# Fitting In:
Tips for Promoting Acceptance and Friendships for Students With Autism Spectrum Disorders in Inclusive Classrooms

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In order for students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) to find acceptance and to develop friendships similar to those of their typical peers, they must be provided with the opportunities to do so. With appropriate planning and supports, inclusive classrooms can provide such opportunities for children with ASD, just as they do for typical children. This article provides tips that teachers and parents can use to foster acceptance and friendships of students with ASD in general education classrooms.
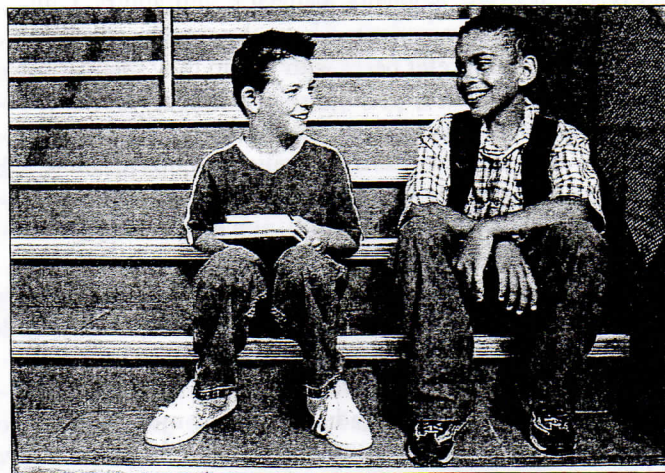
We all need friends. For many children with disabilities, especially autism spectrum disorders (ASD), the development of social relationships may difficult due to the nature of the disability. Children with ASD may have difficulty reading social cues; initiating, sustaining, or terminating a conversation; or behaving appropriately with peers. Further, many children with ASD have a restricted repertoire of interests or behaviors that limits interaction with same-aged peers. Finally, communication with peers may be further challenged due to limited speech and/or use of alternative communication devices.

How, then, do children with ASD make and keep friends? It is a challenging task for parents and teachers, but one that is necessary if children with ASD are to become socially successful. By interacting with same-aged, typical peers, children with ASD have been shown to improve their behaviors, communication and social skills, and play behaviors (Wolfberg, 1999), all of which are important to their overall development. Further, parents often report that having friendships is an important goal for their children with ASD.

Inclusive classrooms are one place where friendships between children with and without disabilities have the opportunity to develop and grow. However, just placing children with disabilities with typical peers does not necessarily ensure that friendships will occur (Boutot & Bryant, 2005). In order for friendships to blossom, there must first be an acceptance of the child with disabilities by the other children. For children with ASD, certain behaviors, the use of strange communication devices, or the reliance on a teaching assistant may limit their acceptance by the other students (Boutot & Bryant, 2005). Thus, parents and teachers need to take steps to promote acceptance of children with ASD and positive social interactions between them and typical peers. In this article, the concept and goal of promoting and maintaining acceptance and friendships for children with ASD within the general education classroom is referred to as *social inclusion*. The philosophy of social inclusion is that all students in a classroom can work together and "belong" in the class. This article provides information on what it means to be accepted (i.e., belong) in an inclusion class for children with disabilities, specifically ASD, as well as

tips for teachers and parents on how to promote acceptance and friendships in inclusive environments.

Social Acceptance of Children Without Disabilities

To understand what it will take to promote acceptance and friendships between students with and without disabilities, it is helpful to know something about how students without disabilities feel about each other and with whom they prefer to spend their time. For example, children prefer peers with whom they have something in common. Children also prefer peers who are more like themselves in terms of dress, language, behavior, and ability. Children tend to prefer students whom the teacher also likes. Finally, children prefer peers with whom they spend most of their time; hence, proximity is a key to preference (Adler, Kless, & Adler, 1992). Popularity is a concept that is often of utmost concern for typical children; Table 1 features an overview of popular versus unpopular characteristics. What makes a child popular or unpopular among his or her peers? Research over the last few decades has found consistently that the more popular students are those who wear current or trendy clothing, have leadership skills, have good social skills, and are good communicators. Popularity varies between the sexes, with girls who are better at academics being more popular, while more popular boys are those with high athletic ability. Less popular students, conversely, are those that play alone, are from lower socioeconomic status, have poor social skills, do not cooperate with others, are poor athletes (males) or poor students (females), and who display inappropriate or extreme behaviors (Farmer & Farer, 1996). It is not a stretch of the imagination to see that some students, by the very nature of their disability, may have difficulty meeting the required "image" of popularity and acceptance.

Social Acceptance of Students With Disabilities

Though disability is only one facet of any child's persona, the disability itself often prohibits or challenges some of the attributes related to acceptance and popularity among students without disabilities. For this reason, it is not unusual to find that in many cases, our efforts at social inclusion are met with failure or, at best, limited success. Research into the social acceptance of children with disabilities has consistently shown that students with disabilities are not as well accepted by their typical peers as are those without disabilities (Bender, Wyne, Struck, & Bailey, 1984; Sabornie & Kauffman, 1987). Table 2 features factors associated with social acceptance versus nonacceptance of students with disabilities by their typical peers

Table 1. Popular Versus Unpopular Characteristics

Popular	Unpopular
Wearing trendy clothing	Being from low socioeconomic status
Displaying leadership skills	Playing alone
Good social skills	Poor social skills
Good communication skills	Lack of cooperation
Good at academics (girls) or athletics (boys)	Poor students (girls) or athletes (boys)
Liked by the teacher	Display inappropriate or extreme behaviors

Table 2. Factors Associated With Acceptance Versus Nonacceptance of Students With Disabilities

Acceptance	Non-Acceptance
Perceived as being part of the class	Frequent removal from classroom
Peer tutors and/or independence	Presence of a one-on-one adult assistant
Limited self-abuse, aggression, or loud behaviors	Extreme or disruptive behaviors
Overall classroom culture of acceptance and tolerance	Negative attitude or treatment by teacher
Knowledge of the disability or differences as well as similarities	Lack of understanding of disability or differences
Specific training	Unusual or "scary" equipment or behaviors

(Brady, Shores, McEvor, Ellis, & Fox, 1987; Garrison-Harrell, Kamps, & Kravits, 1997; Krantz & McClannahan, 1993; Lord & Hopkins, 1986; Muncschenk & Sasso, 1995; Nientimp & Cole, 1992; Odom, Hoyson, Jamieson, & Strain, 1985). Research has found that children with disabilities tend to spend time with those with the same abilities and disabilities as themselves. Although many studies have found a lower rate of acceptance for students with learning and behavioral differences, more recent studies have found no differences between students with disabilities and those without disabilities in terms of their acceptance (Hudson & Clunies-Ross, 1984; Sabornie & Kauffman, 1986). Although acceptance does not always mean friendships, these same studies have found that children with disabilities in inclusion classrooms were, in fact, members of a meaningful social group (Boutot & Bryant, 2005; Farmer & Farer, 1996).

Compared to typical students, students with ASD often have significant social skills deficits that may interfere with their acceptance by others. In addition, students

with autism vary greatly in terms of severity of autistic characteristics that may prohibit successful social interactions (Mesibov & Shae, 1996). According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders–Fourth Edition* (*DSM-IV*; American Psychiatric Association, 1994), the primary characteristics of autism fall into three categories: communication deficits or delays, stereotypic behaviors, and limited social relatedness. Sample characteristics of communication deficits include echolalic speech and a delay or failure to develop speech. The category of stereotypic behavior is characterized by insistence on sameness, preoccupation with certain objects or parts of objects, resistance to change, perseverative movements such as rocking or hand flapping, and self-injurious behaviors such as head banging. Lack of eye contact and lack of social and emotional reciprocity are examples of social relatedness deficits. Each characteristic symptom of autism on its own may not directly influence acceptance or friendships of a student with autism in general education setting; however, the severity of the characteristics could contribute to social success. See Figure 1 for a list of possible social, behavioral, and communicative characteristics of students with ASD.

To help students with ASD become more socially accepted and develop friendships among their typical peers, families and teachers must have a better understanding of the characteristics that contribute to acceptance and friendships. Teachers also need to be able to teach skills or remediate behaviors that may negatively affect a student's social acceptance. Further, planning is key to creating an environment that promotes "fitting in" of students with ASD with their typical peers.

Planning Strategies to Promote Acceptance and Friendships

Although some persons may suggest that simply educating students with disabilities alongside their typical peers will result in greater acceptance and promote friendships between the groups, this is not always the case. To better ensure that the goals of acceptance and meaningful social relationships will happen, careful and thoughtful planning is necessary. The following tips will aid in successful social inclusion for children with ASD:

- select classrooms wisely,
- schedule wisely,
- select supports wisely,
- prepare the classroom teacher,
- prepare the general education students,
- prepare the student with ASD, and
- secure and maintain family support.

Selecting a Classroom

Depending on the size of the school and its level (elementary or secondary), options as to the number of potential classrooms will vary. Try to select a classroom with a teacher who shares, or at least understands, the philosophy of social inclusion: that all students should work together and belong in the class. If the teacher believes that the student with ASD is not just a visitor in their class, but is to be a contributing member, it will support successful social inclusion for that child. Further, whenever possible, special education teachers should spend some time observing the general education classroom to assess its appropriateness for the student with ASD. Look for things such as teaching style: Does the teacher use appropriate pacing, positive reinforcement and corrective feedback, and multimodal instruction? Does he or she use cooperative student groups, or teach in mostly lecture format? Are expectations communicated effectively, and is downtime limited? Second, look at the dynamics of the class: Do the students seem to work together as a team, or in groups of teams, and is there a spirit of support and cooperation among them? Also assess the physical environment: Are there sensory distractions such as poor lighting or loud noises that may distract the student with ASD? Can the students see the board/screen/teacher from their seats? Are the acoustics appropriate? Finally, are all things easily accessible? Just as you want to select a classroom that best fits your student, you also want your student to fit into that classroom. Try to select a classroom in which bringing in a new student will cause least disruption.

Social
Lack of eye contact
Little or no recognition of others' emotions
Little or no response to nonverbal social cues
Difficulty reading social situations in a group
Difficulty controlling one's own emotions
Inappropriate or immature social skills

Communication
Limited to no speech
Odd prosody
No recognition of sarcasm, metaphors, or abstract concepts
Literal thinking and speaking

Echolalia
Behavioral
Perseveration on certain topics or objects of interest
Resistance to change
Preference to sameness
Stereotypical movements (flapping, rocking, etc.)
Self-abusive or aggressive behaviors

Figure 1. Characteristics of autism spectrum disorders.

Scheduling

While ideally you are placing a student into an inclusive environment for all or most of his or her education, there are times when removal from class may be necessary. Work with the classroom teacher so that disruptions are minimal when the student needs to come and go from class. Try to schedule departure and reentry times around natural transitions in the classroom so that they are less noticeable by the other students (such as coming back from lunch, etc.). Further, try to plan for related services to be provided in the natural setting as often as possible to eliminate the need for removal from class. Work with both the classroom teacher and the therapists to find times that work best and to plan ways to implement related service instruction within the typically occurring activities of the general education class.

Selecting Supports

Supports may be anything from copied notes from the board to a paraeducator. The rule of thumb is to select the least intrusive support necessary for the student to be successful. Think independence and normalcy; the other students rarely have an adult sit with them throughout a lesson to help them. Students with ASD will fit in much better with the class if the use of paraprofessionals is kept to a minimum. Ask support staff to help other students as well and to stand away from the student with ASD until assistance is needed. Modifications to the curriculum or the lesson should also not be disrupting or too noticeable to the rest of the class. Discretion is key in helping the student with ASD fit into his or her inclusion class.

Preparing the Classroom Teacher

No matter how willing a general education teacher is to have a student with ASD join his classroom, he or she may need help in making it work. It is helpful if the teacher has some background knowledge of special education and ASD, but if not, the special education teacher should plan to act as a resource for the teacher in everything from planning and implementing instruction to grading. Share resources, model appropriate instruction, assist with modifications and accommodations, and offer suggestions for management and teaching strategies that work well with a particular student. Special educators are sometimes viewed as having a "bag of tricks" that we keep hidden, locked away from the eyes of the general educator. Dispel this myth by being open and forthcoming with any and all suggestions.

Preparing the General Education Students

Many times, teachers do not think of preparing the general classroom peers for the arrival of a student with ASD in the interest of confidentiality. How much and what type of information you share will depend greatly on the grade level of the students and the nature of the disability. For example, in a high school situation, it may not be wise to draw attention to the student with ASD at all, unless the characteristics are disruptive or the student requires specialized equipment or other supports that will be noticeable. In elementary schools, various means of preparing typical peers have been noted. One common way is to have a class meeting, wherein someone (the general education teacher, the special education teacher, a peer who knows the student with ASD, a sibling, or a parent) will speak to the class regarding the student with ASD prior to his or her arrival (Boutot & Bryant, 2005). During such meetings, it is best to minimize those things that the student cannot do, or that make him or her different from the others, and instead emphasize things the student is good at, likes to do, and has interests in, as well as any hobbies, sports, and so on that may be similar to those of other students in the class. Emphasizing how much the students are alike versus how the students are different will promote acceptance of the student with the disability as someone "just like me." Teachers may read a book depicting someone who learns, acts, or moves differently from others (e.g., *Andy and His Yellow Frisbee*, Thompson, 1996) as a way to open discussion about the special needs of the student with ASD. Sometimes it is helpful to open with a discussion of the many ways that all people are alike and different. It is a good idea to make the typical students aware of any special equipment, modifications, communication aids, and so forth that the child with the ASD may bring to class. This will minimize confusion, concern, and curiosity that first day. If the child has some particular behaviors or issues that may draw attention or require special techniques, such as hand flapping or head banging, and so forth, it is best to mention these as well. The students should be encouraged to talk to, play with, and work with the student with ASD, and perhaps some time could be spent on teaching specific skills for doing so. Another possibility is to have one to three students from the inclusion class come into the special education class to meet and work with the student with ASD prior to his or her moving to the general education class. Which students should go will be up to the classroom teacher, but for best promotion of acceptance and friendships, select students whom the others look up to, that is, those who are most popular. This is a particularly good idea at secondary levels, where students move from class to class frequently and having a "class discussion" may not be feasible or appropriate. Select one or two students from each class, preferably a student or two who will share more than one class with the student with ASD, and bring them in as peer tutors before moving your student to the inclusion class. Having a "friend" already in the class will help the student with ASD look and feel more secure and fit in more quickly. When other

students see a child (especially a more popular child) interacting naturally with the student with ASD, they will be more likely to accept him or her as a member of the class with whom they, too, might be friends.

Preparing the Student With ASD

The most important outcome of an inclusive education placement for a child with ASD is success, academically (in terms of Individualized Education Program [IEP] goals and objectives and/or progress toward the general education curriculum) as well as socially. Any skill deficits that may hinder social successes should be addressed prior to the move to general education. For example, if the student has a history of aggressive outbursts that have not been adequately decreased and/or prevented in the self-contained room, it is unlikely they will get better once in the inclusive one. Teaching self-management skills, coping and problem solving skills, social skills, functional and social communication, and self-advocacy will aid in the smooth transition of the student with ASD to the general education setting. The special education teacher can also prepare him or her by simulating a general education classroom environment in the special education classroom. If the general education teacher requires students to raise their hands before speaking, maintain a homework log, and come to class on time, for example, then begin by teaching the student with ASD these same skills and reinforcing their use. The more similar the two environments (special and inclusion classrooms), the less likely the student with ASD will react negatively to the change. Another option is to videotape a general education class for the student with ASD to watch prior to making the move. This will provide him or her opportunities to view expectations as well as provide opportunities for direct instruction of specific skills with typical peers as models. The use of social stories is also a good idea, both as an initial preparation for the transition as well as a daily reminder of expected social behaviors in the inclusion setting. Although this may not be their first general education class placement, there may still be some trepidation when going to a new place. Smoothing this transition will set the student with ASD up for success.

Securing and Maintaining Family Support

Family involvement and communication between home and school are vital in special education. When a student is in a general education setting, communication should also involve the general education teacher. Help to establish written communication on a regular basis. Set up face-to-face meetings prior to the child's placement in the general education class so that the parents and the general education teacher can feel more at ease with each other. Use a communication log or notebook that the inclusion teacher, the special education teacher, and the parents can send back and forth daily or weekly to help maintain communication. The student will feel more a part of the general education classroom if his or her teacher and parents are on the same page and in regular communication.

Conclusion

Everybody needs friends. Positive social relationships with peers are an essential ingredient to a good quality of life, both for children and adults. In order for students with ASD to develop friendships similar to those of their typical peers, they must have opportunities to do so. These opportunities can occur through interactions with typical peers in the community and school. Inclusive classrooms provide opportunities for friendships for children with ASD, just as they do for typical children, with appropriate supports and planning. Parents and professionals are encouraged to educate, enhance, and embrace opportunities for the social inclusion of students with ASD so that they can fit in the social network of their classrooms, community, and greater society.

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