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Making friends

Points to note

- Children with autism often want to join in the play of others and make friends – they just don't know how to go about it.
- The child may *appear* withdrawn and to prefer his own company but usually wants to have friends - he just doesn't know how to go about it. Sometimes he may *need* to withdraw because the social environment can be so stressful and demanding, Just socialising with his peers can be exhausting.
- The child may have a controlling, dictatorial style of play. He may be very resistant to the suggestions of others. He may become aggressive toward others if he has to change his play and incorporate the ideas of others. Other children may see the child as bossy and authoritative, acting more like an adult than a friend.
- The child may have difficulty with concepts such as sharing, waiting and taking turns. He may become over-emotional if he loses a game, he may always want to win or be first. This is probably because he dislikes surprises and has a great fear of uncertainty. Children with autism tend to be perfectionists.
- Children with autism have poor ability to make character judgments. While others can judge a troublesome child that is best avoided the child with autism may be attracted to peers that are poor role models. Similarly, the child with autism may be unable to judge whether a comment or action has malicious intent or is a friendly overture.
- Sometimes a child with autism will tolerate being teased and tormented at school just to have company. He may steadfastly believe that another child is a friend when it is obvious his peer is exploiting his naiveté.
- A child with autism may 'burn out' his friends by being too demanding, possessive, talking too much about his obsessions or being unintentionally rude or unkind. The intensity of an exclusive friendship may become intolerable to some children. The child with autism may not understand that his friends sometimes want to play with others. He might react quite rudely or end the friendship if this occurs.
- For some children, the only social interaction they have with their peers is at school because they don't seek out friends out of school hours unless this is prompted or arranged by their parents.
- The child can be particularly vulnerable to bullying and teasing because of his unusual behaviour. A child with autism who is passive by nature will lack assertiveness, and be naïve and trusting. He will be easily led by others into trouble or breaking rules. The 'active but odd' child will seek social contact but usually fails to get it right.
- A child with autism may lack empathy, an important factor in any relationship. The child may be unintentionally rude or unkind due to his difficulty understanding the thoughts and feelings of others. For example, if a friend falls over and is hurt, the child with autism may act the clown to make his friend laugh, rather than offer sympathy and a helping hand. The friend

may view this behaviour as uncaring.

- The play of normally-developing children frequently involves imaginative, pretend play - children with autism often have impaired creativity or lack imagination. They may not see the point of these games or know what they are required to do.
- When a child with autism fails to form friendships, he is denied access to the very context he needs in order to practice his social and communication skills – a very unfortunate ‘catch 22’ situation.

What you can do

- Recognise that the child is socially immature. Interpret and explain social situations. Encourage and model opening lines of conversation.
- Promote tolerance and understanding amongst the child’s peers by helping them to understand his difficulties. Encourage others to interact with the child in group work.
- The child may require some help interpreting pretend play and understanding how to join in. Encourage imaginative and flexible thinking in classroom activities with “Let’s pretend ...” scenarios.
- Teach the child how to respond to unwanted approaches from other children.
- Select a socially mature child in the class to act as buddy.
- Make yourself (or another adult) available to counsel the child to compensate for a lack of friends.