



## Social Skills in Children With Autism

### KEYWORDS

Autism, social skills, triad of impairment, Perspective-taking difficulties, turn taking.

### Sheila Christopher

Dean of Student Affairs & Associate Professor,  
Department of Rehabilitation Science, Holy Cross  
College, Trichy.

### Cresenta Shakila

Assistant Professor, Department of Training and  
Placement SASTRA University, Thanjavur

### ABSTRACT

*A deficiency in social functioning is one of the defining features of autism. Although many children with autism may wish to interact with others, they often do not have the necessary skills to effectively carry out social exchanges. Social issues can negatively affect a child's learning and self-esteem, making it difficult for them to establish positive relationships. It is crucial that these issues are addressed and that social skills are taught at an early age. Children who do not successfully develop social skills are at risk for having social and emotional issues later in life. Fortunately, there are many fun activities that can help children learn to interact socially. This paper will detail the social skill deficits in children with autism and explain the social issues that they face. This will help parents in understanding the idiosyncratic behavior of these children and also aid teachers to plan and implement intervention strategies to help children with autism cope with social skill deficits.*

A deficiency in social functioning is one of the defining features of autism. Although many children with autism may wish to interact with others, they often do not have the necessary skills to effectively carry out social exchanges. Physical proximity to typical peers alone does not necessarily lead to improved social interactions (Myles, Simpson, Ormsbee, & Erikson, 1993), nor do interventions that exclusively target improvement in pre-academic skills. Often, children with autism must be taught how to hold a conversation, take the perspective of others, and engage in pretend play. In addition, many must learn the subtleties of social interactions, such as personal space, showing empathy, and reading body language. Social skills are often elusive and may not end up on a student's Individual Education Plan (IEP). Oftentimes teachers focus more on decreasing behaviors rather than selecting behaviors for acceleration (Howell, 1985). However, teaching these skills to children with autism is as important as teaching pre-academic skills and should begin in the preschools years.

Some researchers have suggested that social skills are a learned behavior and increased interactions may occur with specific training and opportunities to practice these skills over time (e.g., Gonzalez-Lopez & Kamps, 1997). Early social skills interventions targeted simple, prerequisite behaviors such as orienting toward another person and making eye contact (Lovaas, 1977). In addition, some of these interventions have incorporated the use of video technology (e.g., Nikopoulos & Keenan, 2004), music (Brownell, 2002), and naturalistic procedures (e.g., Pierce & Schreibman, 1997). Others have been shown to generalize across settings (e.g., Koegel, Koegel, Hurley, & Frea, 1992) or with individuals not directly participating in the studies (Pierce & Schreibman), as well as increasing independence and self-reliance for the children with autism (e.g., Apple, Billingsley, & Schwartz, 2005).

Social issues can negatively affect a child's learning and self-esteem, making it difficult for them to establish positive relationships. It is crucial that these issues are addressed and that social skills are taught at an early age. Children who do not successfully develop social skills are

at risk for having social and emotional issues later in life. Social skills or 'pragmatics' are a vital part of living and functioning in our world today. Many children with delays in speech and language, neurological development, cognitive disabilities, lack of exposure to the appropriate skills, low socioeconomic status, late intervention and environmental factors further impeded their development of social skills. Parents, educators, and therapists are challenged to teach these children the 'unspoken' rules of social behavior. Typically developing children pick up these skills through experience and learn from interactions with others. Children with autism sometimes lack the ability to learn from their life experiences, or pick up social skills and cues from peers, siblings and adults, and thus have more difficulty with social skills. In order for these children to learn the critical life skills essential to living with others, they have to be taught (Social Skill Builder, 2008). Fortunately, there are many fun activities that can help children learn to interact socially. This paper will detail the social skill deficits in children with autism and explain the social issues that they face. This will help parents in understanding the idiosyncratic behavior of these children and also aid teachers to plan and implement intervention strategies to help children with autism cope with social skill deficits.

### Social Skill Deficits in Children with Autism

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM IV), one of the core characteristics of autism is impaired social functioning. This means that children on the spectrum often struggle with peer interactions. Here are a few of the typical social issues you might see in autistic child:

- Lack of direct eye gaze or eye contact
- Does not follow others' eye gaze
- Does not turn to look when someone points at an object
- Difficulty understanding jokes or humor
- Difficulty initiating conversation in a natural way
- Tendency to repeat phrases or actions of others
- Non-traditional play routines
- Problems joining in others' play
- Difficulty gauging others' level of interest in a conver-

sation topic

- May appear aloof or uninterested in others
- May not respect personal space
- May say things that appear to be rude or hurtful
- Difficulty with the traditional give and take of conversation
- May have a hard time understanding role changes in games like "Tag"
- Challenges with taking turns
- Difficulty interpreting non-verbal social cues
- Expectation that social interactions will happen the same way every time
- Difficulty understanding idioms or common expressions

Most high functioning autistic kids will exhibit some of these characteristics, but one may find that the child has strengths in other social areas. Playing up these strengths and helping the child learn to use these assets will allow the child to compensate for any social deficits he or she might have. In examining these social issues, it's also helpful to understand how the child sees the world.

### Perspective Taking: Theory of Mind

For many kids on the spectrum, taking another person's perspective is one of the most challenging social skills they will encounter. It's common for high functioning autistic kids to have a hard time seeing the world through others' eyes. They often believe that what you experience is the same as what they experience, and this can have major implications for future social interactions. This difficulty is called "Theory of Mind," and it accounts for many of the deficits one may perceive in the child's social world.

### Perspective-taking difficulties may limit the child socially:

- If the child feels that everyone sees and experiences the same thing, he or she may not feel the need to communicate his or her experiences or ask questions about others' experiences. This type of communication is integral to social interaction.
- Since it's hard for the child to imagine others' perspectives, he or she might not understand if something has offended someone or if another's personal space has been violated.
- The child may not be able to understand if another person is bored with a topic of conversation, since this would require taking the other person's perspective. The same goes for asking questions about something that interests another child, such as a new puppy or a favorite toy.
- Perspective challenges can also affect things like taking turns. If the experience of playing a game is the same for everyone, as it might be in the child's world, then there's no reason to take turns.

### Distracting Sensory Issues

Many children on the spectrum are also dealing with sensory integration issues. This means that the child may have problems sorting through all the sensory information he or she is receiving from the outside world. A child on the spectrum may also need additional sensory input, such as rocking or hand flapping, in order to understand his or her place in the world. These sensory issues can make it hard for the child to focus on another's eyes while also trying to listen to what the other person is saying. A sensory-challenged child may also use objects in ways that satisfy sensory needs, such as spinning a pencil on a desk, rather than the original purpose of that object. This can also happen with toys and can be off-putting to other children.

### Relying on Routines

Another important consideration when it comes to autistic kids' social interactions is the typical reliance on routines. The child may expect that social interactions will follow a pre-arranged pattern. Since life isn't really like that, the child may become flustered when the conversation or interaction deviates from this plan. The child may find social patterns reassuring, and it's common for the unpredictability of social interactions to cause kids some distress.

### Improving Social Skills

Understanding how the child thinks will help us to help the child. The following ideas may also help:

- Practice various social interactions at home. Help the child learn how to start a conversation and use small talk. Practice asking questions.
- Teach the child what facial expressions mean. Show him/her the signs that someone wants to change a topic of conversation.
- Joke with the child. This may seem awkward at first, but many high functioning autistic kids actually love humor.
- Talk about personal space and social expectations. Tell the child which behaviors are unacceptable in public.
- Discuss perspectives as much as possible. Talk about what you see and what the child sees and note any differences. Talk about how others are feeling.
- Practice taking turns and playing pretend.
- Stay positive! While it's common to see social skills deficits for children with high functioning autism, you and the child can work together to overcome many of these challenges.

Children with autism experience specific social difficulties that are different from children with other developmental disabilities. Understanding their own and others emotions, understanding how to communicate their feelings and recognize other's feelings, knowing how to start and maintain interactions appropriately, and understanding other people's perspectives are some examples of difficulties experienced by children with autism. From using and understanding nonverbal communication to initiating an interaction with peers, social skills can be extremely challenging for children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). In fact, since social skills challenges are one of the defining diagnostic criteria of ASD, they are a core area of focus for many therapists, parents, and teachers.

No matter which activity we choose, working directly on social skills is a great way to improve a child's quality of life. Like everyone, children with autism want to interact with others. Having the right tools and enough practice can go a long way toward social success. In an effort to help the child be successful in the world, it can be helpful to understand some of the typical social skill deficits for children with high functioning autism and use innovative methods to work with them to enable them understand the social demand and situation.

**REFERENCE**

- Apple, A.L., Billingsley, F., & Schwartz, I.S. (2005). Effects of video modeling alone and with self-management on compliment-giving behaviors of children with high functioning ASD. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 7, 33–46. | | Brownell, M.D. (2002). Musically adapted Social Stories to modify behaviors in students with autism: Four case studies. *Journal of Music Therapy*, 2, 117–144. | | Gonzalez-Lopez, A., & Kamps, D.M. (1997). Social skills training to increase social interactions between children with autism and their typical peers. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 12, 2–14. | | Howell, K.W. (1985). A task-analytical approach to social behavior. *Remedial and Special Education*, 6, 24–30. | | Lovaas, O.I. (1977). *The autistic child: Language development through behavior modification*. New York: Irvington. | | Myles, B.S., Simpson, R.L., Ormsbee, C.K., & Erickson, C. (1993). Integrating preschool children with autism with their normally developing peers: Research findings and best practices recommendations. *Focus on Autistic Behavior*, 8, 1–18. | | Nikopoulos, C.K., & Keenan, M. (2004). Effects of video modeling on social initiations by children with autism. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 37, 93–96. | | Pierce, K.L., & Schreibman, L. (1994). Teaching daily living skills to children with autism in unsupervised settings through pictorial self-management. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 27, 471–481. |