

Friends Like YOU Friends Like ME



Many children with autism do not have the necessary social skills needed for socialization to play with peers. They do not learn naturally how to be spontaneous, interpret social action, pretend play, or play organized games. These skills need to be directly taught. As a result, it is often difficult for these children to join their peers in shared leisure activities.

Teachers can encourage positive peer interactions in subtle ways and discourage children with autism from being excluded from valuable peer activities. In the classroom, peer pals can help children with autism to interpret social cues, provide clear direction, and help encourage shared activities with other children. Peers may imitate the teacher's model of how to interact with students who have autism.

Shared play with typical peers is beneficial in the overall development of social behaviors including communication, understanding feelings, resolving conflicts, and sharing mutual interests. All of which support the development of meaningful friendships.

- Always convey a positive attitude when speaking about a child with special needs. Be conscious of how you react or respond to irregular behaviors. Children observe and model a teacher's approach and interactions. A teacher's exchanges and tone provide students with clues about how they should act. Demonstrate that each student is a valued part of the class.
- Children with autism may not be aware or may lack effective strategies to recognize and protect themselves from teasing and bullying. Research indicates only fifteen percent of bullying incidents are observed and many of those are treated as isolated incidents.
- Develop story boards or cartoons to help illustrate social interactions and feelings.
- In order to facilitate positive interactions, encourage activities that link students' capacities, and social skills. Look for shared common interests to pair peer pals who can assist or champion for their classmates with special needs. These pals can ease transitions, help other students understand sensitivities and mannerisms, and clarify appropriate social behaviors.
- Help guide the social atmosphere during transition periods (e.g. class changes, before school begins, walking to the playground, during assemblies, etc.) Initiate a topic of shared interest; invent a simple, fun game that can be shared by all; invite student suggestions for imaginative ways to change an activity.
- Help students understand and be responsive to social boundaries and sensitivities. Some children have difficulties with surprise interactions, close proximities, being touched, or large crowds.
- Help students understand different forms and tempos of communication. Provide practice to wait for responses and be attentive to alternative forms of expression.



- If classroom conversation excludes a child with special needs, help redirect the discussion to include that child.
- Make the most of the strengths and interests of students rather than highlighting disabilities. For example, comment about two students' shared interest in soccer or computer games rather than drawing attention to one student's communication difficulty.
- Offer resources for extracurricular social opportunities based on the dynamics and interest of the child and family (e.g. formal recreation programs, clubs, scouts, library programs, etc.)
- Provide multiple opportunities to involve the child with autism in shared interactive projects with peers. Small groups allow for less distraction and more interaction. Observe and serve as a guide when needed. Prompt to engage students, then fade back. The ultimate goal is for the children to help and support each other. Be sure each student has a role within the group to ensure all members are participating and contributing.
- Provide students with defined expectations of social behavior. Implicit rules and expectations can present challenges for children on the spectrum. Note that rules aren't easily generalized across multiple environments and situations.
- Query the students to determine areas of interest, humor, fear, motivation, and recreation and leisure activities. This information will help friendships be more natural and less forced. Have each student create a poster, illustration, or portfolio that represents him or her. Emphasize that each person is unique with interesting and valuable qualities.
- Set clear and consistent rules regarding teasing and bullying. Ask for input from students in setting guidelines for classroom code of behavior within a diverse environment. Help students develop skills to handle various types of interactions.
- Simply and accurately answer students' questions about autism without disclosing personal information. Consider underlying feelings that may accompany the questions. Help reduce fears and anxieties and increase understanding and familiarity.
- Situations where students have personal aides can give peers the impression that they do not have the skills needed to interact with the child with autism. Aides and teachers can consult about ways to involve peers as mentors in various activities. These interactions can build familiarity and mutual understanding.
- Unstructured free-play is often most challenging for children with autism. Subtly provide structure to reduce potential difficulties.
- When a child with autism isolates himself/herself, it may appear to other students that he or she is disinterested. Students may need guidance and prompting to engage in social interactions. Offer techniques to facilitate tolerance and inclusion.



**Children's
Specialized Hospital**

An RWJBarnabas Health facility

1-888-CHILDRENS

www.childrens-specialized.org



Through a partnership with Kohl's Cares, Children's Specialized Hospital is improving access to care for children with special healthcare needs.

