

Help teens on the autism spectrum to navigate social relations



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Many teenagers with [autism spectrum disorder](#) (ASD) experience difficulty with social relationships. Their desire and need to have friendships, combined with their difficulty in understanding others, can lead to great social anxiety, depression and low self-esteem. Parents tend to feel lost or conflicted on how to support their teenager's development in this area.

By understanding the teen years and ASD from a balanced, developmental perspective, one can guide and support a teenager on the spectrum to develop new awarenesses--leading to opportunities for the development of relationships with others.

This advice should not be considered personalized recommendations. Rather, these are general concepts to consider. Be sure to contact professionals for personalized advice and treatment plans.

Do



- grasp the complexity of relationships
- share your thought process
- seek understanding
- preview social scenarios
- evaluate placement

Don't



- assume your teen understands
- push kids to be like peers
- ignore or dismiss feelings of depression and anxiety
- believe that everything is ASD

Do

Do grasp the complexity of relationships

Friendships, dating and work relationships require so much more than spoken language, social skills and social rules. One area of difficulty that goes beyond measurable skills has to do with the ability to process social information. In typical cognitive development, our brains grow in ways that connect certain regions to allow us to focus on multiples. This means managing multiple pieces of information simultaneously, as well as developing the ability to rapidly shift attention to different pieces of information.

Pieces of information include things such as spoken language, gestures, facial expressions, posture, context and prior experience in a stream or flow in our thoughts--with us being able to shift easily back and forth, and simultaneously as needed, during a social interaction. These dynamically connected regions allow us to carry out these functions in order to make better sense of what is going on within social interactions.

However, the brain of a person on the spectrum develops differently. Regions that are supposed to grow and connect do not connect in a typical way. Instead, other regions of the brain develop. These other regions are responsible for concrete information processing. This is why individuals on the spectrum tend to focus on their own ideas, concrete language and rules, as well as starting and stopping points. Individuals on the spectrum have difficulty processing the content in their own minds at any given time, due to the fact that they are operating from where their brains are strongest.

The pace at which typical teenagers are socializing is very fast, in comparison to what a teen with ASD is able to process. Much of the information within an interaction flies by the person on the spectrum--unprocessed and unaccounted for--due to the speed

and ability to manage multiple pieces of information. Consequently, teens on the spectrum tend to miss important pieces of information within social interactions.

Do share your thought process

The good news is that the brain is highly plastic. Brain plasticity is a term that refers to the brain's ability to change as a result of experience. We can provide deliberate experiences that target regions of the brain, which are responsible for this dynamic growth.

As a parent, you can create opportunities for your teen to develop dynamic thinking and gain perspective by adjusting your communication at home. Focus on sharing your thought process out loud, particularly the “why” of thoughts and actions. Make the invisible (what is going on in your mind) more visible (clearer and informational) through your communication. By slowing down and sharing your thought processes, you can provide insight into how others may be thinking and focused.

Do seek understanding

It is vital to take the time to better understand what your teens are thinking, as well as HOW they are thinking. This is more important than directing them or telling them what to do in situations. You must gain information about them. The more you know about how your teens are thinking, the better you will be able to help them. Often times, we are making best guesses on what they may need to understand, as they don't always initiate or express information that helps us understand. More often than

not, what they are focused on and consider relevant is different than what we are focused on and consider relevant.

Use phrases such as, "I want to understand you better" and "I want you to understand me better." This communication sets up the focused mindset of learning and exploring about each other versus being focused on what to say and how to say it. This focus leads to clearer understanding, reciprocity and creates a space for growth in the communication and relationship. By making communication an exploration, you can teach a focus of process. This takes the stress and pressure off of the teen to do things right.

Do preview social scenarios

We cannot predict and prepare for every situation that comes in life. However, we can take the time to help think about possible social scenarios with our teens. Sit together and brainstorm an upcoming situation ahead of time and consider possibilities together. By doing this, you give your teens an opportunity to think about and process possibilities ahead of time when they are not on the spot.

Sit with your teen and discuss potential scenarios they may encounter and options for how to deal with them. Share your past experiences. Talk about potential scenarios that they may encounter and ideas on how to approach. Don't just give them a rule, but instead, share options.

You also can role play scenarios. Try things in different ways. Use language that encourages more than one way of doing things. Use communication such as, "That is one option and let's think of two more" and "I like to have a couple of different options because I don't like feeling stuck."

Do evaluate placement

Individuals on the spectrum tend to be developmentally young from a social/emotional standpoint. Even though their chronological age is a specific number, their development in different areas is skewed. Some teens on the spectrum tend to feel more comfortable with people who are much older than they are, such as adults and seniors, or with younger people. This is due to the pace that these groups operate from, therefore affecting the level of competence a teen may feel. Adults will slow down more naturally to involve the teen than other teenagers might.

Be sure that the types of activities that your teen takes part in are not too high above their emotional level. While you don't want to place your teen in groups that are too young, sometimes looking at slightly younger in age groups can help give teens the opportunity to interact at a pace that they can process and manage, therefore building some social confidence. The more that teens are in situations where they feel they cannot keep up, the likelier it is that they will develop depression, as well as a decrease in motivation and anxiety.

Deciding placement requires a balance of thought. It is important that you evaluate the situations your teen is in, such as school, social groups and church groups, and identify what is a good fit. You also want to include the teen as much as you can. While you need to evaluate some areas that they won't understand, you also need to take their input seriously. You don't want to put them in a place that feels uncomfortable.

Don't

Do not assume your teen understands

It is easy for us to assume that the individual with ASD is focused on the same moment or context that we are at any given moment and vice versa. This tends to lead to conflict within communication, therefore leading to lack of trust on the part of the teen and frustration on the end of the parent. Don't assume that your teen understands the point that you are focused on because you have reasons in your mind for why you are doing it.

Do not push kids to be like peers

Development happens at its own pace. Expecting a person who is emotionally younger to jump to their chronological age rapidly is unrealistic and potentially damaging to the teen's confidence and view of themselves. Growth is a process. Every person (on and off the spectrum) is unique, has different strengths and weaknesses, and will accomplish different things in life at different times.

Do not ignore or dismiss feelings of depression and anxiety

Even if a teen is progressing developmentally and socially, many teens experience depression and anxiety. While some feelings of depression or anxiety are normal, it is important to monitor the level that your teen experiences these feelings. Don't ignore escalated signs of depression and anxiety surrounding the issue of friendships and relationships. They should be considered valid and addressed with a licensed professional if needed. Don't tell your teens that it is all in their head or that they should just deal

with it. These conditions are real and must be treated appropriately.

Do not believe that everything is ASD

The teen years are a difficult time period for everyone--regardless of a diagnosis. For parents who have teens with [autism](#), it can become fuzzy to clarify what is ASD and what is just 'normal' teen experience.

In the teens years, there are physical body changes, chemical changes and changes in the way school is conducted and structured. For any teen, there is a lot to sort out, feel and experience. Under the best of circumstances and abilities, a teen will experience different periods of stress and confidence issues, while having a strong desire to be social. Teens on the spectrum--while they experience the same physiological, physical and chemical changes--may have a harder time making sense of and accepting the changes and situations that come along with teen years. Look to books and information that focus on typical teen development. You can use this information to help your own teen. Use these resources to pick and choose from--and apply what is relevant to your teen.

This kind of balanced thinking will help you with your teen, not just in the teen years, but also into young adulthood. Many parents forget or don't know what is typical for an individual of these ages, as ASD tends to skew thinking and create more of a panic. Having realistic and healthy expectations, while helping your teen grow, is important. It's okay if your teen or young adult on the spectrum is a late bloomer. Viewing it this way removes some of the panic and allows more balanced thinking, as well as a pace that is conducive for the teen to keep up with.

Summary



The teenage years are a tough time in the life of teens and their parents. Even though they are looking to be more independent, they still need guidance. Just because their chronological age is that of a teen, it doesn't mean they are emotionally and socially the same age. Many times, they are actually younger in these areas.

Social skills alone are not enough to help a teen understand social relationships. It is important to focus on thinking and perspective. A parent of a child of any age has strong influence-- whether they realize it or not. Focus on your communication because communication has a powerful impact on creating opportunity for brain growth. Remember that the brain can grow and change across the lifespan. Communication is a powerful tool to help set the tone for how to think about social relationships and decision making. Focus on your own thinking and sharing your thoughts out loud. This will help create a mental map for your teen on how to think.

Focus on balanced thinking. Many times in the well-intentioned rush of wanting to help your teen, it can be easy to lose sight of what is typical, healthy and normal. Your thoughts are powerful in that they will influence the actions you take. Balanced thinking will help you to make better decisions as you support your teen through the world of social relationships.