



Social interaction and Autism

We begin to develop social skills almost as soon as we are born. Very young babies quickly begin to notice faces looking at them, copy certain types of facial expressions and communicate with their care givers, gradually using a different type of cry to signal a different need. Our youngest children develop lots of different skills that support social interaction, such as listening, taking turns, recognising emotions and developing their vocabulary.

Children with Autism experience the world differently to their 'neurotypical' peers. One of the ways adults might notice this is through how children with Autism socialise. Historically, some research has suggested that children with Autism struggle with empathy, seeing things from someone else's point of view, or are simply not interested in socialising. However, these ideas are outdated. Social interaction and relationships may just look a little different for children with Autism.





Attention and communication

Some children with Autism may look as though they do not know anyone else in the room is present, giving little eye contact or not responding to their name. They might move quickly between different areas, exploring lots of resources. A child with Autism may have a speech delay, use gesture, visual supports or Echolalia to communicate with those around them. All children learn at their own pace, and children with Autism going through the above stages are doing just that. They might be moving quickly between activities because they are excited that there is so much to do and see! Watching or copying an adult making a movement or gesture, playing in parallel alongside others or using gestures to communicate a need are all forms of social interaction. Adults can help by getting to know a child's interests and preferences. Providing opportunities for children to explore and communicate (verbally, non-verbally or using assistive technology) using things they like and enjoy, being mindful of sensory sensitivities, can help children to feel calm and motivated to explore, developing their concentration and attention.





Friendships

Young children often quickly form friendships and relationships with their peers – their friendships can sometimes end as quickly as they began! For children with Autism, friendships can follow similar patterns. What that friendship looks like will depend on the individual children involved! For some children, sitting next to each other playing with two different sets of resources may be very comforting and enjoyable. Others might prefer to be the ‘leader’, organising a group of friends to recreate a familiar scenario such as doctors or school. Some children with Autism may have difficulty recognising non-verbal cues such as facial expressions and body language. They may also have a very direct communication style. This can occasionally cause confusion or conflict during social interactions.



Dr Damien Milton proposed the ‘double empathy problem’: the theory that two people can mutually misunderstand one another as they have/are having very different experiences of the world. This means it is important to help all children to explore their emotions, what these might look and feel like, and how everyone processes and expresses things differently. As children develop this understanding, it can make forming and sustaining friendships easier and more enjoyable for everyone.



Play

We know that children learn best through play. Play serves a very important purpose in developing their understanding of the world around them, including social interaction and relationships. Solitary play is just as valuable as other forms of parallel or collaborative play with peers, with different play types occurring at different stages of development. Sometimes children with Autism's play can be seen as very rigid or repetitive – but many young children enjoy repetitive and patterned play (such as listening to a story being read repeatedly, building and knocking down towers, music, songs and rhyme). This is very important for helping them to consolidate their learning. Children with Autism sometimes enjoy focusing on one particular topic/toy/idea (eg: space, Toy Story, animals etc) - this might involve a deep exploration of the subject to get as much information or experience as possible. Sharing information about the things they are interested in is a wonderful way for children with Autism to express themselves and interact with others.

Key points to take away:

- The 'double empathy problem' (Dr Damien Milton) reminds us that we may experience difficulties with our social communication and interaction skills purely based on the differences in our individual perspectives which cause mutual misunderstanding! Social interaction is a two-way process.
- Lots of children and adults have times where they seek more or less social interaction with others. Children with Autism might have lots of friends, a small group, a best friend or prefer to play alone. This can change over time!
- All young children go through a process where they learn how to do things like take turns in play or conversation and understand feelings (their own and other peoples). When adults help children to understand that everyone plays, interacts and learns in different ways, they help to create a space where all children can feel safe, supported and accepted as the unique individual that they are.