

Social Skills

Social skills are the shared and often unspoken expectations, customs, and interaction practices that shape how people connect with others and make sense of the world around them. These skills develop across the lifespan, ranging from play and friendship to self-care, collaboration, perspective-taking, and navigating relationships. Differences in social skills are a core characteristic of autism and reflect the natural diversity of how humans connect and communicate. Autistic students may engage socially in ways that differ from conventional expectations. These differences are sometimes a barrier to meaningful participation in inclusive classrooms and community settings.



● *The Purpose of Instruction: Access, Autonomy, and Belonging*

The aim of teaching social skills is not to make autistic students “fit in,” but to increase their access, safety, participation, and sense of belonging. Effective social skills instruction is highly individualized, based on the student’s strengths, needs, communication modalities, sensory profile, and personal goals.

Social skills support participation in school, work, and community life, but they develop in a variety of ways. While many people learn social expectations through experience and observation, autistic students often learn best through explicit instruction and supported practice in real-life situations.

● *Identifying Goals: Best Practices*

Well-designed goals empower students to build social connections while staying true to themselves. To achieve this, educators should:

1. Collaborate with the student to align goals with their strengths, interests, and preferred way of communicating.
2. Prioritize skills that improve independence, safety, and meaningful relationships.
3. Protect autonomy, ensuring goals respect personal boundaries and sensory needs.
4. Plan for real life by designing goals that work across different settings and evolve as the student grows.

Focus on Connection, Not Compliance: Social skills goals should **not** promote “masking” of autistic behaviors.



A compliance-focused goal may focus on sustaining eye contact or reducing stimming and echolalia.



Instead, prioritize goals that support sensory regulation and social understanding by helping the student navigate their environment in a way that feels safe and enjoyable.

● **Planning for Social Skills Instruction**

Social skills support should be integrated in ways that promote students' access to instruction and meaningful participation. The most effective approach combines brief, explicit instruction with opportunities to practice throughout the school day.

For example:

- Educational teams can target social skills through group activities and collaborative tasks during academic classes.
- For younger students, educators can address social skills during the morning meeting or a time dedicated to social-emotional learning.
- Non-academic periods, such as lunch, before- or after-school, or study hall, can be used to provide focused support while minimizing disruptions to core instruction.

● **Collaboration is Key**

Supporting social skills is a shared responsibility, and positive student outcomes are achieved through strong partnerships among families, educational teams, and the student. While teachers, paraprofessionals, and related service providers deliver direct instruction, all school personnel can

provide valuable opportunities to practice skills in a low-stakes environment. Together, the entire school community can build a culture of belonging by celebrating diverse communication styles and creating meaningful ways for every student to participate and connect.

● **Peer Involvement**

Educators can help all students understand differences in social communication styles and that successful interactions are a two-way street. Rather than asking grade-level peers to act as "role models," focus on building mutual respect, connecting authentically, and learning from one another.

Identify peers who have shared interests and are willing to learn inclusive communication partner strategies, such as:

- Allowing extra processing time
- Respecting sensory needs
- Supporting all ways of communicating, including AAC

● **Additional Resources**

- [Microlearning: Strategies to Support Autistic Learners](#)
- [ACE Factsheet: Introduction to Alternative and Augmentative Communication](#)

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