



## **Chapter Six**

# **Facilitating Socialization and Communication**

Many children with ASD have social deficits. Areas usually affected include interaction and two-way communication, abstract reasoning, and executive functioning (an umbrella term for things like planning, working memory, controlling impulses, inhibition, mental flexibility, and initiating or monitoring actions). These children have trouble making eye contact; understanding body language, facial expressions, and small talk; completing a group activity or conversation; moving to a new subject; showing empathy (due to their rigid, structured manner); and demonstrating or initiating age-appropriate play and social experiences. Perseveration (the tendency to fixate on a subject or repeat an action) is an additional stumbling block to social development; children with ASD cannot socialize because they are too busy repeating an action or immersing themselves in a subject, or they may linger too long within a theme of a conversation that is uninteresting to others.

In addition to the social deficits listed above, children with ASD often have a variety of speech deficits (due to sensory integration dysfunction) that may be exacerbated by poor intellectual and social development. Speech deficits impact the acquisition of cognitive skills, social skills, and the ability to express wants and needs.

Children with ASD are often concrete learners; they need structure and routine to function. The unpredictability of using language in the social world is challenging, as is developing a sense of self and self-esteem. Fortunately, there are ways to make inroads into their world and bring children with ASD into ours. Using a combination of language activities, motor activities, and cognitive activities will foster focus and concentration, engagement with the external world, and two-way intentional communication for all kinds of learners. The right mix of modalities (beyond using only language) will often create interactive experiences the child can use to develop a sense of self, as well as to learn to reach out to others.

This is an area that can be neglected on a child’s IEP. Social skill building is more abstract than curriculum. For the child with ASD, however, it is equally important, if not more so, to build this skill set. Make sure that the IEP team builds in ways for helping the child learn to communicate with you and classmates and learn how to ask for what he needs and wants.

### **Working “with” Autism to Foster Social Skills**

Children with ASD tend to seek out activities that provide sensory experiences most beneficial to them at this point in their development. It is this exploration that helps the child become a more mature, efficient organizer of sensory information and creates opportunities for him to reach out for social interaction. The child seeks sensory input that provides him with a concrete experience. He will begin to understand and generalize abstract concepts through these concrete sensory motor experiences.

The tendency of many IEP teams is to modify, adapt, and seek solutions for only curriculum offerings; however, social development is equally important for children with ASD. IEP teams should plan for social skill development by brainstorming ways to use the child’s behaviors and fixations to build and stretch negotiation and communication periods. Teams can adapt the strategies listed on page 44 to the unique characteristics of the child in order to improve socialization and communication skills.





## Socialization Strategies

- **If the child perseverates**, make the behavior an interaction so that it is no longer perseverative. For example, if a child loves tracing lines on the gymnasium floor, get on the floor and trace along with him, thus using this connection to build the foundation for higher levels of communication.
- **Some children with ASD demonstrate fixation**—an extreme interest in something—which can be used to motivate them to relate to the external world. For example, if a child is fixated on a certain food, reward him with a taste of the food only when he uses words to ask for it.
- **When trying to break fixations or stop perseveration** can cause children to exhibit impulsive behaviors that will hamper social opportunities. While trying to find appropriate substitutions for these behaviors, expect and plan for some acting out.
- **The IEP team should work with the child, whether she is verbal or nonverbal, to develop a repertoire of cues and prompts to express her needs** (especially in times of high anxiety and frustration) in the most socially appropriate manner possible.
- **Teach the child how to maintain his position in space, how to stand, and how to make and maintain eye contact when engaging in conversation with peers.** If he moves too close or walks away during conversation, it reduces his ability to foster two-way communication. Understanding posture and position in space during a social encounter can assist the child to build future social interactions.
- **Practice the skills needed to maintain the child’s presence in a two-way conversation with peers.** During one-to-one interaction and small group experiences, remind her to make eye contact; maintain the proper personal space, position, and posture; take turns; and ask and answer questions.
- **Use pictures of gestures and facial expressions to teach nonverbal communication.** (Research suggests that we communicate nonverbally 93% of the time.)
- **Teach greetings and good-byes verbally** (hi, hello, nice to see you, see you later, good-bye, etc.) **and nonverbally** (shaking hands, giving a “high five,” waving, etc.) to provide a foundation for future higher levels of interaction.
- **Replace inappropriate social behaviors with appropriate ones.** Use different modes of learning to demonstrate. For example, if a child is a kinesthetic learner, teach him to raise his hand when he needs something.
- **Developing social stories** told by the social worker or school psychologist can help the child understand the nuances of communication. Read books with social stories as the theme and have the child act out the stories.
- **Acting as a translator, break conversations into smaller segments** so that the child begins to associate finding meaning with the act of having a conversation.
- **Role-play numerous scenarios** for the child to help her begin to understand the nuances of conversation and social cues.
- **Socially inappropriate behaviors may surface during transitions.** Provide practice for experiencing transitions.
- **Teach social skills in nonacademic settings.** Lunch, recess, and other social times offer

