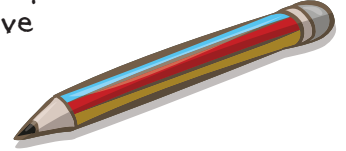


Supporting Autistic Students with Making and Keeping Friends

"It is clear that people on the autism spectrum may perceive friendship differently, have different priorities or goals for friendship, and have different ways of experiencing friendship."

Sosnowy, Silverman, Shattuck, & Garfield (2019)



How Autistic People Describe a Friend

Themes that emerged from autistic individuals describing their friendships (Black et al., 2022):



How Autistic People Experience Friendships

Themes that emerged from autistic individuals describing the benefits and challenges they have experienced in friendships (Black et al., 2022):

"Friends make your life happy."

Emotional support, social support, and practical support were emphasized

"I don't know if I have friends."

Unsure if they are liked; feelings of disconnection from groups

"Social disorientation."

Difficulty navigating neurotypical relationships and forms of communication

"I'm afraid friends will get sick of me."

Common worry of rejection and losing friends; friendship insecurity

"Makes me tired."

Unpredictability in social situations, and overwhelming sensory environments

"A small group of friends."

Enjoyment of alone time; fewer friends allowed for more time to build trust and closeness

"Lonely people need friends."

Feelings of loneliness, exclusion, and isolation are upsetting

"I work hard to pass as normal."

Self-rehearsal and camouflaging commonly used to fit in, which lead to emotional fatigue, distress, identity crisis

"People used to be my friends."

Difficulty maintaining friendships due to navigating conflict





What Skills Are Needed for Friendship?



Interaction Skills

Beginning, intermediate, and advanced engagement/play skills

Emotional Regulation

Understanding emotions, self-regulation, flexibility, problem-solving



Group Skills

Participating in a group, following the group, seeking assistance

Communication Skills

Conversational skills, nonverbal conversational skills, questions, compliments



Check out the “Social Skills Checklist” by University of Washington:

<https://www.wannerooeducationnetwork.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Social-Skills-Checklist.pdf>

How to Support an Autistic Child with Making Friends

The following approaches may be useful for children/youth/teens of any age:



Discuss what friendship means to them. What makes a good friend? What makes a bad friend?



Foster their strengths, interests, and self-awareness. What are some things that you are good at? What are some things that you like to do? What are some things that you need to feel comfortable?



Create opportunities for interaction with other children/youth who share their interests. Start a club, join a group, try something new.



Focus on growth mindset and long-term success. Friendship is a choice – we don’t need to be friends with everyone. It takes time to develop friendships. Disagreements are a normal part of friendships and can be resolved together.



Have fun!





Resources for Supporting Friendship Skills

Programs for Schools:

Elementary School

We Thinkers® Series	https://www.socialthinking.com/Products/
Learning About Neurodiversity at School (LEANS)	https://salvesen-research.ed.ac.uk/leans

Middle/High School

PEERS® Curriculum	https://www.semel.ucla.edu/peers
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Multi-Age

Second Step®	https://www.secondstep.org/
Everyday Speech™ Curriculum	https://everydayspeech.com/

Work with your School Team:

- Student Support Teacher / Resource Teacher
- Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Teacher
- School Counsellor / Youth and Family Worker
- Speech-Language Pathologist
- Board Certified Behaviour Consultant

Seek out a Community Professional:

Speech Language Pathologist	https://speechandhearingbc.ca/#professional-map
Behaviour Consultant	https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/search?id=D9E8F17BE-27040D28C185FE4E57FA421&sourceId=666C07A0AC6A4456B-237268D60F370
Clinical Counsellor	https://bcacc.ca/

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