

Rehearsing Social Skills with the Asperger's Child

Social skills are a vital component of success for children in school and eventually in the workplace when they become an adult. The skills needed to start, maintain, and develop relationships are difficult for a child with Asperger's to implement and should be rehearsed with them to develop the necessary social skills for success in life. As your child develops, social situations will change and your goals for them will change as they mature. There are several key parts to developing social skills:

- I. Communication
- II. Developing a conversation
- III. Interacting with a group
- IV. Interpretation of social cues (facial expressions; body language)
- V. How to play games or sportsmanlike conduct

As a therapist, I teach these various social skills to young children and older children, not just with children with Asperger's Disorder, but for a variety of reasons. Many children and even adults are simply not good with social interactions, however if rehearsed, can be improved upon to make social interactions much less painful. Children with Asperger's Disorder by definition, struggle with social skills and do not understand the basic nuances of social interactions that are necessary to interact with those around us. The first step in rehearsing social skills is to understand what are the basic elements of having a conversation with another child. Of course, what is being rehearsed will change over time as your child grows as does his/her social interactions around him/her and you as the parent will need to change your goals accordingly.

I. Explain the elements of communication to your child. Communication is developed through:

- a) Eye contact - No one will think you are interested in them if you are looking at the floor or down at your feet. Averting your gaze means to others that you aren't really listening. Explain to your child why we look at people when we talk to them
- b) Posture - Teach correct posture to your child. Stand up straight, face the person, your head is held back and you are looking at them
- c) Volume and pitch of voice - Teach appropriate volume. Children have a tendency to yell out when they want something. This is not appropriate; model volume and pitch of voice in communicating with other children
- d) Personal space - I can't stress this part enough. Please, model appropriate personal space. Children do not like to be crowded and this is very annoying to other children. Model personal space when they are sitting by other children in the lunchroom, walking, standing, etc..

II. Explaining the elements of a Conversation:

- a) Teach them how to introduce themselves, “Hi, my name is Kate”, for example. Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse. Practicing will lower their anxiety level.
- b) Teach your child how to keep a conversation going and how to end a conversation. Maintaining a conversation is very difficult for children. Teach them to discuss common interests such as movies, video games, what they are doing in class, etc... and have them stay on the subject. Jumping from one topic to the next will not maintain a conversation. Go over the ebb and flow of a conversation. One person talks and asks a question and the other person answers and then asks a question. We take turns in a conversation. One person does not do all of the talking, believe it or not!
- c) The rules in a conversation-There are so many tiny; little rules in conversation that these will have to be gone over and over again. For example, when we have a conversation with someone we usually say their name, we look at them, we take turns when we are speaking, we face them and our body is not averted, we teach “small talk”, which is a little harder. Model the beginning, middle, and the end of the conversation and what types of things you can say ie... how have you been, what did you do this weekend, did you go see that movie.

III. How to participate in a group conversation

- a) How to respond in a group when others are speaking to you or when they are teasing you. Children with Asperger’s often do not know how to respond to teasing and this makes the situation worse. How to respond when other children want you to play or not to play with them and how to respond. Model how to join into a conversation when they are asked to participate in a group discussion or activity. Children often work in groups in school to teach social interactions and how to work together.

IV. Social Cues

- a) Children with Asperger’s usually do not understand what a certain facial expression means or body language. If a child is standing in front of your child with their arms crossed, then explain what this means to your child. Social cues are a very important part of social interactions.
- b) Teach your child about their own body language and facial expressions. Your child should understand how to monitor their own social cues and those of them around them.

V. Games and Sportsmanship

- a) This is the one thing that I have found that is very difficult for children and even adolescents to work on. Everyone likes to win and no one likes a “sore loser”. Teach them that it is no fun for others if they win all the time and no one will want to play with them at all. Teach them the rules of games. No, not the specific rules of each and every game, but the specific rules of how games are played. ie.. everyone gets a turn, we do not pout or get an attitude if it is not our turn or we are losing at the game. Teach your child how to win and lose at a game. Teach them what to say and what not to say. Saying, “you are gonna lose”, during game play is not the way to make friends!!
- b) Conflict resolution-teaching your child how to manage and work their way through conflicts with children during game play is an important key. Children with Asperger’s behave in a repetitive manner with a very narrow range of interests; you as the parent have to teach them that there are other ways to do things other than one way.

Developing these social skills with your child will take time and will also change as your child develops. Visual cues are often an important component in teaching these skills and through rehearsing and modeling these behaviors, your child will be much more successful in their social interactions. Many parents will seek out professional assistance in order to implement these strategies and other parents with children with Asperger’s are also a great resource.

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