

Developing social interaction skills

The types of activity to develop social interaction skills include:

- Learning to share
- Teach the child to 'wait'
- Model play skills
- Awareness of others
- Social interaction tasks.

Strategies for developing social interaction

To develop a child's social interaction skills will involve providing activities to support the development of:

- interest in other people
- tolerating the presence of other people
- desiring interaction with others
- eye contact
- listening and attention skills
- social play
- turn-taking and sharing.

To achieve all these abilities will take time. Any progress should be celebrated no matter how small. As long as each step is developmentally appropriate, and tasks have been broken down into small progressive steps, then success should follow. When trying to focus on one activity or stage, try to eliminate or reduce background noise and visual distractions to promote improved concentration.

Young children with autism may react very negatively to any attempts of social interaction or approaches from adults or children alike, resulting in head-banging, screaming, hand-flapping, covering eyes or ears. This is **not** unacceptable behaviour, but their way of coping with a situation they feel uncomfortable with or even fearful of. Use their preferred activity as a starting point to:

- imitate their actions nearby
- reduce slightly the distance between you
- talk about and develop your play a little – too much change may result in the opposite reaction
- offer the child one of your toys
- suggest the child makes a minor change to their set play routine, or, invite the child to join your game, or ask if you can join the child's game
- praise any interaction shown.

Once the child accepts the adult's presence and, hopefully, begins to watch and imitate the adult play model, then the beginnings of interaction are emerging.

Strategies to support social interaction skills could include:

- Collecting your own toys for a simple imaginative game linked to the child's likes and preferred activities. Playing your game where the child can see you and displaying pleasure and enjoyment whilst describing and talking about your game. Inviting the child to join in or offer him/her one of the toys. The child may reject this invitation but if you repeat the exercise regularly s/he is likely to develop a desire to interact with you. This type of activity could include looking at and talking about a book.
- Ensuring you indicate a desire to interact with the child through passing comments or smiling if s/he glances at you. Although the child may not initially show any interest in others, we should still show that we value and respect him/her.
- If a child can tolerate your presence, try to encourage physical contact through stroking the child's arms or gently touching his/her shoulder to try to develop an awareness of touch as acceptable and even enjoyable. In time it may even be liked.
- Ensuring the child's safety due to possible lack of awareness of danger and/or possible low sensitivity to pain. This can be achieved by placing visual barriers across dangerous items, or better still, having them cordoned off and generally being aware of where the child is and what s/he is doing.
- Eye-to-eye contact does not come naturally to all children with autism. If your child is approaching you, try to anticipate this and face him/her, give eye-to-eye contact and say 'hello' in acknowledgement, thus demonstrating the appropriate way to approach people. If the child will allow, tilt his/her head to directly face yours, even if s/he is glancing out of the corner of their eyes to avoid direct eye contact. Remember and respect that the child with autism may see eye-to-eye contact as difficult, challenging or possibly fearful.
- Encouraging action rhymes by singing them to yourself if necessary, and performing the simple actions. If the child allows, move his/her hands to copy the actions. This not only develops imitation skills but interaction skills, attention and concentration, eye-to-eye contact, sharing, and turn-taking.
- Overemphasising your facial or body gestures that are accompanied by verbal comment to support the development of understanding other people around you. You could also use pictures of facial expressions.
- Drawing the child's attention to you before speaking to or interacting with him/her to signal that something will follow. By saying his/her name and pointing to your own eyes or ears will indicate to the child you want him/her to look or listen.
- Continuing showing things to the child, despite the child not appearing to want to show you things. This will help develop an awareness of sharing, as well as helping to develop vocabulary.
- Showing an interest and commenting on what the child is doing, even if it is a repetitive play routine. S/he may not be interested in you, but you should show an interest in him/her.
- Rewarding any progress made by the child, either verbally and /or with a tangible reward. Even though the child may not initially understand the praise or what is being praised, this should develop in time. In addition, any child, with or without autism, is likely to repeat an activity or behaviour that is positively rewarded.

Reference:

Hannah, L. (2001). *Teaching young children with autistic spectrum disorders to learn: a practical guide for parents and staff in mainstream schools and nurseries*. London: The National Autistic Society.

Wall, K. (2004). *Autism and early years practice: a guide for early years professionals, teachers and parents*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.