

Finding Friends

Supporting Neurodivergent Students with Building Friendships

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Research on Benefits of Having Friends

- Having friends and social connections are key indicators for a high quality of life.¹
- People who have friends and close confidants are more satisfied with their lives and less likely to suffer from depression.²
- Research shows that having friendships impacts every aspect of life in a positive way, including health (lower blood pressure)³

1. [Murphy, 2009](#)
2. [Choi, et.al., 2020](#)
3. [Hold-Lunstat, et.al., 2007](#)



Difficulties Many Children with Disabilities Face With Making Friends

- Communication challenges
- Bullying from peers and community members
- Exclusion from school and recreational activities with peers
- Ableist misconceptions and prejudice
- Deficits in pragmatic and social skills
- Difficulty self-regulating
- Anxiety



Difficulties May Start in Early Childhood

- Delays in learning turn-taking and sharing
- Lack of reciprocal play
- Limited joint attention
- Need for play to be a certain way
- Can't express wants and needs in an expected way



Difficulties that Affect Many Adolescents

- Clicks/Exclusion from Group Activities
- Social pressure to belong
- Social media
- Hormones
- Unwritten rules
- Having different interests than many peers



Challenges to Making Friends:

In Their Own Words

- **Spencer:** “Teenagers can be kind of mean. They don’t really understand me and think I’m weird.”
- **Laura:** “I’m kind of rigid and other people get annoyed with it. I also need time to think before I can respond and answer questions and then people just give up trying to talk to me.”
- **Geoff:** “I ramble on and on about things that I want to talk about. I like a lot of niche things that other people aren’t interested in, like history.”
- **Cassie:** It is hard to know where to begin with friendships. I always wanted them with people my age but didn’t learn what to do until I was older. Adults were easier.”



Friendship Algorithm: *The Big Bang Theory*



How I Made Friends: In their Own Words (Middle School)

- **Charlie:** “So one way is asking them nicely. And one way is telling them good jokes and being nice to them. Helping each other. There are many ways but this is one example. Talk to each other about their interests. Hang out with each other a lot. Try to comfort them if they feel bad. Don’t make any inappropriate comments or jokes. Be kind to them. Don’t judge them by their looks, opinions or race or any of that.”
- **Isabella:** “I said hello to make friends. Ask them how they are doing. It is not hard to make friends. Saying hello or greeting them helps me make friends. Everyone at the school is my favorite friend.”
- **Luke:** “Just by existing - I don’t know what I did. Waiting for them to come towards me I guess. Just find someone who seems nice. If they backstab you then no, don’t be their friend. Some people just have an attraction to friends and some don’t. It is really hard for me to make friends but they come to me when they like the way I am.”

Sometimes Our Kids Need A Little Help: Professionals Who Support Friendship Skills

- Speech-Language Pathologists
- Special Education Teachers
- Occupational Therapists
- Counselors
- Social Workers
- Psychologists
- Drama Teachers



How I Made Friends: In their Own Words (middle school)

- **Robert:** “I made friends at D and D (*editor’s note- Dungeons and Dragons*). There are three kids that are my friends and we do D and D. One friend even brought tokens and figures to D and D. I made friends by sitting with one kid on the first day at lunch and they ended up being in my science class.”
- **Arraiz:** “I made friends by being nice to them and hanging out with them. You should make sure you are choosing the right friends like the friends that are nice and kind and not bullies
- **Lem:** “Mostly just talking to people that don’t stress me out.”

Evidence-Based Practices

For Teaching
Friendship Skills

Social Skill Instruction

Modeling

Video Modeling

Social Narratives

Peer-Mediated Instruction and Intervention

Social Skill Instruction

- Focus on acquisition of skills needed for friendship, such as:
 - Turn-taking and sharing
 - Reciprocal conversations
 - Perspective taking
 - Understanding personal space
- Groups led by a therapist or teacher with peers
- 1:1 instruction
- In a classroom or clinical setting
- Generalization must occur in other settings



Modeling

- Modeling involves the learner observing someone correctly performing a target behavior and then promoting the learner to imitate the behavior
- Modeling can be used as a prompt to provide extra support to the learner after the direction has been provided and the child is trying to use the behavior.



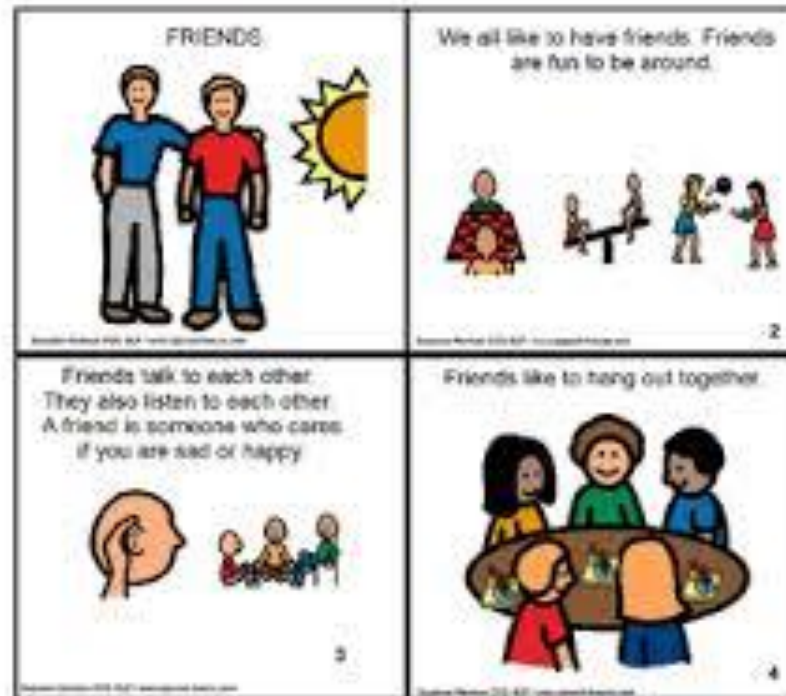
Video Modeling

- Video modeling (VM) is an intervention that uses technology (video recording and display equipment) to provide a visual model of a targeted behavior or skill.
- Could be a video of the child trying a friendship skill, such as asking a peer to play a game



Social Narratives

- Social narratives describe social situations for learners by providing relevant cues, explanation of the feelings and thoughts of others in the social situation, and descriptions of appropriate behavior expectations.



Peer-Mediated Instruction and Intervention

- **Teaching Typical Peers How to be Friends**

- Training all students in a classroom on disability awareness, communication strategies, and etiquette

- **Buddy Clubs**

- Self-selecting group of typical peers trained to support a student with disabilities

- **Circle of Support**

- Group convened to provide friendship and support for one specific student

Building Bridges with Typical Peers

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Thoughts on Buddy Clubs: In their Own Words

- **Marcus:** “I love Best Buddies! I love parties and dances! I love my friends!”
- **Juan:** “Best Buddies is fun. My buddy is nice to me.”
- **Aaron:** “Buddy groups look down on you and the buddies ignore you after the time they are your buddy and don’t pay attention anymore. They are doing it just as volunteer hours, like a check list. ”



How I Made Friends:

In their Own Words (Young Adults)

- **Lukas:** “I like acting and singing so I made friends in ArtStream. I have all my friends in Cool Aspies and we like to do the fun things.”
- **Emma** “DeviantArt is a place I can share my artwork and I made lots of friends. We started off online but now we go to anime conventions together and hang out. I also have my Cool Aspies friends, now.”
- **Geoff:** “I tried Best Buddies but didn’t really click with anyone. I made my first friends when I joined Cool Aspies”
- **Erin:** “I made friends in Special Olympics. I run, swim, and play basketball.”



Animal-Assisted Friendships

- **Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) can support many friendship skills:**
 - Reducing social anxiety
 - Improving communication skills
 - Increasing empathy
 - Facilitating social interactions.
- **Could look like:**
 - Having pets
 - Therapeutic horseback riding
 - Goat yoga
 - Volunteer work



Animals as Friends: In Their Own Words



- **Sam:** “It has always been easier for me to get along with animals. I had a dog and cats growing up and they kept me company. I loved the animals at the Career Center and learned that helping them is my passion. Now I’m a vet tech and just got a promotion.”
- **Rebecca:** “Well, horseback riding really saved my life. I’m not as nervous and sad all the time and I learned to talk to the horses as friends. Now I can talk to people as friends. “
- **Geoff:** “My best friend is my cat. She just gets me and makes me feel calm and loved.”
- **Mikayla:** “I have human friends now and a boyfriend, but animals were my first friends. I would at a nature center and volunteer with animals. They are easier to socialize with than most humans, but I’m getting better with people.”

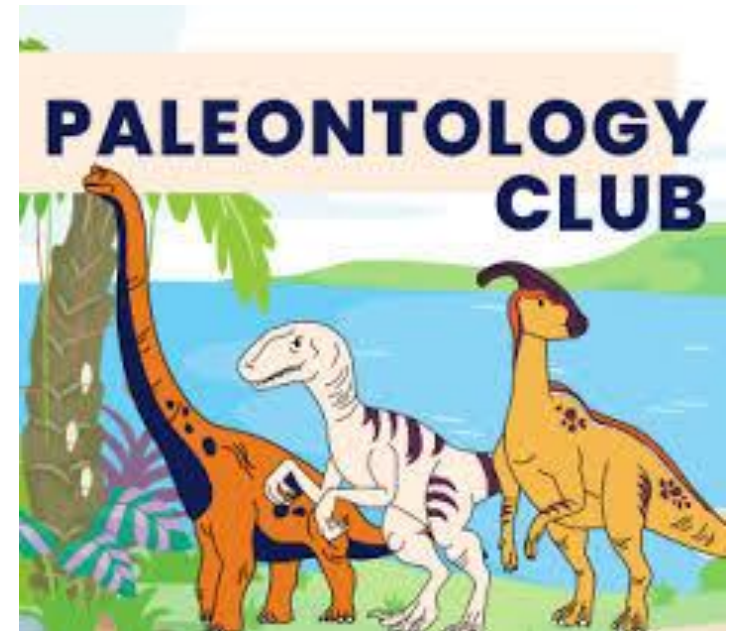
Drama Classes

- Scripts of what to say to others
- Orienting toward others
- Facial expressions and body language
- Expressive communication
- Playful way to learn social-emotional skills



Helping Children Find Their “Tribe”

- Find affinity groups for passions and interests, such as:
 - Typewriter repair group
 - GW Memorial Parkway bug lab
 - Lego club
 - Laser Tag group
 - Museum Sensory-Friendly Events
 - Anime Conventions



Finding a Friend Group

Morgane: In her Own Words

“My name is Morgane Clark and have been a member of the Cool Aspie social group for a while now. Joining Cool Aspies could not have happened at a better time because I was feeling lonely and needing friends. This was the first time I ever joined a group of neurodivergent peers and found them to very accepting of my quirks. The friendships that I have been able to maintain over the years with Cool Aspies has really allowed me to check in with myself and others and made me feel less alone and more confident in myself. Having this group also has benefited my health whether I am extremely happy, sad, or struggling, Cool Aspies has seen me through it all.”



Making Friends

Ariel: In her Own Words



Thank You

To my current and former students who contributed:

- Ariel
- Laura
- Morgane
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- Rebecca
- Mikayla
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- Aaron
- Sam
- Charlie
- Luke
- Arraiz
- Lem
- Robert

References: Books

- [Good Friends are Hard To Find](#) by F. Frankel
- [Bullies and Victims: Helping Your child through the Schoolyard Battlefield](#) by S. Fried and P. Fried
- [How To Talk With Friends: A Step-by-Step Social Skills Curriculum for Children With Autism](#) by J. Toole
- [A Friends for Henry](#) by Bailey and Song
- [The Survival Guide for Making and Being Friends](#) by J. Christ
- [A Is for Autism, F Is for Friend: A Kid's Book on Making Friends With a Child Who Has Autism](#) by J. Keating-Velasco
- [Unwritten Rules of Social Relationships](#) by Grandin and Baron

Reference: Web

- [Tips for Creating a Peer Buddy Club](#)
- [Circles of Support](#)
- [Animal-Assisted Friendships](#)
- [Healthy Relationships Workbook](#)
- [Practical Tips for Peer Supports](#)
- [Free TPT Lessons on Friendship](#)
- [LessonPix Sharing Center Friendship Lessons](#)
- [UNH Friendship Toolkit](#)
- [The Friendship Project](#)
- [Organization for Autism Research](#)



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