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Helping the Autistic Child Build Peer Relationships and Friendships

by Becky L. Spivey, M.Ed.

Understanding the complex natures of autistic individuals is difficult even for the most trained professionals. So, imagine how hard it is for an autistic child. Children and adults (depending on severity) have difficulty communicating with others; therefore, they may have very few friends and shy away from the simplest conversation or interaction. The autistic child may avoid contact with classmates, and in turn, classmates may not make an effort to build a relationship or friendship because they do not understand his/her “stand-offish” behaviors.

Teachers in regular classrooms may not be familiar with or may not understand the needs of the autistic child. Mainstreaming these children into regular education requires teachers to educate themselves about Autism Spectrum Disorder—as well as the needs for that particular child in his/her classroom—in addition to helping the child’s classmates understand the disorder. Teaching classmates about this condition helps them relate to someone who does not quite know how to relate to them.

Most students like to be helpers. When they share things well with others, it gives them a sense of pride. The autistic child who receives this help builds relationships, learns to focus on others rather than self, and experiences cooperative learning and valuable social skills.



What Are Some Ways Teachers Can Help Build Peer Support?

Teachers can show students that everyone has something he/she does well (gifts) and something that he/she doesn’t do well (How to Present, 2005, ¶ 7). Generally, we don’t have to think about the things we do well. For autistic children, their needs and challenges are usually skills that their classmates do not have to think about—such as social skills. Try some of the suggestions on the following page to help the autistic child build friendships and become a contributing part of the group:

AUTISM



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Ask the parent(s) of an autistic child to share with the class what they know about Autism Spectrum Disorder and how it affects their child. Parents can explain the ticks, quirks, fears, and habits of their child and tell the classmates how they can deal with these behaviors. Parents can answer questions or have their autistic child answer questions if he/she is comfortable sharing this information.



Pair elementary-age autistic children with a classmate while walking down the hall, playing on the playground, and during any other unstructured time (Pratt, 1995). Pick a confident student who will encourage correct social behaviors. ("We must wait for our turn to drink from the water fountain." "Throw the ball to Becky because it is her turn now." "We need to whisper when we are in the library." "Tell Mrs. Jones you need a tissue.")



Explain to the class that autistic people sometimes find it hard to look at someone when speaking or listening to them. Some do not like to touch certain textures, engage in hugging, hold hands, or sit too close to others. Some do not want personal belongings touched or disturbed. Classmates should understand that they are not being rude—it is just how they are.



Display a time schedule of routine events. Abrupt changes in routine or scheduling for the day can be disturbing to an autistic child. If you know that changes are going to occur, prepare the student for the change and add it to the schedule as soon as possible.



Take every opportunity to involve the autistic child in cooperative play and shared learning. Place the child in very small groups or pair one-on-one with a classmate (Pratt, 1995).



Build cross-age peer relationships. Assign an older student to assist an autistic child with classroom activities, especially in the very early grades (Pratt, 1995).



Assign a peer partner(s) to an autistic child who is transferring from another school (Pratt, 1995). This partner can help the child with autism as soon as he/she arrives at school by walking him/her through daily routines.



Preferential seating is often necessary. Seat the autistic child in close proximity to the teacher and his/her peer partner(s). Monitoring the peer partner(s) is as important as monitoring the child with autism.



Meet with the peer partner(s) often to answer questions or make suggestions for successful communication with the autistic child. Teach the peer partner(s) to take initiative to help him/her learn turn taking, game play, lunch-hour routines, recess rules, how to follow instructions for classroom assignments, etc.



Change peer partners when you feel it is appropriate. Peer partners may burn out if they feel they are constantly responsible for their friend's lack of attention or inappropriate social behaviors.



Find peers to assist the student with homework or attend school events such as dances and athletics (Pratt, 1995). Try to find a club for the student that connects with an interest of his/hers; for example, computer club, science club, etc. (Pratt, 1995).

Assist the autistic child in sharing his/her computer skills, math skills, etc., with his/her classmates (Pratt, 1995). Some children with autism excel in many areas of the curriculum but may not excel in others. This is a great way for students in the regular classroom to see that autistic children are not that different from themselves and have much to offer them, too.

Peer Understanding Means Peer Support

Peer support meets a variety of functions and is a necessary strategy to help us meet the multiple needs of the autistic child. The benefits of peer support are immeasurable. Best of all, non-disabled individuals become more informed and tolerant citizens. In turn, autistic children will hopefully gain new friendships and will want to contribute more to their class.

Resources:

Autism Society of America. (2005). How to present an autism awareness program for your child's classmates. Retrieved December 18, 2008, from <http://asa.confex.com/asa/2005/techprogram/S1538.HTM>
Pratt, C. (1995). Peer support programs. *The Reporter*, 1(1), 5. Retrieved December 18, 2008, from <http://www.iidc.indiana.edu/irca/education/peersupport.html>

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