

# The Development of Social Skills for Students with ASD



# Autism Spectrum Disorder

- Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) are complex neurological disorders that have a lifelong effect on the development of various abilities and skills.
- Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is “characterized by impairments in communication and social interactions, unusual patterns of behaviours, interests, and activities, the extent of the difficulties will vary considerable across individuals and within an individual over time”.
- Autism is recognized by the Ontario Ministry of Education as a communication exceptionality for the purposes of student identification and placement. This term continues to be used frequently as a shorthand term to include various conditions that are now recognized as a range of disorders.

# Building a Foundation for Social Skills in children with ASD

- Individuals with ASD generally do not learn social skills through incidental experiences and exposure to social situations.
- It is necessary to work on skill development by directly teaching the language and rituals of social interaction.
- Children with ASD need to be given the opportunity to practice their social skills and generalize them to the school community.
- All invested people must be involved in the planning for a student
- Recognition that it takes time, patience and consistency for the development of social skills is important
- Skill development may come quickly at some points and take longer with others

# Peer Support

- School and classroom climate that is inclusive is imperative.
- Peers can play a significant role in supporting social skills.
- Peers can take on various roles (gym buddy, recess partner, computer peer, lunch buddy)
- Other students will also benefit from their association with the student with ASD by developing an understanding and appreciation of human difference.



# Guidelines for a Buddy System

- Explain why a buddy system is in place to everyone
- Participation must be voluntary
- Allow class to generate ideas to best help student succeed
- Arrange for buddies to work in pairs so they can plan and implement ideas together
- Buddies working in pairs also provides a safe network in case an incident does occur (always a witness)
- Acknowledge that the student with ASD may want to be alone sometimes

# How to create peer awareness



- Respect the privacy – discuss with parents how they would like you to introduce the topic of ASD in the class
- Assess whether the student with ASD is aware of the diagnosis and their level of comfort
- Should the student with ASD be present when discussion takes place in class
- Comfort level for all students is necessary

# Social Development

## Eye Contact

- Many students with ASD can look at or listen to others, but they cannot do both
- Huge inhibitor for social interaction
- Must practice using eye contact in social settings – work slow and steady
- Their communications with others are easier when they focus on another physical detail of the speaker or in the environment.
- It is important to consider that emphasizing or focusing on the skill of making eye contact may reduce or limit the student's abilities to communicate.

# The ability to attribute thought and feelings to others

- Children with ASD have difficulty imagining how other people may be feeling in a situation or forming hypotheses about what others may be thinking
- Unwritten social rules are tough to understand
- Direct teaching and ongoing mentoring are needed to help to form generalizations





# Important Social Skills to Teach

- Greetings
- Initiating and closing interactions
- Choosing activities
- Sharing
- Waiting
- Turn taking
- Playing games



# Greetings

- Important for you to know how other students at the age level greet each other
- Student with ASD may initially need to be prompted through the greeting and continually reinforced
- People in the school need to know that if they greet the student, they must be prepared to wait the 10 or 20 seconds it may take the student with ASD to respond





# Initiating and Closing Interactions

- Many children, not just children with ASD, struggle with initiating conversation
- Just as important to coach peers on how to accept someone when an initiation takes place
- The use of social scripts is important
- Give the language needed for the student to practice
- Teach explicitly how to leave a play situation politely
- Rehearsal and prompting may be needed
- The infusion of waving goodbye with a simple `see you later` can be practiced

# Choosing Activities



- Transitions between activities are challenging
- Choosing a new activity can lead to high anxiety
- Clear schedule with `activity time` labelled
- Visual choice board (would you like this or that activity)
- Sometimes, students have one preferred activity at which they would choose to spend all of their time. When this happens, it is helpful to provide transition warnings, such as using a timer, to let the students know that it is time to move to another activity
- Work towards participating in an activity that another has chosen

# Sharing



- Students with ASD often have difficulty understanding either what sharing means or why it is necessary
- The concept of sharing may be best taught in a quiet, non-distracting environment
- The word “share” is emphasized with simple language as the student is handed a block (e.g., “I share the blocks.”)
- The student is then given an instruction to share. At this point, the student may need to be prompted to give a block to the instructor.
- This prompt may be gestural: the instructor holds out a hand and says, “Share.” If the student is able to do so, praise lavishly.
- If the student is not able to follow through, then continue to repeat instructional sessions.
- Important throughout is the student’s awareness that he is not going to lose the item by sharing it.

# Waiting

- Being able to wait, either to take one's turn, to eat lunch, or to go home, is a critical life skill
- A “First ..., then ...” board
- A visual schedule
- A timing device
- Distracters, such as tokens that can be removed one at a time to denote a “countdown”
- A high rate of reinforcement for waiting
- Reliable follow-through: the student has waited, so he receives the item



# Turn Taking

- Must be explicitly taught
- Use a familiar toy or game
- Key terms, such as “My turn” and “Your turn”, must be associated with the movements involved
- Reinforce the student’s participation in the process of waiting for a turn
- Occasionally pause before saying “Your turn” so that the student will develop an awareness of having to wait for the verbal cue





# Playing Games

- In a step-by-step manner, introduce the game materials and demonstrate how to use them
- Demonstrate the expectations of the game (e.g., throwing a ball towards a target, moving a game piece, matching cards)
- Incrementally demonstrate and practise the steps, adding each new step as the student experiences success
- Practise the game regularly until the student understands
- When the student is comfortable playing with an adult, introduce a supportive peer to the game
- If possible, videotape a small group of students playing the game so that the student can watch the routines and rituals of play over and over again



# Final Thoughts

When a student is able to play independently without adult supervision and coaching, he is more likely to be included with peers.

The acquisition of these fundamental social interaction and play skills will facilitate social relationships with peers.

Such skills will serve as a foundation on which to build skills as the student moves on to other environments.

