and using this skill. This means that children and teenagers on the autism spectrum can often have difficulty understanding and predicting the thoughts, feelings and intentions of others which makes social interactions and communication challenging.

If someone doesn't understand social norms, can't recognise sarcasm or suspect lying or understand the concept of engaging in reciprocal conversations, they will struggle to make friends and can be vulnerable to teasing, bullying or even exploitation. And that is often the challenge for children and teenagers with ASD.

In addition, children with ASD are often accidentally overly blunt, are insistent on things being done their way, can talk

about themselves and their interests too much or disengage if disinterested /overwhelmed. These actions then frequently contribute to friendship breakdown as opposed to not managing to make friends in the first place. Also, children and teenagers with ASD, often through misinterpretation and misunderstanding, take things personally. As a result, they become overly upset which can result in withdrawal, again resulting in breakdown in friendships.

Early detection of ASD is crucial for early intervention and tailored support. Educational strategies can help children and teenagers with ASD improve their theory of mind skills. There is also a lot you can do as a parent to help. Harness your child's unique view on the world and their great attention to detail. An eye for detail is invaluable for picking up new skills.

The skills needed to make and keep friends

- Starting and having conversations; give and take in conversations
- Working out what other people are thinking and feeling
- Showing empathy with others in positive and negative situations
- Being able to accept and handle criticism from others
- Knowing the right time and how to offer constructive criticism
- Managing difference of opinion with compromise (rather than aggression or emotional outbursts)
- Knowing how to enter into another's activities
- Knowing how to welcome other children into one's own games and activities
- Being able to take on someone else's ideas and suggestions during an activity
- Understanding personal space and boundaries
- Understanding facial expressions, hand gestures and body language
- Adjusting to new social situations
- Recognising when and how to help others; seeking help from others
- Understanding idioms/ abstract expressions ("I'm so hungry I could eat a horse")



Useful resources...

Publications for 3-6 year olds:

"Do you want to play: making friends with an autistic kid" Daniel Share-Strom

"My friend with autism" Beverly Bishop

"Liam says 'Hi': Learning to greet a friend" Jane Whelan Bank

"A friend like Simon" Kate Gaynot

"The autism acceptance book: being a friend to someone with autism" Ellen Sabin

How to develop social skills at home

It's not that children and teenagers on the autism spectrum (and particularly those at the milder end of the spectrum) don't want friends. It's just that they don't know how to go about making friends in a successful way. Equally, if they have a friend, it can be a struggle to maintain and manage that friendship. Alis Rowe, the autistic creator of 'The Girl with the Curly Hair' talks about how the social energy batteries of people with autism 'run dry a lot'.

Whilst we want to help our children make and maintain friendships, we have to acknowledge that children and teenagers with ASD may be happier with a quieter social diary and fewer commitments than other children – because they may be less interested but also because it is difficult for them to emotionally manage those interactions to the same extent. Having spent the day at school, navigating the ups and downs of all the different social interactions that take place there, it can be tempting for a child or teenager with ASD to not bother with friends once they finish the school day. So pacing is key and don't be worried if the social interactions are brief.

We will look at some practical ideas to help support your child understand and develop their social skills for making and keeping friends.



What is a friend?

This may seem obvious but your child needs to know what a friend is. It is difficult to be someone's friend if you don't know what that means. Many children and teenagers on the autistic spectrum misunderstand normal social cues and can mistake the interaction of someone making fun of them, for example, as friendship.

Children with ASD struggle with abstract concepts like 'friendship' so you should be literal when discussing what a friend is. Use simple, clear language to explain ideas like: 'a friend is someone who treats you nicely', 'someone you have fun with'. You can ask questions such as 'Do you like being with people who say nice things to you?'

- Friends like you for who you are
- They share things with you
- Friends let you join in
- They are interested in what you have to say
- They can cheer you up when you feel sad
- Friends can stand up for you if someone isn't being nice to you
- Friends make you feel good

Not all friendships are the same

For adolescents, explain that there are different types of 'friends':

- Best friends
- Friends
- Acquaintances

Discuss the different types of relationships that you could have with friends from each of these groups (eg colleagues have work in common but the friendship can be superficial while best friends have deeper, more personal relationships).

It's important for young people with ASD to understand that they don't have to be friends with everybody. It's not a numbers game. They just need to be friends with people who make them feel happy – and if that's just one or two people, then that's okay. And remember that it's not all one-sided (about give and take); pretty much everyone is looking for a friend, not just those with ASD. So while your teenager with ASD may be feeling anxious about rejection, the uncertainty of where all this might lead, making themselves vulnerable, point out that we can all feel like this when it comes to making friends. Help them manage their anxiety and set realistic expectations for them (not everyone will want to be their friend; it can be disappointing – that's okay).

Online friendships

Gaming is often a popular hobby for children, particularly teens, with ASD; it supports their wellbeing, giving them downtime from face-to-face contact in the real world, helps build friendships, connections and can be a way of recharging their energy batteries. It's a world where they can feel in charge. Online friends are just as valid as real life ones for adolescents with ASD.

Understandably, many parents can feel nervous about the online world and how their child is interacting with people online. While it can be a benefit for children with ASD, there are risks about online exploitation. However, there are safe communities online where young people can connect. Spectrum Gaming (www.spectrumgaming.net) is an autistic-led UK based charity that supports autistic young people online; they have useful advice for 8-13 year olds, 13-17 year olds and parents of children with ASD.

Useful resources...

Publications for 6-9 year olds:

"What is friendship? Games and activities to help children understand friendship" Pamela Day

"Friendly facts: a fun, practical interactive resource to help children explore the complexities of friends and friendship" Margaret-Anne Carter

"Teaching children with autism to mind-read: a practical guide for parents and teachers" Patricia Howlin

"How to be a friend: a guide to making friends and keeping them" Laurie Krasny Brown & Marc Brown

Understanding non-verbal behaviour

Body language and facial expressions are a big part of communicating with others. Talk to your child about different non-verbal situations and behaviours. These include things like making eye contact, facial expressions (frowning, rolling eyes, pursing lips etc), body movements (such as folding arms, turning your head away). Some of these can make people feel uncomfortable; others are cues (such as wanting to end a conversation or becoming bored).

Work with your child to identify these cues and practice the different ways to respond to them correctly.

- Create a script for your child that they can use if they want to play with someone or start up a conversation. Practise it at home with them. Include alternative endings; for example, what to do if they say 'yes' or 'no'.
- Children/teenagers sometimes want to spend time alone so explain to your child that their new friend may not want to be with them all the time

Understanding emotions

'Alexithymia' is when a person has difficulty identifying, experiencing and expressing emotions. It can be linked to several conditions, including autism. Being able to communicate and recognise emotions is an integral part of friendship. So an adolescent or child with ASD can often be perceived as shallow or rather cold if they are not responding as expected.

Most children on the autistic spectrum understand the emotional concepts of happy, angry and sad. This is a good base to start from. You can then gradually expand this to include other feelings (such as surprised, frustrated and confused).

Children with ASD often respond to things that they can see or read, that tells them what they are supposed to do. Draw up a list of feelings which you can then categorise and colour code. For example, write negative feelings in red and positive ones in green.

Cartoons are a useful resource for teaching facial expressions, particularly with young children. By their very nature, they are over-exaggerated. Watch a cartoon together and:

- pause it at appropriate moments
- discuss what is happening
- explore why characters are behaving in such a way
- copy facial expressions
- see if you can predict what will happen next



Activities for... understanding emotions

Create picture cards to learn facial expression and body language

Show a variety of emotions in faces and body languages. This helps your child interpret visual clues when someone is getting bored, angry, sad, frustrated, happy etc.

Take photos of you, your child, family and friends

All making a certain facial expression (eg anger, boredom, laughing, crying) and get them to see the similarities in how faces work (this helps with generalisation).

Print off photos or drawings of facial expressions

Use them in a matching card game such as snap.

For young children ie 3-6 years

Ask an adult to become a friend. The adult would need to consciously behave like a peer, speak like a peer, engage in turn taking, ask for help etc. (while giving explanations during the teaching; for example saying "When this happens, we do that, which is a friendly thing to do")

Watch films together, press the pause button to discuss and explain communication

Encourage them to read fiction to learn about thoughts and feelings of characters (ideal for 6-9 year olds in particular); Harry Potter is a good book in this regard



Conversations

Conversations are not predictable and don't always involve an immediate response. This is why many people on the autism spectrum avoid conversations with their peers and will often talk to adults or children much older or younger than themselves.

Children and teenagers with ASD can often dominate a conversation and talk about their own interests. A crucial skill is to learn to spend time listening to others, realising that their peers have interests too, and asking questions about their interests. Conversations are also about taking turns.

To help a young child with this you could:

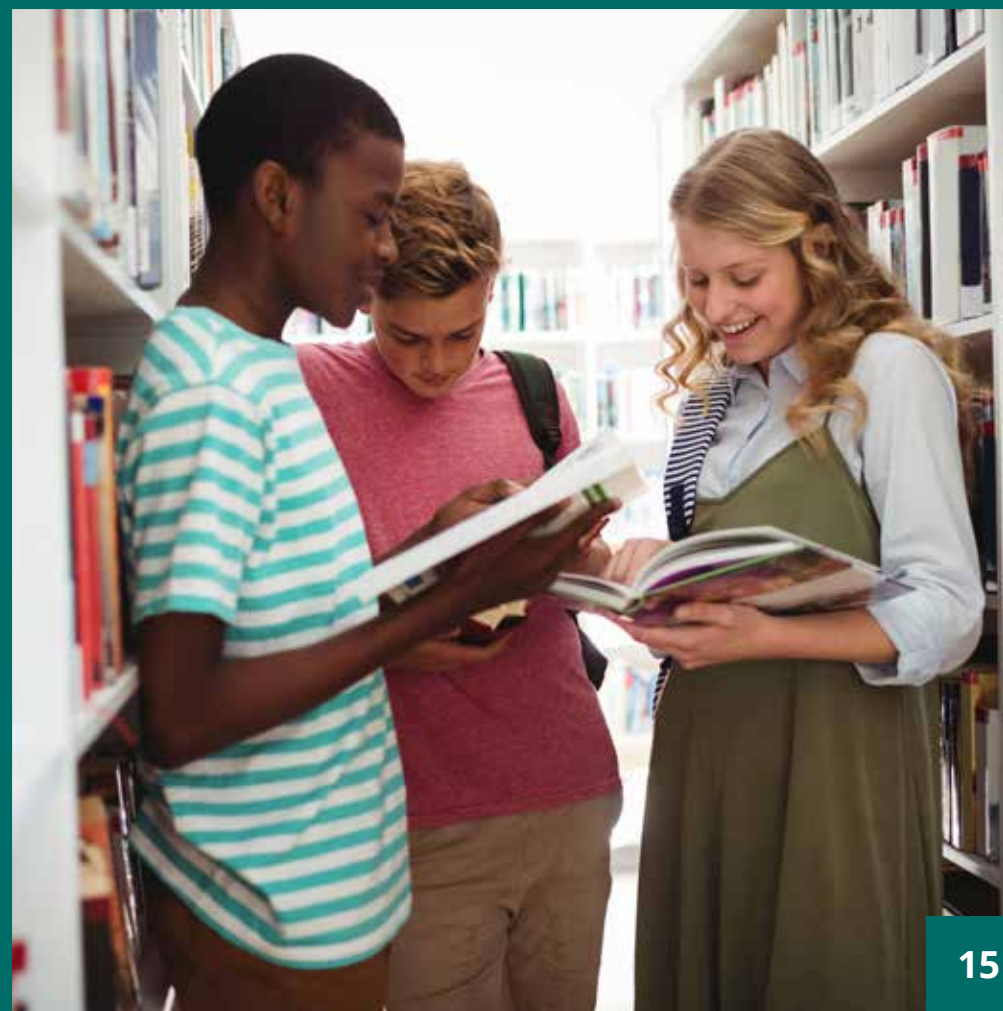
- use a 'talking stick' – whoever is holding it, it's their turn to speak - and use timers to show when it's the end of their turn and that they have to pass the stick on to the next person
- play board games; great for learning about taking turns. Board games are visual and use things that clearly show that it's your turn (eg dice, counters)
- play the 'never ending story' game. One person starts and says one word only, such as "one". The next person says another word such as "afternoon"; keep going, each person adding one word at a time. It helps develop listening skills because you both have to listen to what the other person has said and make sure your response is relevant to keep the story going.

It can be quite daunting for many of us to strike up a conversation with people we don't know; it's particularly challenging for teenagers with ASD. So it's a good idea to:

- have some handy conversation starters ready (such as 'What are your hobbies?', 'Are you doing anything nice at the weekend?') to help them initiate a conversation
- use open-ended questions (ie ones that don't require a 'yes' or 'no' response); open-ended questions can lead to more discussion and even put the emphasis on the other person doing a lot of the talking (some children with ASD can feel anxious or uncomfortable if they feel they have to do all the talking)

- understand how to respond if asked an open ended question – "What do you mean?"
- steer clear of subjects like politics, sexuality, finances as conversation starters which are best avoided with new people.

As we've mentioned before, it helps to manage their expectations. Not every new conversation will go as successfully as they'd hoped; not every new conversation will necessarily end up with acquiring a new friend. It's a skill that we all need to develop as we grow up so it's worth practicing to get better at it.



Activities for... making a conversation

Make a game of questions and answers

Take turns to ask questions about each other and give a short answer. This demonstrates that a good conversation is where both people get to share the talking equally.

Play a game where the child is a journalist or interviewer

Draw up a list of easy questions to ask to suit the person they are 'interviewing'. As they get better at this, they could 'interview' people at school or in the community. This activity puts their new listening and questioning skills to use.

Here are some questions to get you started...

Where do you go to school?

What are your hobbies?

Do you have any pets? What are their names?

What's your favourite colour and why?

What is your favourite book?

What book are you reading at the moment?

What's your favourite game?

Who is your favourite band/singer?

Where did you last go on holiday?



Maintaining friendships

Friendships are a bit like plants; they need looking after to keep them going. For younger children, this is often supported by the parents – arranging play dates, taking them to after school events and so on. Teenagers spend more time with their peers, beginning to segment into different groups, so parents are less able to drive the friendship agenda.

But friendship works best when it's a two-way process, with both friends taking the time and effort to keep the friendship going. If it becomes one-sided – one friend feeling they are making all the effort – that's when friendships break down. So your teenager should:

- Keep their friend in mind (when their birthday is, what is going on in their life)
- Arrange to meet up with their friend/s regularly
- Check in on their friend (ask them how they are)
- Listen to them; don't just talk about themselves
- Be there for their friend when they need them; it's not just about being a fair weather friend

Practising and role play

Children and teenagers with ASD need a bit more time and repetition to gain a new skill. So practising together will help them prepare for new situations and tackle any potential problems or pitfalls in a safe space (with you); for example, ordering a drink in a coffee shop or getting on the bus and talking to the driver. Enrol family members and friends to help your child practice these new skills.

Role playing gives your child or teenager the time they need to work through different social situations that they may have trouble with; for example, starting a conversation, inviting someone to join in an activity with them or joining in another person's activity. Role playing will help them understand facial expressions, body language and work out appropriate responses.

Record this on your phone or video camera so you can replay it together, discussing what went well, what could have gone better and analysing the interactions.

Freeze the footage on relevant bits so your child has time to analyse particular facial expressions and body language.

For adolescents, peer pressure can play a huge part in their lives. One way to support your teenager with ASD is to help them blend in:

- Keep an eye on what is fashionable or popular (from movies, video games and TV programmes to the clothes, trainers or backpacks people are wearing)
- Make sure they practice good hygiene (no body odour, bad breath, greasy hair)

This isn't about squashing their individuality but just helping them to fit in with their peers a bit more and avoid any potential bullying.

Useful resources...

Publications for 9-13 year olds:

"Social skills groups for children and adolescents with Asperger's Syndrome: a step-by-step program" Kim Kiker Painter

"Social skills training for children with Asperger Syndrome and high-functioning autism" Susan Williams White

"The friendship formula" Alison Schroeder

"Socially curious and curiously social" Michelle Garcia Winner and Pamela Crooke

"Win or lose by how you choose" Judy Sheindlin

Find shared interests

Getting together with others who share an interest is a more natural way for children and teenagers to make friends. It's difficult to become a friend if you have nothing in common.

- What are your child's interests and strengths?
- Help your child meet children who enjoy similar things. This could be through a play group, a special interest club at school, an after-school class (eg sport, music, drama)
- Look for compatible interests; for example, if your child or teenager likes drawing and painting, find an art class or a child who is interested in art
- Make sure the groups are made up of similar-aged children so your child can see and experience age-appropriate behaviour
- For teenagers, have a brainstorming session with them to come up with a list of suggestions as to where they might meet friends

Sharing

Some children may not want someone else to touch their favourite things. Explain that sharing is part of friendship. Talk this through with your child before anyone comes over to your house.

- For younger children, try activities and games that also encourage co-operative play
- For teenagers, try outdoor activities like tennis or indoor ones like baking or playing a video game
- If you think your child will struggle to share their belongings, put away the things that they don't want to share or organise something away from home
- Toys and games that encourage sharing (such as puzzles, video games) are a good choice
- Be a role model: make sure to show your child that you share things with family members and friends

Making mistakes

We all make mistakes but children and teenagers on the autism spectrum might run away rather than ask for help or throw away a whole piece of work rather than put a line through a mistake. Showing your child that everyone makes mistakes (and that there are very often ways to fix those mistakes) is helpful:

- point out when you make a mistake so they can see it happens to others; explain what you are doing to resolve the mistake
- talk about wins and losses in the news (for example, sports or awards). Particularly pointing out the mistakes of someone your child admires might help them to accept their own
- stick to the facts when attempting to resolve conflict. If you are discussing an incident with your child, examine different parts of the argument that they may have missed, such as the other person's point of view and misinterpretation of words (children on the autistic spectrum can sometimes be extremely literal and focus on specific details rather than the overall plot)
- make sure your child knows what a 'game' is. In most games, there are winners and losers so they need to understand this. Explain this before a game or activity starts and talk through about being a 'good loser'
- learning to disagree with each other. We all have different views about things and friends will disagree with each other at some point. This is about showing respect for each other, trying to see things from a friend's perspective and, if they still disagree, to do so respectfully

Useful resources...

Publications for 13+ year olds:

"Safety skills for Asperger women" Liane Willey

"The Aspie girl's guide for being safe with men" Debi Brown

"Approaching autistic adulthood: the road less travelled" Grace Liu

Conclusion

Nobody can make friends for their child. But you can give your child the opportunities to interact with others, find people with similar interests and support them in developing the social skills to maintain friendships.

Many children and teenagers with ASD struggle with social skills and situations. But they can make and keep friends and gain acceptance from their peers. Children and teenagers with ASD bring many strengths to a friendship. They are loyal, accepting, honest and funny. As a parent, you can help them celebrate those strengths so they understand that they can be a great friend to someone.



Useful resources...

Online resources:

National Autistic Society – National charity for autistic people and their families. <https://www.autism.org.uk/>

Ambitious about Autism – National charity for autistic children and young people <https://www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk/>

Spectrum Gaming is an autistic-led UK based charity that supports autistic young people online. <https://www.spectrumgaming.net/>

Secret Agent Society computer game & board game (learning social skills could be fun). www.sst-institute.net and www.socialthinking.com

The Profile of Friendship Skills in Asperger's Syndrome – Dr Tony Attwood (clinical psychologist specialising in Asperger's Syndrome) <https://withyoueverystepoftheway.com/friendship-skills/>

Asperger's and me – Alis Rowe Useful leaflet about masking and mirroring from a girl's perspective <https://thegirlwiththecurlyhair.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/aspergers-and-me-sample-watermark.pdf>

Friendship is like that: Carol Gray Social Stories – Carol Gray's social stories are well validated method of helping young people with ASD understand the why, how etc. of day-to-day activities. <https://carolgraysocialstories.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Friendship-Is-Like-That.pdf>



JM Mental Health

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Trust your instincts as a parent or carer

We understand that this is a very stressful time for everyone. We want to support you and work with you to improve the situation.

We make no judgements. We listen to you and your child. We make absolutely sure we understand what is going on. Remember, you are not alone. This is a safe place. We are here to support and care for you all.

If you have concerns about your child's moods and behaviour, then you need to act sooner rather than later. Please discuss any concerns with your clinician.

Dr Julia Moss
Founder of JM Mental Health



Helping children and
teenagers and their families
with mental health difficulties.

www.jmmmentalhealth.co.uk