



Friendships

Friendships are about:

- Enjoying spending time with each other, whether online or in person. Teenagers are more likely to spend time with their friends online on a daily basis, than to meet up in person (Pew Research Centre, 2018).
- Interacting in a way that is comfortable. Some autistics are more likely to have friendships that are based on chatting or texting, and other autistics may prefer friendships that are focused on a shared activity.
- Being able to interact with others who share your passions and interests can foster a sense of belonging as well as develop confidence and skills. It may be easier for some autistic children and young people to find others who share their passions or interests online.
- Having opportunities to be or play alongside others. Many friendships develop this way. Professionals call this parallel play.
- Developing confidence and improving wellbeing. Healthy friendships naturally nurture these (Narr, 2019).

Characteristics of healthy friendships:

- Kind
- Caring
- Loyal
- Sharing
- Supportive
- Respectful of each other
- Valuing each other and the friendship

In a healthy friendship, a child or young person should feel:

- Comfortable to be themselves
- Valued
- Cared about
- Heard
- Understood
- Able to share their passions and interests, likes and dislikes

Where can friends get together?

- Online: social media, gaming, video chat, watch parties etc.
- In person: school, home, clubs or groups based on the child or young person's interest or passion (e.g. dance, judo, art class, band), having a meal or going to the movies or another event, youth groups, lego clubs etc.



Children and young people on the autism spectrum may value different things in friendships than non-autistic people (Cresswell et al, 2015). To support friendships, provide opportunities to be alongside or near other children and young people. Individuals may need support to understand the 'hidden curriculum' or unspoken rules of a game or interaction. For example, why people throw the ball to the most popular student and not someone else, or how many times you can text someone.



Children and young people make friends for a variety of reasons and these may change across contexts. For individuals on the autism spectrum, some of these reasons may be confusing or highly desirable. For example, when children and young people want to be accepted into 'popular' groups, they may not initially understand the difference between being laughed at and laughing with their friends, or they may have a fear of being laughed at (Grennan et al, 2018).



When supporting children and young people to make friends, it is important that this support is focused on creating healthy relationships. When autistic individuals are comfortable in themselves, they are more likely to be comfortable interacting with others. Some children and young people on the spectrum really want friends and some prefer their own company. It is important to find out their preferences and to respect these.



As educators and parents, it is important to consider the right moment to support friendships. Structured social skill sessions may play a positive role, but need to be balanced with more natural opportunities. For some children and young people, it may be about choosing the right moment to support their friendships, taking into account the need for them to have a break from the demands of socialising.



Keeping Friends

It can be hard to keep friendships going for many children and young people. They may need support with how and when to contact or interact with friends to maintain a friendship.

However, individuals may also need support to understand why and when to end a friendship. If friends become unkind or disrespectful, then they should no longer be seen as friends.

Tips for supporting successful friendships

- ✓ Provide opportunities to do things the individual likes
- ✓ Express interest in the child or young person's interests
- ✓ Help them to find age appropriate people who share some of their interests to connect with, either online or in person
- ✓ Help the child or young person to understand the difference between healthy and unhealthy friendships
- ✓ Role model and talk about healthy friendships

Bennett et al. (2018)