



# Early Childhood- Social Interaction



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## Early Childhood Social Interaction

### Learning to share

*“Ryan isn’t interested in sharing at all. If another child wants to play with blocks when Ryan has them, he becomes quite upset and cries out.”*

### Why does this happen?

- Young children with autism have a very strong motivation to do things their own way. They dislike it when others interfere with their ‘sense of order’.
- Children with autism have difficulty with the concept of time and they may fear they will have to wait forever for their turn to come. They have trouble understanding abstract phrases like, “It will be your turn soon,” “You can have a turn later,” and “In a minute.”
- Children with autism lack social awareness. They don’t understand that it is polite to ask another child for something they want – they may just take it.

### What you can do

- If the child always wants to make a tower of blocks exactly the same way, see if the child will tolerate you introducing a small change. Gradually introduce more change until the child will tolerate the presence of others playing alongside. Comment on what the other children are building to develop creative interest. Visual cues, such as photos of block building, may provide a new model for the child to follow.
  - Verbalize “Ryan’s turn...my turn” etc. Or try counting the number of blocks as you each take a turn. You can also use name cards or children’s photos to indicate whose turn it is.
  - Reward the child with extra time at the blocks or time at a favourite activity if he agrees to share with others.
  - A kitchen timer could help the child understand when his turn is finished and it is time for another child to have a turn. Use specific phrases that the child will understand. “In a minute” or “later” are very vague concepts to children with autism. Try “When the big hand of the clock is on the 12.”
  - The child will not pick up social skills the way other children do. These skills need to be specifically taught; such as how to politely ask for a ‘turn’, how to share, etc. Specific modelling may be necessary. For example, “Ryan, you need to say ...”
- See also Social Interaction > Learning to wait and take turns

### **The buddy system**

*“Lewis doesn’t really seem to fit in. He gets bossy and frustrated with other children but I think he just wants to have friends.”*

### **Why does this happen?**

- Children with autism have difficulty forming friendships due to deficits in their language and social skills.
- They may become frustrated by their inability to make friends and their difficulty interpreting social situations, leading to undesirable behaviour.

### **What you can do**

- Choose another child in the group who seems mature to act as a buddy for the child. Young girls are often more mature than boys and may be more accepting and nurturing toward a child who appears different and awkward.
- Buddies need to be taught when to ask for adult help and what their role will be.
- A buddy can help the child understand the rules of games, encourage social interaction, come to his aid if he is teased and ask an adult for help if the child becomes distressed.

### **Note**

Be careful not to place too much stress on the buddy; children with autism can be very demanding. Ideally, have two or three helpers, rotating them on a regular basis.

### **Being over-affectionate**

*“Chris is always hugging the other children and touching the girls’ hair. How can I get him to stop?”*

### **Why does this happen?**

- Children with autism have difficulty with social rules. They may be unsure of the appropriate level of affection for a friend, teacher or someone they have just met.
- Children with autism often display behaviours that are obsessive or repetitive. They may be unable to stop this type of behaviour.
- While some children may have an intense dislike of certain textures, some may have an obsession for things that they find pleasant.
- Sometimes, children with autism really just want to make friends with other children but they don’t go about it the right way. They lack the social skills to do this and they don’t naturally acquire these skills by observing other children. They need to be specifically taught.
- Many children with autism dislike affection, or will only tolerate it when they initiate the physical contact.

### **What you can do**

- Even if the physical contact is inappropriate try not to react too strongly. It is a positive sign for a child with autism to be initiating physical contact. Examine the possible reasons for the behaviour. Make the behaviour more acceptable by giving the child a doll or soft toy that he can stroke. A social story may also be useful in teaching appropriate behaviour.
- Explain to the other children that the child’s behaviour is harmless and he only wants to be friends.
- Model opening lines of conversation to help the child join in play situations. The child may need lots of encouragement and prompts to initiate social conversation. Social language can be practised at group time, through songs or role play.
- If the behaviour is excessive, teach the other children how to respond to the child’s approaches. If they don’t want to be touched, they need to give the child a clear verbal message to “Stop!” then physically remove the child’s hands.
- Explain what is acceptable behaviour, i.e. hugging for family and close friends; a smile, wave and hello for other children instead of hugging.

### **Learning to wait and take turns**

*“Liam can’t handle having to line up and wait for his turn to go down the slide. He pushes the other children out of the way and gets quite aggressive if he has to wait for his turn.”*

### **Why does this happen?**

- Children with autism have difficulty anticipating what will happen next. They seem to think if they don’t get what they want immediately, they might never get it at all.
- This inability to see beyond the moment can lead to frustration and anxiety, which in turn can escalate into aggressive behaviour.

### **What you can do**

- Work with the child with Autism and one other child. Choose an activity he enjoys, such as play dough. Give the child a small amount of play dough, and ask him if he wants more. Give the other child their play dough while telling the child with autism to wait. Use a visual prompt such as a hand signal to reinforce your words. Praise him with “Good waiting!” and give him his play dough.
- Gradually increase the amount of time the child is required to wait. Avoid increasing the wait time too fast or he may become uninterested in the activity or become frustrated. Try this with different activities and in variety of situations, then move onto small group settings.
- Verbalize “Liam’s turn, Chris’ turn etc.” Or allow each child a set number of turns and count them out loud.
- Use a brightly-coloured laminated “wait” card with a hand symbol. Give this card to the child as a visual reminder every time he has difficulty waiting.
- Teach the child about correct sequences in a variety of situations. For example, at mealtimes – first sandwich, then sweets. At home – first bath, then story time, then bed.

## Encouraging interactive play

*“Daniel mostly plays on his own, lining up toys or objects. How can I get him interested in playing with other children?”*

### Why does this happen?

- Young children with autism tend to have limited interests. Their play tends to be repetitive and solitary. They may use toys inappropriately, i.e., lining up pencils, spinning the wheels of cars. There is often an absence of pretend play.
- The child with autism has a very strong desire to do things his own way and will resist ‘interference’ from other children in his play routine.
- Young children with autism often have poor imitation skills. They are not able to learn how to play with others simply by watching them. They have difficulty understanding how and when to join in an activity or game with other children.

### What you can do

- Before you can involve the child in interactive play with an adult you will need to build a relationship with him. Get to know the child by observing his play, watching him on video, and talking to his parents about things that motivate and interest him. It may take longer than usual to establish a relationship with a child with autism.
- Try to get the child interested in one-on-one play with an adult by imitating his actions. If he always does the same actions, change yours slightly and make it seem really fun. When the child is comfortable playing with you, move on to play with one other child, then a small group.
- Change an obsession into creative play. Again, this can take some time. For example, if Daniel repeatedly lines up toy cars, you could initially make comments about the cars. “That’s a nice red car.” Move a car a little out of line. When the child tolerates this without becoming anxious, ‘brrrooom’ your car along, “My car is going fast/slow.” Encourage the child to copy your actions. Gradually invite others to join in.
- Try short, repetitive songs that involve turn-taking and actions. Adapt song lyrics to include the child’s name.
- The child may enjoy rough and tumble play. He may enjoy bouncing, spinning or rolling on a large ball.
- Teach specific phrases that will assist the child to join in with others. Act as an Interpreter by explaining what is going on in imaginative and pretend games. Describe the role of each participant. Be explicit about what each person is expected to do.

See also Social Interaction > The aloof and withdrawn child

Other resources:

<http://www.med.monash.edu.au/spppm/research/devpsych/actnow/download/factsheet33.pdf>

### Note

Trains are a common obsessive interest, particularly among young boys with autism. This play tends to be repetitive; some children will copy scenes from a favourite television program, never varying or extending their play. With some creative input,



there are limitless opportunities to develop a child's imagination and extend their vocabulary.

You can comment on what the trains are doing – forwards, backwards, going slow/fast, pulling, stopping, etc. You can comment on the train's appearance – big, small, colour, shape, number of wheels and other features. And you can teach concepts like behind, in front, beside, next to, etc.



### **The aloof and withdrawn child**

*“Tammy always seems to be in her own little world – it’s like the rest of us don’t even exist.”*

### **Why does this happen?**

- Most children with autism have limited interests that are repetitive and solitary. They may appear to be self-absorbed.
- Young children with autism tend not to share things of interest with others. They often have poor eye contact and will avoid looking at someone who is speaking to them.
- Sometimes the close proximity of others makes them feel uncomfortable and anxious.
- Some children can have an extreme sensitivity to certain smells or strong fragrances, others dislike being touched.
- Children with autism need to be taught all skills, including how to be social and interact with others.

### **What you can do**

- Approach the child in a calm, low-key manner. Your movements should be deliberate and slow. It will help if you have an interesting or motivating toy with you. Stay for just a few seconds at first. Let the child become used to you being in her space without feeling threatened.
  - Don’t insist on eye contact at first if this causes the child anxiety. You need to have her shared attention, but not necessarily eye contact.
  - Don’t be put off if the child tells you to go away. Remember it may take some time to establish a relationship.
  - When the child accepts you in their personal space, start to copy their actions.
  - Music can be especially helpful and stimulating. Try short, repetitive songs with lyrics that can be adapted to a variety of actions. E.g. When you’re Happy and You Know It.
  - Consult an occupational therapist for an assessment and sensory profile. The child may have an extreme aversion to certain people because she has sensory processing difficulties.
  - Avoid wearing strong perfumes or distracting rattling jewellery and bright clothing as the child may be aversive to certain smells, sounds or colours.
  - Keep a balance between interactions that are social and fun and those that require the child to do something you want her to do.
- See also Social Interaction > Encouraging interactive play

### **Lack of awareness of others**

“Aden often steps on other children or pushes them out of the way. He never says sorry.”

### **Why does this happen?**

- Children with autism have difficulty understanding the consequences of their actions. They do not deliberately attempt to hurt others; they may not understand that their actions can hurt others. They can also have a different pain threshold to their normally developing peers.
- Children with autism do not ‘pick up’ social skills like saying, ‘Sorry’, the way that normally developing children do; they need to be specifically taught.
- Some children with autism have poor gross motor skills. They may have difficulty stepping over or around others
- Children with autism can have difficulty with spatial awareness; this makes it hard for them to accurately judge distances. They are not always aware of where their bodies are in space. They also seem to lack an intuitive understanding of body language; they may not be able anticipate that someone is about to move into their immediate space.
- Children with autism may be so focused on getting to where they want to go they will push past others without realising.
- Children with autism often do not like lining up to take a turn may push to the front of the line as being in close proximity to others can cause anxiety. It can also be confusing if the child does not have a designated place to stand.

### **What you can do**

- If the child is walking over other children on the mat, give him his own place to sit at the edge of the group so that he can easily move away from the other children. You could provide him with his own mat square to sit on in a defined space.
- Role play with dolls and puppets can help the child develop an awareness of social rules, such as when and how to say ‘sorry’ and to understand the effect of his actions on others. Video is often very appealing to children with autism and can be a good medium for teaching. Ask a parent with a camcorder to videotape the children in role play.
- Give the child lots of opportunities to develop his gross motor skills, e.g. activities that involve leaping, hopping, climbing and jumping.
- If requesting the children to line up place the child with autism closer to the front or end of the line to reduce the number of other children touching them.