

# *Friendships and Autism*



## Helping people with autism make friends

Whether we're neurotypical or neurodivergent, making friends is essential for our growth, health and happiness. This International Day of Friendship (30 July), we take a closer look at the importance of friendship for autistic individuals.

Individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can find making friends difficult. Autistic adults and children alike can struggle with the social cues and behaviours that neurotypical people take for granted.

If you're a carer or parent of a non-verbal child or a child with autism, keep reading for more information on helping them find success with friendship.



## **Why friendships are important to people with autism**

For children and young people, positive interactions with others are a key part of social, cognitive and emotional development. Having good friends at school is linked to a sense of belonging and improved academic performance.

Children with autism can find learning and exercising friendship skills to be beneficial in a number of ways. As they become familiar with navigating the social landscape, they're sure to improve their ability to make meaningful connections with others, feel more accepted by their peers and see a reduction in social anxiety.

The more they're encouraged to practise, the greater the sense of independence they'll have later in life too.

### **How autistic children make friends**

Making friends can be overwhelming. There are so many unwritten rules and nuances involved that it's almost like an entirely different language.

Unfortunately, when we find things difficult, we often look for ways to avoid them, but when it comes to making social connections, this can result in a lack of opportunities to develop skills and confidence. The only real way to make friends is to try, and to do so regularly.

A good way for autistic and non-verbal children to be exposed to social situations is often through clubs or other social activities. This way, they can connect with other children over a shared interest, the event is planned in advance (and time-limited), and a parent or carer can be around to offer support when necessary.

## **Helping children with autism learn social skills**

Here are a few things you can try to make learning social skills a bit easier for children with ASD:

### 1. Minimise stressors

Where possible, provide an environment with reduced social stressors or triggers – starting in a familiar place and one-on-one or in small groups, for example.



## 2. Take things slowly

Allow them to approach interactions at their own pace.

## 3. Practise new skills

Encourage children to practise new skills in several different situations, so they have the opportunity to learn how to apply them.

## 4. Use technology

Make use of new technology such as readily available apps - many of which, like ours, are completely free. Our app can help children who are autistic or non-verbal express themselves and communicate with others, and there are apps that help support them in other areas too.



## 5. Collaborate with teachers

Work together with your child's school to understand if your child is struggling in certain situations. Practise with them and encourage them to build confidence and reinforce recent learnings.

### **Helping autistic and non-verbal people build meaningful connections**

app2vox is a completely free autism communication app, giving a voice to autistic and non-verbal people, and helping them build lasting friendships.

