

Tools for Building Social Success

ASD Children and Social Communication

Presentation at Feb. 27/08 Autism Portage Support Meeting, by Christine Longford, Children/Adolescent Community Mental Health worker, RHA Central MB.

The goal of Christine's presentation was to outline some of the challenges that children with autism spectrum disorder face in social situations, and to suggest ways of overcoming these challenges so children can improve their social success.

Children with ASD often differ from other individuals in how they listen to and understand other people. Sometimes it seems like there is an unseen barrier between the child and other people, almost as if there is no recognition that you are in the same room. Because of the characteristics of ASD, these children can sometimes appear to be rude, cold or indifferent, aloof, out of it, odd-looking, and inattentive. Particularly as the children enter adolescence, they can also appear anxious or withdrawn.



She likened the experiences of our children, in everyday social interactions, to visiting a foreign country where you don't know the customs or understand the language. It is very difficult to know what to do, or how to act, especially if something new happens that you are not familiar with.

Children with ASD have a difficult time reading non-verbal cues (body language, facial expressions, etc), which makes understanding social situations even more difficult. Some ASD children have a very difficult time looking at people's faces, which means that they are missing a lot of information that could be gained from the face, particularly the eyes. It would be like only having conversations with people who are wearing masks, or talking over the phone.

One activity she suggested to draw focus to the face, and in particular the eyes, would be to hold a piece of paper over the lower part of your face when talking with the child with ASD, which would force them to focus more on the eyes as they talk with you.

Communicating: It is important, when communicating with children with ASD, to:

use clear, empathic, compassionate caring language in easily-understood vocabulary

know that the child might be listening to you even if his/her body language suggests otherwise

accept that they have a different 'reality' from you, but as long as it is not harmful this reality is perfectly acceptable

listen for other problems, changes in their usual selves, that might indicate problems such as depression and anxiety.

Emotional Reciprocity - this refers to the 'give and take' that we all use in social interactions. This can be very difficult for ASD children. They can seem self-centred, unaware of the thoughts and feelings of others, and may often talk 'at' people rather than with people. To help boost emotional reciprocity, you can:

play games to practice turn-taking and the awareness that there are rules that must be followed (just like there are unspoken social rules in how to interact with people)

practice scripting events at home beforehand, for example, if you are going to the pool, what should you say to the cashier, what will she say back, and so on.

One good resource for scripting is English Language learning tapes, which tell a person learning English exactly what to say at a restaurant, at the post office, at the store, etc.

use concrete rewards for positive social interactions, but always pair the reward with labelling the action and resulting emotion. (e.g., "Mrs. Smith was very happy with you when you picked up her garbage for her. Here are two Smarties. It made her feel happy because you helped her")

use Social Stories to prepare for social interactions. The social stories will explain what the situation is, how you should act and why, and what would happen if you don't act the right way (see slides 12 to 14 below for an example of a social story about how to act at school).

Rules of the Game - Once the children learn that social interactions are made up of a series of social rules, they need to learn the rules.

"Just because you told him, don't expect he learned it; just because he learned it, don't expect he can generalize it"

Rules are not black-and-white, may require flexibility and adjustment (difficult for ASD kids to learn)

Social rules depend on many factors, such as how well you know a person, the social setting etc. Can't always apply the same rules across the board.

Getting out of a fix - Sometimes ASD kids can lose control, lose their temper, tantrum. Try to stay calm and de-escalate the situation, but it's best not to try and talk about what 'went wrong' in the social interaction during

the middle of a melt-down.

After the child has calmed down, can discuss or analyze the episode to figure out what could have been done differently. Practice with the child some alternative behaviours he could have done that might have improved the situation.

Problem Solving - When children encounter problems with social interactions, it is important to let the child know that HE is not the problem, but that the situation was problematic.

Talk about the problem as if you were a police officer gathering facts about a crime scene. What happened, what happened next...but unlike a police officer who is interested only in the facts, make sure you talk about the feelings that resulted from the actions. "What happened when you asked Johnnie for a turn on the swing?" "He said no". "Then what happened?" "I pushed him off the swing". "What did Johnnie do then?" "He went to the teacher crying." "Do you think he was sad because you pushed him off the swing?" "I don't know." "I think he was crying because he was sad".....

Some parents/teachers have found it useful to videotape their children interacting with their peers, so they can analyze the tapes later and talk with the child about what s/he could have done differently.

Social autopsies: What happened? What was the social error? Who was hurt by the social error? What should be done to correct the error? What could be done next time?

Humour and Lowering Stress - Sometimes children with ASD have a difficult time finding the humour in their mistakes, even if they find the mistakes of other people funny.

sarcasm, plays on words, idioms, slang phrases are hard for ASD children, who may think very literally, to understand.

Tell the child that it is okay to laugh at ourselves when we make mistakes, and that everyone does make mistakes.

Model this behaviour! Point out your own mistakes and laugh about them.

Might be necessary to practice the gentle teasing that children do to each other, so the ASD child becomes familiar with it.