

ACT-NOW

FACT SHEET 33

Developing Social Skills



A Monash University, Centre for Developmental Psychiatry & Psychology Project
Funded by the State Government of Victoria, Department of Human Services

Dr Avril Brereton & Ms Katie Broadbent

© Centre for Developmental Psychiatry & Psychology
Monash University

Developing Social Skills for children with High Functioning Autism in the Preschool environment

Children with high functioning autism (those children who are in the average intellectual range but who present with the core features of Autism - problems in the areas of communication, socialisation and have routines, rituals and obsessions) can find the unspoken social rules at preschool difficult to understand and follow.

Typically developing children will often learn to enter a play situation and negotiate with peers through a lengthy series of trial and error. They notice and interpret the reactions they receive from others, and maintain or modify their behaviour in response to these reactions. Children with autism often do not pick up on or misinterpret others' reactions.

Skills for joining in with others, maintaining appropriate play and interaction, and ending play situations successfully need to be taught .

What are the skills required for joining in a play situation?

Joining in a play situation with others is a complex process. More than asking "Can I play?" to which the response from others might be "No", children need to learn *how* to join in play with other children. This involves:

- making a choice to participate in a social play activity eg. the block corner at kinder, home corner, dress ups, a chasie game
- moving safely to the area in which the social play situation is occurring
- Observing and identifying the play *theme* that is occurring eg. in the block corner, more than just building with blocks, the children might be cooperatively building a farm or a spaceship
- choosing an appropriate "joining in strategy"
 - Sit alongside the children and, using spare materials, make a structure that will fit with the existing theme (eg. a new fence for the farmyard, a rocket ship for the space theme)
 - Ask "Can I play too?"

NB: The difficulty with this strategy is knowing what to do when the children say "no". A child with autism will also need to be explicitly taught the options for when someone says they can't join in (eg. play with something else for a while, go and read a book until there is space available, ask an adult for help, wait until there is a space if the play situation has a limited number of children allowed)

How do I teach "joining in" skills?

Children with autism will usually need to be taught all of the above "joining in" strategies in order to participate in social play situations with peers. A range of strategies can help children learn each of the concepts listed above:

- Social storiesTM detailing step-by-step how to join in with other children. The social story might also need to address what to do when the other children say “no”, or how to manage when you want to play and there is no room for another child at that activity
- Role play joining-in with a small group of children. To facilitate the role play, an adult could commentate on the existing play of the children to assist in the identification of the play theme. The children could then suggest a range of structures that would be appropriate to make/build in order to fit with the identified theme
- Discussion about ways to manage if the play situation is full, and alternatives to joining in eg. play with something else for a while, read a book, ask an adult for help
- In-situ practice within the naturalistic setting. Once the above strategies have been tried in role play situations, provide support for the child to implement the strategies within the naturalistic play setting.
- Cue cards: Some children respond well to cue cards carried in their pocket or attached to belt loops with words or pictures to remind them of what they can do/say to enter a play situation, or to manage a play situation in which they have been rejected.

Sustaining appropriate play

Once children have successfully entered a play situation, there is the expectation that they will maintain appropriate social play whilst engaged with peers. This can be a real challenge for children with autism. Skills needed include:

- Understanding that other people have a different point of view from their own; putting themselves in someone else’s shoes
- Picking up on the other child’s subtle cues, such as body language and facial expression
- Conversational skills and negotiating skills
- Wanting to incorporate their own special interests or obsessions into the play scenario, whether it be appropriate to include or otherwise.

Children with autism usually need adult support to engage with peers in social play situations.

Ways in which you can help a child with autism are listed below:

- Place “play ideas mats” in the social play areas to provide the child with autism who lacks imagination or play ideas, with some visual examples of what to do in the block corner, home corner, play-dough table



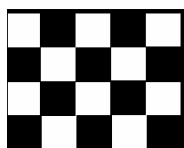
© Irabina Childhood Autism Services

- Provide intermittent praise and reinforcement to the child when they are playing well with others, and some helpful suggestions for when they appear to be “lost” or becoming anxious in the play situation
- Provide a social commentary on the play theme if the child is attempting to take over; facilitating negotiation between the children by providing some options for play and asking for alternative suggestions from peers

Finishing a social play activity appropriately

Many children with autism have difficulty recognising when they have had enough of a play activity, and have trouble finishing the activity in an appropriate way. Often times, it is at this point that the child becomes destructive in an attempt to finish the play activity and move on. Children with autism will need adult help and support to recognise that they are ready to finish an activity, and to move on in an appropriate way:

- Practice using a “finish box”. A finish box is a container or tray that has a black and white chequered symbol on it (much like a finish flag in the grand prix). Providing the child with a consistent visual image for finishing helps to generalise the skills required for finishing an activity appropriately. The child places the item into the finish box to symbolise that they have finished. This is a concrete way for the child to then move on to another task. In group play situations, such as the block corner, however, it is inappropriate to be placing all the blocks into the finish box, as other children might still be using them. In these instances, a photo or image of the block corner would be more appropriate to be placed into the finish box.
- When the child appears to be disengaging from the activity, it is helpful for an adult to make comments such as “you look like you might want to finish with the blocks”, or “I wonder if there’s something else you’d like to do?”, in order to prompt the child to recognise signs of needing to finish. These sorts of strategies can often avoid a disruptive ending to an activity.
- When the child has left a social play situation appropriately, reinforce this behaviour with labelled praise, such as “good finishing with the blocks” to help them recognise the appropriateness of their actions, and encourage this behaviour to continue.



Social play situations, whilst tricky for many children with autism, can provide so many rich opportunities for learning. It is vital that appropriate adult reinforcement and visual supports be provided for the child with autism to practice successful social play situations with peers.

Useful references

National Autistic Society website: www.nas.org.uk/ for information handout, *Practical ideas for developing different social skills at home*

Carol Gray website: www.thegraycenter.org/socialstories.cfm for more information about Social Stories™