

## **Social Functioning in Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders Throughout Their Lifespan**

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Social functioning is a core deficit in individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders throughout their lifespan. Despite the fact that individuals with social skill deficits are able to acquire social responses, attempts to use these responses in typical environments often do not result in a positive interaction with typically developing peers. The initiated interactions lack the typical familiarity, presentation style, timing and spontaneity, which often render the social attempts misunderstood by the social partner.

Reciprocity or reciprocal peer interactions, and social competence have been offered as terms to describe the critical missing components that have the largest negative impact on interactions for individuals with ASD. Reciprocity has been defined as 'the dance of social interaction, and involves partners working together on a common goal.' (Baltimore Autism Society). Social competence is seen as 'The ability to interact successfully with peers' (Ohio Center for Autism).

Both components require the ability to respond to ever-changing social contexts, environmental and setting variables, spontaneous interactions, and shifting social expectations. The relational character of these social demands, make it especially difficult for individuals with ASD.

Limited comprehension of nonverbal components of social interactions such as facial expressions, gestures etc. is also problematic, making it difficult to sort out essential vs. 'filler' information in social speech, as well as identifying and appropriately reacting to emotions displayed by others. Much research has been conducted to determine the most effective means of teaching, maintaining and generalizing effective social skills. Many have reported success in the initial teaching of skills, however these gains were lost over time, or were not successfully transitioned to day to day situations.

One possible explanation for this is that often the teaching of skills is done in a structured setting such as a social skills group, and focuses on general skill sets for the entire group. Without practice and problem solving within actual day to day environments, maintenance and generalization are not able to be addressed. By individually prioritizing the skills that are required for critical settings and situations that are important to the individual and family, these critical components can be explicitly targeted. It is important that you work with your BCBA to be sure both skill maintenance and generalization is explicitly part of your written plan. Supporting individuals with ASD by careful prioritization of social skill goals, paired with repeated exposure to the social settings that require these goals can be useful in obtaining social success and the ability to form social relationships.

### **What to know before you start:**

- Select skill sets that are central to your high priority settings. What are the specific skills he or she lacks that same age peers use successfully in this setting? If it is important to your child or family to be able to successfully attend movies or family gatherings, or participate in community settings such as playgrounds or sports events, determine which skills need to be acquired or strengthened in those environments and target these as goals.
- For verbal interactions, target a set of age appropriate responses. This will help to avoid a restrictive or repetitive response each time the social situation presents itself. A basic example would be responding to or initiating social greetings. Instead of using the same learned response each time, focus on a variety of responses that are common to peers of that age.

- If you are not sure where to start, observe similar aged peers in the targeted setting. What phrases or non-verbal responses are used? How are they different from the greetings you exchange?
- Most importantly, remember that a person does not need to be indistinguishable from peers to be successful. The more important goal is to help your child achieve the skill level that will allow them to participate more effectively, and have increased acceptance from social groups. This will better enable him/her to form social relationships.

### **Ask your BCBA**

- What is the plan to move your child from his current ability level, to those necessary to achieve your goals? This is often called a task analysis, where the outcome is broken down into small subsets of prerequisite skills. This determines a starting point to build on to meet the goals.
- What level of support will be needed at each level? For example, one frequent approach to teaching a person to be able to tolerate an activity of substantial duration (such as a movie), is to gradually increase the amount of time the child is in the setting, or decrease how often a break to walk around before returning to the setting is needed. This may require many steps before he or she is able to sit through a movie in its entirety.
- What steps will be necessary for these skills be generalized and maintained after acquisition has occurred? Remember that research suggests that many acquired social skills do not maintain post intervention without carefully planning for generalization and maintenance.
- What role will you and your family have in this process?
- What is the time line estimate for seeing progress? This is important, as some plans will require gradual changes that may take longer than you may expect. Being able to anticipate the length of interventions can prevent feeling discouraged if progress is not seen quickly. However, know that this is an estimate only, and your child's specific progress may take more or less time than anticipated.
- Does the plan include fading of supports and generalizing of new skills to the level appropriate for your child, and is this formally included in the plan?

### **Materials you may want to have**

- o This will vary tremendously dependent of the setting and the goals you have selected. A few examples are listed based on the desired outcome.
  - *Increasing the duration of time your child can be involved in the chosen activity.* To support your child you may want to bring an assortment of distraction items that are appropriate in the setting. So that even if he/she is attending to the items provided and not the activity, the resulting behavior enables your family to remain in the setting
  - *Learning a new activity or skill.* This may start by repeatedly exposing your child to the equipment and or basic rules of the activity. Family practice time, to get your child comfortable in the surroundings
  - *Learning to be an active observer.* If you have other children involved in activities, or are a fan of a sport, having your child be able to attend with you can be an important goal. Start by modeling appropriate spectator responses, and encouraging your child to imitate. You can also point out a specific outcome, such as 'when the song ends, we clap'. Or 'When the ball goes into the net, we yell yeah!'

### **Data collection**

- Often, your BCBA will request that you collect data on your child's progress. Work with him or her to determine what is the best way to do so without interfering with the ongoing activity.

- Notify your BCBA if you have difficulty collecting the data, or feel that the data you have collected is not accurate.
- How often will you provide your data to the BCBA? And when will you sit down with your BCBA to interpret the data? Be sure you understand what changes are being made to the plan and why.

**What to expect**

- Changing habits and learning new skills takes time
  - o Throughout the process, expect some ups and downs. Just because your third trip to the movies was more difficult than the last one does not mean you are headed in the wrong direction.
  - o Be aware that others may unintentionally derail your efforts by accepting responses/behaviors that are not consistent with your plan. Although the people sitting in front of you at the movies tell you that they don't mind your child kicking their seat, doesn't mean you can ignore the behavior 'this time'. Consistency is important both for skill building and clarifying expectations for your child.
  - o Your child will need to work hard to achieve these skills, celebrate the small successes on the way.