

Ask the Expert Q&A #7

Fostering Friendships

Presenters:

Selena Layden, Ph.D. &
Cyndi Pitonyak, M.Ed.
VCU-RRTC, Autism
Center for Education

Q Why is it important for students with ASD to have friends?

It's important for students with ASD to have friends for the same reason it's important for all of us to have friends, we're social beings and need to be connected to each other. Friendships are an important part of social development for all children -- this is the way we develop a sense of who we are as individuals and members of a group outside of our families and the way we begin to develop a social support network that can be there in hard times. Friendships and peer relationships are the primary predicting factor in which students are going to have difficulty with aggression, they'll withdraw later on as they move through school. Friendships are just a huge part of quality of life and a source of joy and pleasure for all of us. Students with ASD are no different!

Q Why do students with ASD have difficulty developing and maintaining friendships?

A student with ASD can have social communication difficulties. It's important for students to have access to excellent social skills instruction and social support and have opportunities to practice their social skills. Sometimes we get caught up in trying to provide social skills instruction and create opportunities to practice these skills and actually begin to define friendship differently for students with ASD than for other students. A friendship is a mutually enjoyable connection! All students usually want to be a part of a group and enjoy spending time together. A helper/helpee relationship is one you can practice your social skills with, a friendship and is MORE than that! Peer helpers can be an important support for students with ASD academically and socially and help them move through the school day successfully. But a peer helper is NOT the same thing as a friend!

Q What are some tips to help promote friendships for students with ASD in the classroom?

One thing you can do is focus on the similarities more than the differences. A great question to ask is what does the student love and who loves that too? Then take students who love the same thing and create short, fun, social opportunities for them to be together and enjoy. A group of kids who all love trains can have a breakfast club once a week where they bring in books and items of interests about trains and share them. Kids who love to dance can get together during recess once a week and share their dance moves with each other and have fun. Kids who love Looney Tunes cartoons can eat lunch together in the classroom once a week and watch cartoons they brought in to share. At high school, there are usually a variety of clubs that students can participate in but in elementary and middle school, you have to get creative in making those opportunities work. We can develop the club around the interest that the student with ASD has, but the student with ASD is not the focus of the club. There will be plenty of opportunities for social interaction, but don't force these interactions every minute. You want to make this a fun experience for ALL the students involved, including the students with ASD.

This Q&A has been taken from "Ask the Expert Series" which are short videos that discuss important topics for parents, educators, community members, and individuals with ASD and can be found on the VCU-ACE website: <https://vcuautismcenter.org/resources/asktheexpert/>