

How Research Informs Practice: Helping Adolescents and Young Adults with Autism and Asperger Syndrome Develop Friendship Skills

Adolescents with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and Asperger Syndrome (AS) have difficulty with social skills and developing friendships (Gutstein & Whitney, 2002; Hillier, Fish, Cloppert, & Beversdorf, 2007; Laugeson, Frankel, Mogil, & Dillon, 2009). Even when adolescents with ASD and AS know the rules and understand the skills needed to socialize and develop friendships, they do not, or are unable, to apply the knowledge (Hillier et al., 2007).

Gutstein and Whitney (2002) pointed to a deficit in experience-sharing relationships and suggested developing an intervention program that would—instead of teaching scripted instruments and survival social skills—develop social behaviors through experience-sharing encounters by having adults act as both guides and participants in interactions with adolescents. The theory behind this kind of intervention was that if an adolescent could experience and learn to become a fully functional partner in a relationship with an adult guide, then they might be able to progress to managing relationships with peers by applying the skills they had acquired in the earlier relationship.

Hillier et al. (2007) used a more traditional skills-learning approach and found that an 8-week social and vocation skills group for young adults with ASD benefited members in that it enabled them to experience being accepted in a group, meeting with others with the same diagnosis, and having an opportunity to discuss their individual challenges with regard to interpersonal issues. The downside of this study, as cited by the authors, was that the measures used to analyze behavioral changes did not provide the desired degree of sensitivity.

Laugeson et al. (2009) held twelve 90-minute sessions in which parents and teens attended separate but concurrent sessions on social functioning training for those with ASD. By incorporating adults in the program, this study utilized some of the adults-as-guides-and-participants theory suggested by Gutstein and Whitney (2002). Laugeson et al. (2009) found that teens in their study reported increases in hosting get-togethers and better quality friendships at the end of the program. Their parents reported significant improvements in their teen's overall social skills. Laugeson et al. (2009) did not see an increase in invitations received by the group members, but were unsure whether this was because of the short time frame of the study or for other reasons.

This research supports OT treatment in helping clients address their social skills. Below is a five session treatment plan that can be conducted with individuals or in groups, and incorporate the idea of adult participation.

Problem	Activity
Motivation	Have the client create a list of his favorite activities. From the list, work with client to describe how strong motivation is and put them in order. Explore with client how to do some of these with someone else. Create a list of possible places, groups, classes, where client might be able to begin finding a person or people with same interest.
Identifying feelings	List, and define, some feelings. Write them down, put in a bag, and

	have client select a “feeling” and either describe when a person might experience the feeling, or act out the feeling, or provide an example of when they or someone, real or fictional, expressed that feeling.
Difficulty reading the expression of others	Select pictures, movie clips, or even an internet game that display faces. Have client identify the emotions. If this is too difficult, provide choices. Discuss the answer and even possible other emotions that it might be associated with the picture. Possible activity in this area: http://www.cccoe.net/social/SAdirectory.htm
Inability to initiate a conversation	Create a shopping list. Together take a walk (perhaps in a mall or on a main street). Practice having client gain appropriate attention by either saying hello, asking for an item from the list, or asking about something the client has found or that interests him.
Inability to maintain a conversation	Make a list of things to say when talking with someone, for example, “Could you tell me more about that?” Teach clients about open questions. Discuss the idea of looking for something interesting in what others say. Practice asking questions and carrying on conversations by role-playing.

References

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