

hendrickx associates

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Social and Personal Relationships on the Autism Spectrum

'Autism is someone who has found something better and more interesting to do than socialise' – Prof. Tony Attwood

Sarah Hendrickx

Friendships/Relationships

- What are they for?
- What are the rules?
- How do I get one?
- What is a friend?
- What's in it for me?
- Is it worth it?

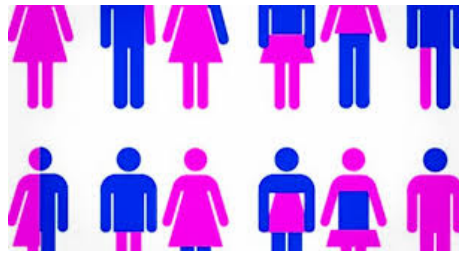


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Autism & Sexuality

- Autism – research suggests higher % of non-heterosexuality than in general population
- Causes: genetic, hormonal, life choice, social, experiential
 - Experience of having autism may have an influence – negative history
- Heterosexual (straight)
 - Attracted to males or females
- Bisexual
 - Attracted to males and females
- Pansexual
 - Attracted to all genders
- Asexual
 - Attracted to no one



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Autism & Gender ID

- Poss higher % autistic population gender identity differences
- Does not necessarily relate to biological birth (cis) gender
- 'I'm just me'
 - Different sense of gender ID
 - Male/female or
- Atypical gender presentation
 - 'Tomboy' females
 - Gentle males
 - Androgynous
 - Gender fluid
- Non-gender typical interests
- Societal construct of gender
 - Less societal awareness/peer influence
 - Smaller data input
 - Independent choices



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Autistic Social Differences?

'Male'

- Girls may be easier than male peers
- Concept of 'friend' difficult
- 'Awkward', 'arrogant'
- Alone = easier
- My way or no way
- Social occasions inaccessible and/or avoided
- Say 'No' to social invitations to avoid discomfort

'Female'

- Boys may be easier than female peers – females are nuanced
- Observe and learn the rules
- Desire to connect – don't know how
- Want to fit in at all costs – copy, mimic
- Social failure = devastating
- Social performance = exhausting
- Mental health issues as result
- 'Aloof', 'stand-offish', 'shy'
- Say 'Yes' to social occasions - then cancel at last minute...

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Typical Social Expectations

- Non-verbal signals
 - Spotting interest, reading cues
- Sharing
 - Possessions, plans, space, team-work
- Companionship
 - Sharing time, chatting
- Flexibility
 - People change their minds/plans
- Physical contact
 - Hugs, play
- Emotional support & intuition (empathy)
 - Mind-reading, guesswork
- Compromise – doing things you don't want to
- Maintenance
 - Contact for purely social reasons
- Understanding of two-way nature (reciprocity)
- Acceptance of changes and endings



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Features of Autism

- Purposeful communication
 - Needs to be a reason to speak/approach
- Problem solving approach
 - Practical/logical rather than emotional
- Lack of understanding NT social rules
 - Face value, haven't got a clue
- Preference for own way
 - Because its the best way!
- Sensory sensitivity
 - Too many people
 - Touching
- Recognising & responding to others' needs
 - No idea what anyone wants – people are not clear
- Need time alone
 - Too much people time hurts my head



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Autistic Preferences

- Lone play
- Parallel play – alongside and silent
- Organising play – sorting, lining up, helping
- Activity/interest based interaction - clubs
- Parties = hell + new rules
- Get class 'buy in' for autistic child via skills
- Break-times – worst part of the day – where do they go? Where is their respite?

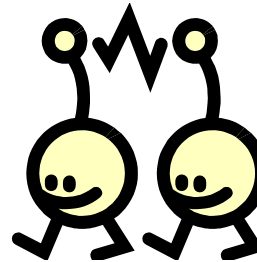


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The Perfect Friendship/Relationship

- 'Me in the preferred gender'
- 1:1 interaction (not groups)
- Limited and defined time – e.g. 1-2hrs
- Not too frequent
- Not constant interaction (text, FB etc.)
- Online / non face to face
- Shares interests
- Useful
- Meets physical needs – whatever they are
- Low (emotional) maintenance
- Social bodyguard
- OR often also neuro-diverse/AS

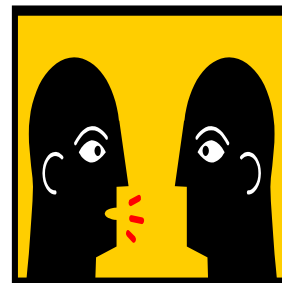


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Teaching Social Relationship Skills - 1

- Teach fundamental autistic social error: spread net wide vs targeting
- Encourage self-reflection and awareness – ask 'what would another person think about that?'
- Systematic, evidence-based approach
- Knock backs and endings
- What does it mean to be a friend? (Difference between friend and friendly)

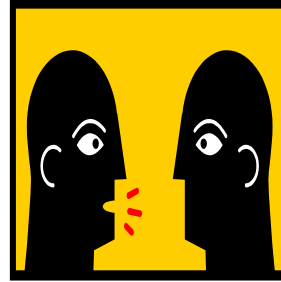


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Teaching Social Relationship Skills - 2

- Why do you want friends? Response gives clues to level of understanding of friendships
- What are benefits/disadvantages?
- Explain the 'deal' (consequences) of friendship:
 - Maintenance
 - Doing things you don't want to do
 - Tolerating company
 - Sharing
 - Tolerating opinions of others

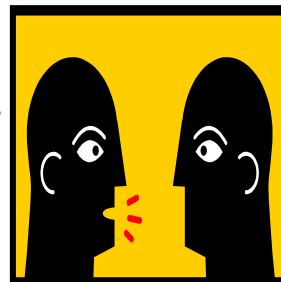


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Teaching Social Relationship Skills - 3

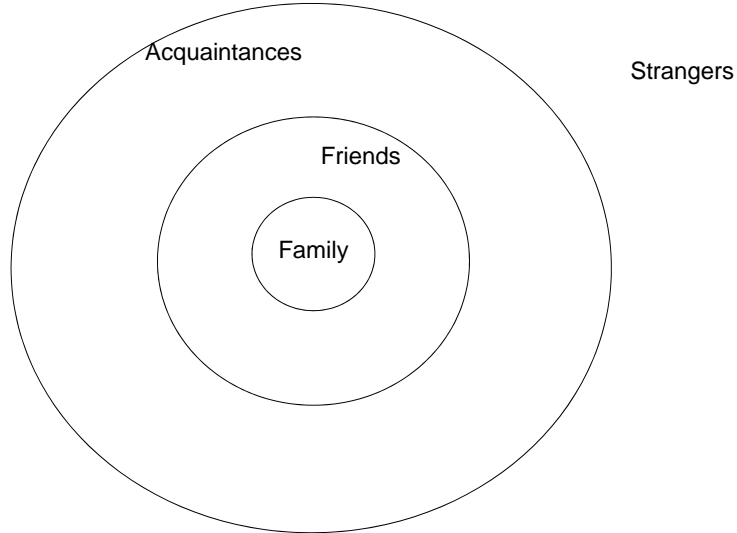
- What do you have to do to have friends?
- Where do you find them?
- Why would someone want to be your friend (what's good about you)?
- Rules of engagement
- Reading signals of interest
- Safety and well-being – check with someone else if you're not sure



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Rules of People



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Rules of People

- Problems occur when you don't know the rules:
- Mix up the circles
- Mistake 'friendly' for 'friend'
- Don't spot hints
- Don't spot hidden agendas
- Talk too much
- Talk too little
- Ask too many questions
- Don't ask enough questions
- AND MANY MORE...



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Autistic Relationships

- Many people with autism have or desire personal and/or physical relationships
- Most fit within 'typical' format

BUT SOME:

- May be unconventional
- Live apart
- Polygamous/polyamorous
- Different language
- Non-physical (sexual)
- Physical only
- Based on shared interests
- Virtual
- Paid for (escorts)
- May be vulnerable & attract predators – can't see agendas



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Love in an Autistic World

Moreobsessional and
stalky at first, then more
disinterested over time

Wanting to spend time with someone every day without
gouging my own eyes out

'Being in a bubble with this
one person who feels like an
extension of yourself. It takes
no effort to be with them,
whilst it takes SO much effort
to be with anyone else on the
planet'

'Love is about actions, not feelings.
Feelings are transient, unpredictable
and irrational. When you love
someone, you treat them well and look
after them and listen to them - it's in
the doing'

I've never met anyone
who irritates me less
than he does

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Support

- Needs to be autism specific
- Just because it's not how you see it, doesn't mean it's wrong
 - Recognise and accept potentially different view on identity, sexuality and relationships
- Needs to recognise that the autistic thinking cannot be separated
- Recognise potential vulnerability to unhealthy relationships
- Teach social rules on people, dating & realistic expectations
 - Most relationships fail – FACT – and that's OK
- Sexual health education – do not make assumptions on base level
 - Basic concepts may not be understood
 - Teach in social context – not just nuts & bolts



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The Future

- Autistic adults tend to have small social networks
- 1:1
- Infrequent
- Activity/interest-based
- Autistic/quirky friends (and partners)
- Struggle/hate superficial social chat
- Love spending time alone
- *Autistic children grow into autistic adults*
- *Work with their autistic preferences, rather than against*



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