

Social Skills for Children and Young People with an Autism Spectrum Condition

Many children and young people with ASC may appear solitary, to prefer their own company, even resisting any “invasion” of their space by others. They may want friendship and conversation but are uncertain how to approach others, fail to give out or read the appropriate social signals, and do not appreciate how their behaviour may need to vary in different situations. They may appear actively anti-social. The majority of children with Asperger Syndrome will be in mainstream schools where they can probably cope at least adequately with the academic demands and may achieve very well in certain areas like Science or Maths; but it is the social or group side of school life that may prove very difficult or threatening to many of them. Teaching social skills to children and young people with an Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC) must happen everywhere! At home, at school, in leisure time – any occasion is an opportunity to develop communication skills, empathy and imagination which may then be employed in different situations.

Often, explaining exactly why a particular word, mode of speech or action is best for a certain circumstance can aid understanding and encourage imitation in the future. Inappropriate behaviour or speech must be discouraged every time and correct alternatives offered.

Over learning is crucial to consolidate learned behaviour and speech. Frequent opportunities to practice skills should be provided. Learning by example is effective as people with an ASC often do not learn these skills intuitively and therefore need to be taught. Watching a video-recording, listening to their own recorded speech, using a mirror and role-playing have also proved helpful.

The newly-acquired skills should then be practiced in real settings.

Teaching social behaviours

People with ASC often need teaching what is and is not acceptable in certain settings or with different people, and why. Once they understand the reason why we do certain things they are more likely to learn the skills. Be aware of their lack of ‘generalisation of skills’ as sometimes social skills learnt in the home, for instance, may not automatically be applied into new situations and environments. Only teach social skills when the young person is calm and receptive, teach one at a time and they may prefer a regular time each week rather than on an ‘as and when’ basis. Home and school working together on social skills is beneficial.

The use and meaning of eye contact

Some children with ASC may find it physically painful to give or maintain eye contact with others so may need to be given an alternative, such as looking at someone’s forehead.

It may also be difficult for them to maintain eye contact and listen at the same time so you may need to decide which is most important at a given moment.

Inflections and voice tone, volume, rhythm and speed

It might be necessary to explain what the variations mean and where they are generally used – for instance, a harsh tone means someone is angry; speaking quietly may be appropriate in a place of worship or in a library etc.

Suitable length of conversations, including beginning and ending one

Children with ASC may need to be taught to listen, to wait for a gap in a conversation before joining in and, especially, how not

to dominate a conversation with their own interests. They also frequently like to know the reason why certain things are done before they have to do them – just telling them to do something will not always suffice.

Physical proximity to others

It’s important to learn the meaning of personal space and not to invade it! Some people with ASC may not understand that standing too close to people when talking to them may make the other person feel uncomfortable but that it is okay to stand close to someone in a long queue. These are skills that most of us will learn intuitively but people with ASC may not and will need to be taught.

Facial and hand gestures and body language

People employ body language all the time but people with ASC often have difficulty interpreting it and may need guidance to help them to understand expressions and actions. Role play can help, as can discussing expressions on faces in magazines or watching characters on TV.

Humour, figurative speech, sarcasm, metaphors

People with ASC tend to have very literal minds so will not understand the nuances of figurative speech unless they are explained. For instance, most people will know that ‘pull your socks up’ means ‘try harder’ but someone with ASC may very well take this literally and actually pull their socks up. There are resources, such as books and games, to help them to learn many of the literal sayings. Although many will not understand sarcasm, some will be able to.

Meeting unfamiliar and new people

This can be a stressful occasion, but is helped by knowing how to greet someone, how to behave and what to say. Again, role play can help prepare them for what could and may be said and how they could respond appropriately. They may also need to be taught that many of us are not always interested in what someone else has to say but that it is polite to sound as if we are interested. It may be helpful to let them have a start and finish time for any social events so that they know how long they will have to be there.

Having an interest in more than one topic

To show an interest in someone else’s subject is not only a good way to build a relationship, but can also help to broaden horizons for the person with ASC. Being able to talk about more than one topic is also helpful as is understanding that everyone is allowed an opinion even if they don’t agree with it.

Problem-solving strategies for troublesome situations

Social occasions and conversations don’t always go according to plan for any of us. It would be reassuring for the person with ASC to learn some of the things that might happen and how to deal with them as they may not be able to predict what may go wrong. In this way, a bank of ideas can be built up to use and possibly adapt in the future. It is also important to learn that no matter how much we prepare, we cannot always prepare for every eventuality.

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Appropriate choices

This could include 'stranger danger' and learning to say no. It's important to explore the possible outcomes of a variety of situations so appropriate choices can be made when they occur in real life. Using role play can help reinforce understanding.

Good friend behaviour

People with ASC often want friends but do not know what makes a good friend, leaving them vulnerable to being taken advantage of and susceptible to bullying by peers. They need to be taught how a good friend should behave – kind, sharing, understanding etc and how a good friend will not get them into trouble by telling them to do things they know, or feel, is wrong.

Manners

Having good manners can go a long way to giving a good first impression. People with ASC can come across as being rude or arrogant, particularly to those who do not know them or understand the condition. Therefore, if they are taught to have good manners it can help others to understand that they are not necessarily being rude at other times. Once again, role play can help give someone with ASC a better understanding of certain situations.

RESOURCES AND IDEAS

Social Stories and Comic Strip Conversations devised by Carol Gray. These individualised social stories and comic strip conversations help those with Asperger Syndrome or High Functioning Autism to understand social concepts, changes in routine, theirs and others' feelings etc and can be adapted for virtually to any situation or person. They can be used by parents, carers, teachers and anyone working with an individual. Visit Carol's own website for information, advice and downloadable items: Website: www.thegraycenter.org/social-stories

The National Autistic Society:

www.autism.org.uk/living-with-autism/approaches-therapies-and-interventions/skillsbased-interventions/social-stories-and-comicstrip-conversations.aspx

Circle-Time

is a good arena for helping students develop their social skills, and to promote universal understanding of others' individualities. For further information try the following: Website: www.circletime.co.uk

Circle of Friends

This is something that some primary schools do: National Autistic Society: www.autism.org.uk/working-with/education/educationalprofessionals-in-schools/resources-for-teachers/circle-of-friends-promoting-inclusion-andinteraction.aspx

Advice from Staffordshire CC: www.education.staffordshire.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/BB594DC4-8CF5-400C-B32C-194A8538C1EB/85450/ATI1CircleofFriends1.pdf

Buddy System

some secondary schools operate a 'Buddy system' to help year 7 and vulnerable pupils: Ideas and good practice on transition from Years 6: www.movingon-leeds.org.uk Information from Barnwell School: www.barnwellschool.co.uk/students/buddy-system/

Incentive Plus

more than 3000 social, emotional and behavioural resources: www.incentiveplus.co.uk

Model Me Kids

an American social skills website which has worksheets, activities and DVDs and software for children with autism (calculates the shipping cost of your order): www.modelmekids.com

Snivel and Shriek

fresh and funky downloadable resources: www.snivelandshriek.com

Winslow Publications

games, books and resources: www.winslow-cat.com/catalogue/social-emotional/social-skills.html

Xtra

thousands of topical resources to help children and young people cope with modern social issues: www.xtra-cat.com

Mr Bean

is enjoyed and understood by many children and adults with an ASC, especially as there is no language. It can be a very good tool for recognising expressions and body language and also for pointing out the wrong types of behaviour in social situations; a different way can then be discussed and practised.

USEFUL READING AND WEBSITES

Cambian free Information Sheets

Includes for ASC: Behaviour Support; Inappropriate Sexual Behaviour; Motivation; Sensory Issues and Coexisting Conditions; Social Skills; Stress and Anxiety; Educational Issues; various coexisting conditions such as ADHD, dyslexia, OCD, Tourette's, SEN advice. See the Cambian information sheet 'Books

– where to find them' for a list of specialist publishers with a huge range of books, especially: www.autism.org.uk and www.jkp.com (500+ books on ASC).

Kids Health

is an American website with information written for children. There is a huge range of topics including friendships, brothers and sisters, loneliness and this is the link to Social Skills: www.cyh.com/HealthTopics/HealthTopicDetailsKids.aspx?p=335&np=287&id=2905

National Autistic Society

Social skills in young children: www.autism.org.uk/living-with-autism/communicating-andinteracting/social-skills.aspx Social skills in adolescents and adults: www.autism.org.uk/living-with-autism/communicatingand-interacting/social-skills/social-skills-foradolescents-and-adults.aspx National Autistic Society Surrey branch has an article on social skills: www.mugsy.org/connor38.htm

Autism Education Trust

www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/en/goodpractice/written%20for%20you/parents-andcares/pc%20personal%20and%20social%20development.aspx

OASIS and MAAP

American website: www.aspergersyndrome.org/Articles/The-Socially-Aware-Autistic-Child-and-Adult.aspx

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All the information sheets are checked and amended annually. Please ensure you have the current version.



Cambian is the largest provider of specialist residential education and care for young people with Autism, Asperger Syndrome and other associated complex needs in the United Kingdom. Cambian is trusted by hundreds of parents and over 70 Local Education Authorities. www.cambianguroup.com

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