



Teaching Social Skills

Difficulty with social interaction is one of the key features or core deficits in children with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs). Some researchers have suggested that teaching social skills is one of the most important things we can do for children with ASDs.

What types of social difficulties do children with ASDs have?

Children with ASDs can have difficulty with a wide range of social skills, including the following:

- Entering, sustaining, and exiting interactions
- Reading and using nonverbal and verbal social cues, such as eye contact, facial expressions, and gestures
- Understanding “unwritten” social rules of the environment
- Negotiation, compromise, and conflict resolution
- Play or leisure skills

How do we teach social skills to children with ASDs?

There are many ways to teach social skills to children with ASDs. Most professionals who work with children and adolescents with ASDs do not believe that simply exposing children to “typical” children is enough, as children with ASDs may not readily copy, or model, their peers. Using social skill groups, where children can be coached by a trusted teacher or therapist, in school or in a private practice setting, can be helpful. Using games, stories, pictures, and drawings, and teaching some social rules that many of us take for granted, are some strategies used to teach social skills. These skills should be practiced in the classroom with teacher support and at home with family support for the student to learn to use them when appropriate.

Teaching specific tasks, such as how to start a conversation, how to provide a compliment, and how to take turns in a conversation, are often addressed in social skills training. Teaching nonverbal skills, such as providing eye contact, directing facial expressions, and using appropriate gestures, is also very important.

Where can children with ASDs learn social skills?

Children can learn social skills in a variety of settings. In school, social skill goals can be set as part of a child’s Individualized Educational Program or Section 504 plan. These goals may be addressed in speech therapy, with a school psychologist or behavioral consultant, in the classroom, or in other settings. Some children participate in social skill groups through private therapy agencies or hospital-based therapy programs. Everyday activities also provide opportunities to teach social skills, including going to the store, ordering a meal at a restaurant, playing on a sports team, or attending family social events.

How can we help our child learn social skills?

Families can provide many opportunities to learn and practice social skills in everyday life. Playing a game teaches the very important and sometimes difficult skill of turn-taking. Eating dinner together can teach a child about making conversation, taking turns in conversation, and listening to others. Talking about a TV show or movie can lead to discussions of how and why characters behaved as they did. There are many books and resources to help families work on social skill development with their child with an ASD.

There are 4 important, basic steps for teaching social skills.

- *Tell them* (label for the child what needs to happen).
- *Show them* (demonstrate how it is done).
- *Rehearse* in school, at home, and in community settings—practice, practice, practice!
- *Reinforce* (positive feedback for your child so he knows he is performing the skills he has been taught).

Resources

AAPC Publishing: www.aapcpublishing.net

American Academy of Pediatrics HealthyChildren.org:
www.HealthyChildren.org

Autism Speaks Social Skills and Autism: www.autismspeaks.org/family-services/community-connections/social-skills-and-autism

The Gray Center for Social Learning and Understanding:
www.thegraycenter.org

Indiana Resource Center for Autism: www.iidc.indiana.edu/irca

Myles BS, Trautman ML, Schelvan RL. *The Hidden Curriculum: Practical Solutions for Understanding Unstated Rules in Social Situations*. Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Co; 2004

Winner MG. *Thinking about You Thinking about Me*. 2nd ed. San Jose, CA: Think Social; 2007

The recommendations in this publication do not indicate an exclusive course of treatment or serve as a standard of medical care. Variations, taking into account individual circumstances, may be appropriate. Original document included as part of *Autism: Caring for Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Resource Toolkit for Clinicians*, 2nd Edition. Copyright © 2013 American Academy of Pediatrics. All Rights Reserved. The American Academy of Pediatrics does not review or endorse any modifications made to this document and in no event shall the AAP be liable for any such changes.

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