



Teaching Social Skills

What types of social difficulties do children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have?

Having a hard time socializing is one of the key features in children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Children with ASD can have difficulty with many social skills, including

- Starting, keeping, and finishing interactions
- Reading and using social cues, such as eye contact, facial expressions, and gestures
- Understanding social rules
- Problem-solving skills
- Play or leisure skills

How do we teach social skills to children with ASD?

Some researchers think that teaching social skills is one of the most important things we can do for children with ASD. There are many ways to teach social skills to children with ASD. People who work with children and adolescents with ASD do not believe that simply having them be around typically developing children and teens is enough, because they may not be able to copy, or model, their peers. Using social skill groups, in which children can be coached by a trusted caregiver, in school or in a community setting, can be helpful. Using games, stories, pictures, and drawings, as well as teaching some social rules that many of us take for granted, are some ways to teach social skills. These skills should be practiced in the classroom and at home for the student to learn to use them.

Skills like how to start a conversation, how to give a compliment, and how to take turns in a conversation are often taught in social skills training. Teaching nonverbal skills, such as making eye contact, making facial expressions, and using the right gestures, is also very important. You can use a social story, which is a story with pictures and words that shows and tells what will happen and what is expected. It can help your child participate in activities.

Where can children with ASD learn social skills?

Children with ASD can learn social skills in many places. In school, social skill goals can be set as part of a child's Individualized Education Program or Section 504 plan. These goals may be worked on in speech therapy, with a school psychologist or behavioral consultant, in the classroom, or in other places. Some children participate in social skill groups at school or through therapy programs outside of school. Everyday activities also give opportunities to teach social skills. These activities might be going to the store, ordering a meal at a restaurant, playing on a sports team, or going to family social events.

How can I help my child learn social skills?

Families can give many chances to learn and practice social skills in everyday life. Playing a game teaches the very important and sometimes hard skill of taking turns. Eating dinner together can teach a child about making conversation, taking turns while talking, and listening to others. Talking about a TV show or movie can lead to talking about how and why characters behaved like they did. There are many books and resources to help you work on social skill building with your child.

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

- *Tell your child* (explain to your child what needs to happen).
- *Show your child* (show how it is done). Sometimes, using a social story or a picture book can help teach the most important parts.
- *Practice* in school, at home, and in the community—practice, practice, practice!
- *Reinforce* (give praise for your child so that he knows he is performing the skills he has been taught).

Sometimes it is easy to get frustrated with your child because she doesn't seem to "get it" in social situations. Remember that learning social skills is harder for children with ASD. However, repeated social skills practice can greatly help your child improve her social interactions.



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

