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Peer relationships

Points to note

- The child may appear withdrawn and to prefer his own company but usually wants to have friends - he just doesn't know how to go about it.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 of school can be so stressful and demanding. Just socialising with his peers can be exhausting.
- The child might prefer adult company over his peers. The child may seek friendship for what he can learn from another person, not for social enjoyment. Adults are likely to be more understanding of the child's peculiarities. The child may think his peers have little knowledge on the topics he finds interesting.
- 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 his peers if he has to change his play and incorporate the ideas of others. Peers may see the child with autism as bossy and authoritative, acting more like a teacher 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.
- The child may actively seek friendship but lacks the ability to interact with others. He can become quite distressed by his failed attempts to make friends. His response to this failure can range from arrogance and denial, to poor self-esteem or complete withdrawal.
- Children with autism have poor ability to make character judgements. 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. Some will steadfastly believe that another child is a friend when it is obvious his peer is exploiting his naivete.
- A child with autism may 'burn-out' his friends by being too demanding and possessive. 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 their friends out of school hours unless this is prompted or arranged by their parents.
- Conversational topics may be limited for a child with autism. Some will want to talk exclusively about his preferred interest, not recognising the signs of boredom from his friends. While his friends may prefer to talk about the opposite sex, TV shows and social gossip, these topics may have little interest for a child with autism.

- When children reach an age where they have to wear the 'right' clothes, the student with autism will struggle to fit in. Fashion is not usually a high concern for children with autism; they tend to dress for comfort and practicality. In adolescence, there may be little motivation to maintain a socially acceptable standard of personal hygiene.
- A child with autism may lack empathy, an important factor in any relationship. Friends expect compliments, compassion and kind gestures. The child with autism can be unintentionally rude or unkind due to his inability to understand 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 compassion and a helping hand. The friend may think this behaviour is 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.
- Adolescents with autism can develop real social phobias. They can become acutely aware of their social errors and the fact that they are 'different'.
- As you can see there are a great many reasons why it is difficult for children with autism to make and keep friends. However it is not impossible. Remember that when children with autism fail to make friends, they are denied access to the very context they need to practice their social and communication skills - a very unfortunate 'catch 22' situation.
- *Note: for information on peer relationships with the opposite sex, see this topic in Education > Later Years.*

What you can do

- Recognise that the student is socially immature. Interpret and explain social situations. Incorporate social skills training into the curriculum. Role play social situations. Developing interpersonal skills will help all students learn the benefit of team work, the ability to manage conflict and enjoy successful relationships with peers and teaching staff.
- Some suggested topics for social skills training:
 - recognising how and when to help others, and when to seek help,
 - the ability to judge when criticism is appropriate or inappropriate,
 - the ability to tolerate, accept and respond to criticism appropriately,
 - how to join in an activity or conversation,
 - knowing when and how to give compliments,
 - acknowledging the suggestions of others and incorporating their ideas into play / activities and conversations,
 - conversational turn-taking,
 - using vocals to convey tolerance, empathy, sympathy, arrogance, nonchalance etc,
 - compromise and conflict resolution,
 - active listening, reading and using body language and facial expression,
 - recognising when it is appropriate to make empathetic comments,
 - recognising character traits of others and one's own personality to determine the type of person likely to be a compatible friend.
- Promote tolerance and understanding amongst the student's peers by helping them to understand his difficulties. Encourage others to interact with the student in group work.
- The student may need some help interpreting pretend play and understanding how to join in. Encourage imaginative and flexible thinking in classroom activities with "Let's pretend ..." and "What if ..." scenarios.
- Teach the student how to respond to unwanted approaches from other children. Business

size cards with suggested replies can be carried in the child's pocket.

- Select a socially mature child in the class to act as buddy or interpreter. Arrange for them to have a regular, private Q & A session.
- To compensate for a lack of friends, make yourself or a school counsellor available to discuss any concerns the student may have.
- Encourage the student to befriend other children in the school with autism spectrum disorder. Even if there is an age difference, friendship with another student with autism can be very successful. They are likely to have similar interests and be more understanding of each other's peculiarities.
- Social stories are a good way for the student to learn friendship skills. Older students could benefit from having a list of friendship rules.
- Depression often develops in the pre-adolescent and adolescent period as a reaction to loneliness and feeling socially awkward. Talk to the student's parents if you feel he could benefit from psychological services.