



# Helping Peers Support Students with Autism

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## Teaching Peers about Autism

Autism education or sensitivity training can occur in a generalized manner, in which students learn about acceptance and sensitivity not related to a particular student at school. It can also be much more specific to the needs of that student and his or her family.

It is very important to communicate with the parents or guardian of the child with autism before any sensitivity training is done. The teacher or school psychologist leading the class discussion should reach out to the parents or guardian of the child with autism to understand what they are comfortable with in terms of disclosure. Some families may be comfortable with general sensitivity training and acknowledgment of their child's strengths and challenges to the class, but not with sharing the autism diagnosis. Other families are more open about their child's diagnosis and are willing to be active participants in the education and sensitivity training. These are personal decisions that each family must make and schools should honor. These decisions can also change over time as the needs of the student with autism may change.

It is also important to keep in mind that some families may not have told their children about their diagnosis yet. Some children may know that they have autism but may not want to share their diagnosis with their classmates. Again, these are individual decisions. The other consideration to discuss in advance is if the student with autism will be present during the sensitivity training. Some families want their children be active participants in the training process, and others might prefer that it's done when the student is out of the classroom.

Many schools have found it helpful to have a parent, caregiver or school representative who knows the student well introduce the student at the beginning of the school year or during a new inclusion opportunity. If the family or team feels that protecting the student's privacy is important, the student may not even be mentioned by name and general sensitivity and acceptance may be all that is addressed. Out of respect for the student, a more specific introduction can also be done when he or she is not in the room. It is important to present the student as a person with unique abilities and similarities (a family, siblings, pets, love of music, favorite foods, video games, movies, etc.), while also sharing some of the challenges and differences the students might notice or need to be aware of, such as sensory needs.

## Informing Peer Families

In addition to addressing peers, it is also important to reach out to their families. Many parents will not have had experience with autism, and may not understand or have the tools they need to appropriately support their children in fostering relationships with children who seem different. Involving the overall school community will build awareness and sensitivity and benefit everyone involved.





Families of peers can be informed through assemblies or Parent Teacher Organizations (sometimes called Home & School Organizations). In some cases, it may be necessary to inform the peers' families more directly within a classroom or grade level.

Some families may prefer to protect their child's privacy (which is their right), while others might be inclined to share information in a letter or meeting about their student's challenges and interests, finding that greater understanding and perspective within the community will reduce fear and improve acceptance.

**Here is a list of resources broken down by age group...**

## Resources for Elementary School Children

### General Sensitivity Training

These books are designed to teach general acceptance and appreciation of differences between individuals and their peers and classmates. Especially when a family wishes to maintain their privacy, sometimes general sensitivity training is enough to teach students to support and include their peers with autism.

**Trevor, Trevor**

*by Diane Twachtman Cullen*

The story of Trevor, a primary school aged child whose problems with social relationships suggest a form of autism. Unfortunately, like so many children with social interaction problems, it is not Trevor's strengths that his classmates notice, but rather his differences. Change comes through the efforts of a caring and sensitive teacher Metaphor, as it is explained in the preface, is a type of storytelling pioneered by Milton H Erickson that concentrates on indirect or symbolic communication in order to transfer the message or meaning of the story in a lasting and powerful manner. [Show More](#) [Show Less](#)

**Wings of Epoh**

*by Gerda Weissman Klein*

Wings of Epoh is a story that teaches acceptance, tolerance and empathy. What unfolds is the gift of friendship, and the joy in helping a person who is misunderstood or who just doesn't fit. The Wings of EPOH is available as both a book and a film.

### Autism Specific Education

These books address autism specifically so that peers can learn what autism is and are better able to understand their classmate's strengths and challenges. They can be used when the family involved is comfortable with disclosing their child's diagnosis with his or her classmates.

**The Autism Acceptance Book**

*by Ellen Sabin*

The Autism Acceptance Book teaches children about autism, further develops their understanding for the people around them, and encourages them to embrace people's differences with respect, compassion and kindness. For ages 6 and up. There is also a teachers' guide that can be [downloaded here](#).





## The Sixth Sense II

by Carol Gray

Provides a lesson plan for promoting understanding and supportive social climates for children with autism spectrum disorders. "Students (peers) will be better equipped to include a classmate with unique behaviors when provided with accurate social information. Using their five senses as a frame of reference, this lesson plan introduces students to their sixth (or social) sense via activities and discussions."

## My Friend with Autism: A Coloring Book for Peers and Siblings

by Beverly Bishop

Written for classmates of spectrum students and the classmates' parents, this kid-friendly book explains in positive ways that children with autism are good at some things, not so good at others - just like everyone else! The narrator (a peer) notes that his friend's senses work "really well" - he can hear sounds no one else can hear; his eyes work so well bright lights can hurt them. In all cases, the differences are described in a kind, understanding manner. There are charming illustrations for readers to color. "Notes for Adults" offer parents more detailed information about the "kid's pages."

## Kids Booklet on Autism

presented by Autism New Jersey

A booklet for siblings and peers, with notes for parents and teachers, too! This resource provides children with lots of helpful information about kids and grown-ups who have autism and includes answers to frequently asked questions from children, explanations about autism, descriptions of feelings, ideas and actions plans.

## How to Be a Friend to Someone with Autism

adapted, Peter Faustino, PhD

- **Take the Initiative to Include Him or Her** - Your friend may desperately want to be included and may not know how to ask. Be specific about what you want him to do.
- **Find Common Interests** - It will be much easier to talk about or share something you both like to do (movies, sports, music, books, TV shows, etc.).
- **Be Persistent and Patient** - Remember that your friend with autism may take more time to respond than other people. It doesn't necessarily mean he or she isn't interested.
- **Communicate Clearly** - Speak at a reasonable speed and volume. It might be helpful to use short sentences. Use gestures, pictures, and facial expressions to help communicate. Speak literally - do not use confusing figures of speech (He may truthfully tell you, "the sky" if you ask "What's up?")
- **Stand Up For Him or Her** - If you see someone teasing or bullying a friend with autism, take a stand and tell the person that it's not cool.
- **Remember Sensory Sensitivity** - Your friend may be very uncomfortable in certain situations or places (crowds, noisy areas, etc.). Ask if he or she is OK. Sometimes your friend may need a break.
- **Give Feedback** - If your friend with autism is doing something inappropriate, it's OK to tell him nicely. Just be sure to also tell him what the right thing to do is because he may not know.
- **Don't Be Afraid** - Your friend is just a kid like you who needs a little help. Accept his or her differences and respect strengths just as you would for any friend.





## Programs that Promote Inclusion and Support

### Perfect Pals

Perfect Pals is a program started by the Autism Speaks Nantucket Resource Center in collaboration with the Nantucket School District to provide students with and without disabilities with to participate in after-school recreational activities.

### Light It Up Blue

Autism Awareness Month (April) offers many opportunities for schools to focus on teaching about autism and its impact on students and their families. The Autism Speaks Light it Up Blue campaign provides ideas for preschools, elementary schools, middle schools, high schools, colleges and universities to Light It Up Blue!

## Resources for Middle School and High School Students

### Books and Resources

#### What's Up With Nick?

*From the Organization for Autism Research*

A story about Nick, a new kid in school with autism. This accordion booklet includes sections "Meeting a Kid with Autism", "Hanging Out With Kids That Have Autism", "Things to Remember About Autism" and more!

#### A Buffet of Sensory Interventions: Solutions for Middle and High School Students With Autism Spectrum Disorders

*by Susan Culp*

This book offers a smorgasbord of sensory-based interventions for use by educators, occupational therapists and parents. This practical and well-researched tool is unique by focusing on middle and high school students, whose sensory needs are often overlooked. In suggesting interventions for this age group, the author emphasizes the importance of fostering independence, self-advocacy and self-regulation as a way to for teens with autism spectrum disorders to take ownership of their sensory needs as they transition into adulthood.

#### How to Talk to an Autistic Kid

*by Daniel Stefanski (an autistic kid)*

Kids with autism have a hard time communicating, which can be frustrating for autistic kids and for their peers. In this intimate yet practical book, author Daniel Stefanski, a fourteen-year-old boy with autism, helps readers understand why autistic kids act the way they do and offers specific suggestions on how to get along with them. Written by an autistic kid for non-autistic kids, it provides personal stories, knowledgeable explanations, and supportive advice—all in Daniel's unique and charming voice and accompanied by lively illustrations.

#### Social Skills Picture Book for High School and Beyond

*by Jed Baker*

Winner of an iParenting Media Award, this picture book appeals to the visual strengths of students on the autism spectrum, with color photos of students demonstrating various social skills in the correct (and sometimes incorrect) way. The skills depicted are meant to be read, role-played, corrected when necessary, role-played some more and, finally, to be practiced by the student in real-life social situations.





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## Preparing for Life: The Complete Guide for Transitioning to Adulthood for Those with Autism and Asperger's Syndrome

by *Jed Baker*

Award-winning author and counselor Dr. Jed Baker draws from his experience working with young adults on the spectrum to put together a thorough resource for students with ASD preparing for life after high school. This comprehensive handbook offers "life skills training" on subjects that young adults need to know about, such as nonverbal cues, body language, dealing with anger, frustration and anxiety, as well as building and maintaining friendships and intimate relationships.

## The Social Success Workbook for Teens: Skill-Building Activities for Teens with Nonverbal Learning Disorder, Asperger's Disorder, and Other Social-Skill Problems

by *Barbara Copper and Nancy Widdows*

This workbook includes forty activities teens can do to recognize and use their unique strengths, understand the unspoken rules behind how people relate to each other, and improve their social skills. After completing the activities in this workbook, teens will discover that they can get along with others and build friendships despite the challenges they face. All they need is the confidence to be themselves while still keeping the feelings of others in mind.

## Programs to Support Peer Relationships for Middle and High School

### Circle of Friends

The Circle of Friends program consists of a trained group of peer mentors who serve as good social role models and interact with a specific student on a consistent basis. Activities can include teaching scripts and how to 'chat' (using topic lists or boxes), noncompetitive games, book clubs, extracurricular activities and more.

### Student Clubs for Autism Speaks (SCAS)

Student Clubs for Autism Speaks create the opportunity for students to engage and actively participate in positively affecting the lives of people with autism. Through education, awareness, friendship and fundraising, SCAS includes students at the middle school, high school and college level.

### Perfect Pals

Perfect Pals is a program started by the Autism Speaks Nantucket Resource Center in collaboration with the Nantucket School District to provide students with and without disabilities with to participate in after-school recreational activities.

### Best Buddies

Best Buddies® is a nonprofit organization dedicated to establishing a global volunteer movement that creates opportunities for one-to-one friendships, integrated employment and leadership development for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Best Buddies' eight formal programs – Best Buddies Middle Schools, High Schools, Colleges, Citizens, e-Buddies, Jobs, Ambassadors, and Promoters – positively impact nearly 700,000 individuals with and without disabilities worldwide.



