

## **AUTISM: MITIGATING SOCIAL ISSUES**

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Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a complex neurodevelopmental condition involving persistent challenges with social communication, restricted interests, and repetitive behavior.

While ASD is considered a lifelong disorder, the degree of impairment in functioning because of these challenges varies between individuals with autism.

One of the hallmarks of ASD is a lack of interest in or connection with other people. Their intuitive understanding of how to read, reach out to, and successfully interact with other human beings is most intensely affected.

### **1. SOCIAL ISSUES IN ASD INCLUDE**

- A range of behaviors, from completely avoiding any sort of personal interaction at all... to completely monopolizing conversations on a single topic that nobody other than the person speaking seems to be very interested in.
- Decreased sharing of interests with others
- Difficulty appreciating their own & others' emotions
- Aversion to maintaining eye contact
- Lack of proficiency with the use of non-verbal gestures such as waving bye-bye, pointing
- Difficulty making friends or keeping them
- Poor attention to the social world
- Poor initiating interactions, responding to the initiations of others, maintaining eye contact, sharing enjoyment, reading the non-verbal cues of others, and taking another person's perspective.

#### ▪ **SOCIAL ISSUES IN INFANTS (EARLY WARNING SIGN)**

Early warning signs seen in infants include

- Lack of overriding interest typical infants' display for human faces and voices.

They tend not to seek out their parent's gaze, and so cannot initiate or respond to attempts at shared enjoyment

- SOCIAL ISSUE IN SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN WITH ASD

- They may focus on objects instead of people...or look over a conversational partner's shoulder instead of into their eyes.

- SOCIAL ISSUE IN ADOLESCENTS

- Inability to fully grasp their communication issues and often fail to recognize how their way of communicating can be offensive or make others feel uncomfortable.

These manifest in obliviousness—monopolizing conversations, being unable or unwilling to converse outside particular topic areas or generally shutting out all external stimuli.

- GAZE AVOIDANCE/LACK OF INTEREST IN OTHERS

An infant seems uninterested in making eye contact, never smiles, or can't bear to be held.

A toddler rocks in a corner, watching his fingers flick before his face in seeming fascination, oblivious to a parent's attempts to engage him.

A child wanders the playground in circles before stopping to stare at the pattern of veins in a fallen leaf, uninterested in the other kids and unable to engage in the recess activities going on around him.

- GAZE, JOINT ATTENTION, AND NEURODEVELOPMENT

Human infants are hardwired to seek out faces, as opposed to other objects in the environment. Initiate social connection with a parent by pointing to an object and then alternating their gaze from parent to object and back again, one of a series of behaviors that involve joint attention. This is absent in ASD

- THEORY OF MIND

People with ASDs have a hard time interpreting it. Early problems with gaze and joint attention, it is believed, come to impact their theory of mind.

**Theory of mind simply refers to the understanding that other people have their thoughts, perceptions, and intentions separate from one's own.**

To accommodate others, to predict their future behavior, to manipulate or please them, you must have this inbuilt capacity to guess something about who they are and what they might do or desire. **Individuals with ASDs lack this ability to a staggering degree.**

Because they cannot read social cues, including facial expressions, body language, or tone of voice, people all across the autism spectrum are at a disadvantage.

## **2. CONSEQUENCES OF SOCIAL DEFICITS**

- 1) Individuals with ASDs look “odd” to the outside world.
- 2) They may stop in the middle of the sidewalk to stare at a fan revolving in a storefront window, oblivious to the crowds of people trying to get by.
- 3) They may pick their noses in public with no consciousness that this is not OK; walk away in the middle of a conversation or talk on and on about a topic of no interest to the listener.
- 4) They may bump into other people, as if they did not see them or as if they had misjudged how much space was available
- 5) May seem aloof or run right up to strangers and start conversations on obscure topics.
- 6) They may be lost in their thoughts or trying unsuccessfully to connect.
- 7) Inability to understand the complex dance that characterizes the social world
- 8) This can breed frustration that only fuels the fire because they may want to interact with others; they simply don’t have the skillset to do so easily.
- 9) Behavioral issues such as outbursts, tantrums, or inappropriate expression of self, in social contexts, essentially as a result of boiling over at their difficulty to either understand their place in a social situation or make themselves understood to others.

Dr. Scott Bellini, Associate Director -"I am not asking for my child to be the life of the party or a social butterfly. I just want her to be happy and have some friends of her own. She is a wonderful kid, and I hope someday others can see that."

## **3. MITIGATING SOCIAL ISSUES IN AUTISM VIA SOCIAL SKILLS**

Social skills are pivotal behaviors that open up a new world to the child and enhance his chances at learning from his environment including his workplace and community eventually.

These skills can be acquired as social skills

Social skills are essential in building both personal and professional relationships. Demonstrating strong interpersonal skills can help you accomplish career goals, contribute to community achievements, perform well during the hiring process and expand your professional and personal network. Understanding and improving your social skills can benefit you in every area of life

Social skills help all children know how to act in different social situations – from talking to grandparents to playing with friends at school.

Social skills can help your child make friends, learn from others and develop hobbies and interests. These skills can also help with family relationships and give your child a sense of belonging.

#### **4. WHAT ARE SOCIAL SKILLS?**

Social skills are the rules, customs, and abilities that guide our interactions with other people and the world around us. In general, people tend to “pick up” social skills in the same way they learn language skills: naturally and easily. Over time they build a social “map” of how to act in situations and with others.

For people with autism, it can be harder to learn and build up these skills, forcing them to guess what the social "map" should look like.

Social skills development for people with ASD involves:

- 1) Direct or explicit instruction and "teachable moments" with practice in realistic settings
- 2) Focus on timing and attention
- 3) Assess Social Functioning, distinguish between skill acquisition and performance deficits, select intervention strategies, implement Intervention, evaluate and monitor Progress
- 4) Support for enhancing communication and sensory integration as these make it possible for them to relate with others
- 5) Learning behaviors that predict important social outcomes like friendship and happiness
- 6) Pivotal response treatment (PRT):- one of the naturalistic intervention models, principles of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) aiming to facilitate the stimulant-response generalization, decrease the dependency on cues and increase the motivation of the individual to lead to improvements in other areas that are not specifically targeted
- 7) Other Applied behavior analysis concepts such as incidental teaching, mand-model, time delay, activity-based teaching, peer tutoring, self-management, social stories,
- 8) Accommodation and assimilation. Accommodation, as it relates to social skills instruction, refers to the act of modifying the physical or social environment of the child to promote positive social interactions. Examples of this include training peer mentors to interact with the child throughout the school day, autism awareness training for classmates, and signing your child up for various group activities, such as little league, or Boy or Girl Scouts. Whereas accommodation addresses changes in the environment, assimilation focuses on changes in the child. Assimilation refers to instruction that facilitates skill development that allows the child to be more successful in social interactions.
- 9) Practice play, praise, role-play, social skills training, social stories, video-modeling, visual supports.
- 10) Social Skills Groups

## **IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL SKILLS**

- 1) Communicate your needs and wants clearly and effectively
- 2) Have better—and potentially more—relationships with family members and school peers
- 3) Navigate tricky social situations as they are growing older
- 4) Feel happier because they understand their environment better
- 5) Reduce behavioral issues
- 6) Advantages to your friends, education and community
- 7) Improves the opportunity to gain ideas, information, techniques, and perspectives from people with different areas of expertise
- 8) Accomplish tasks and collaborate with others toward a shared goal
- 9) Expand your network to learn about and pursue new opportunities
- 10) Make the workplace, school environment, parks, and environment more enjoyable
  
- 11) They would be able to have better communication to share their thoughts and ideas clearly with others.
- 12) Conflict resolution: Disagreements and dissatisfaction can arise in any situation. Conflict resolution is the ability to get to the source of the problem and find a workable solution
- 13) Active listening: Active listening is the ability to pay close attention to a person who is communicating with you. You can increase your listening skills by focusing on the speaker, avoiding distractions, and waiting to prepare your response only after the other person is finished
- 14) Foster empathy: Empathy is the ability to understand and identify with the feelings of another person.
- 15) Relationship management: Relationship management is the ability to maintain healthy relationships and build key connections.
- 16) The respect: A key aspect of respect is knowing when and how to initiate communication and respond. In a team or group setting, allowing others to speak without interruption is a necessary communication skill that shows respect. This helps them use their time with someone else wisely—staying on a topic, asking clear questions, and responding fully to any questions you've been asked.

## CONCLUSION

The typical coping mechanism for most of us is to reduce stress and anxiety by avoiding stressful situations. For children with ASD, it often results in the avoidance of social situations, and subsequently, the development of social skill deficits.

When a child continually avoids social encounters, he denies himself the opportunity to acquire social interaction skills. This can lead to negative peer interactions, peer rejection, isolation, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and even suicidal ideation.

For others, it creates a pattern of absorption in solitary activities and hobbies; a pattern that may lead to the development of more detrimental outcomes, such as poor academic achievement, social failure, and peer rejection, anxiety, depression and other negative outcomes.

Mitigating social issues via teaching social skills as an early intervention strategy would help improve the overall quality of life of our children, adolescents, and adults with ASD

## RESOURCES

1. <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/autism/what-is-autism-spectrum-disorder>
2. Educational Sciences: Theory & Practice - 13(3);1730-1742;2013 Educational Consultancy and Research Center. [www.edam.com.tr/estp](http://www.edam.com.tr/estp).
3. <https://www.appliedbehavioranalysisedu.org/why-do-autistics-have-issues-with-social-skills/>
4. <https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/career-development/social-skills>
5. <https://www.iidc.indiana.edu/irca/articles/making-and-keeping-friends.html>
6. Nelson Pediatrics textbook [19<sup>th</sup> edition]: Pervasive developmental disorders