

Supporting Tweens and Teens with Communication and Interaction Difficulties to Develop Healthy Relationships



Introduction

Developing healthy relationships can be a struggle for any tween or teen, but particularly hard for those that have communication and interaction difficulties. This can become even more apparent when students join secondary school and meet a different peer group.

This booklet has been designed to provide some general advice and practical strategies to support students to develop healthy relationships. However, it by no means covers everything, and the most important strategy in this area, is to ensure that students have a **trusted adult** that they can go to for support.

The key areas this booklet will focus on are:

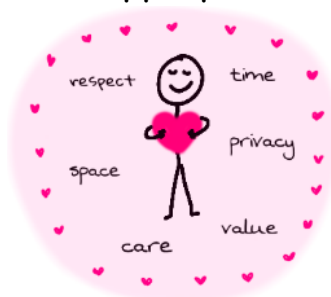
- Developing conversational skills



- Resolving conflict



- Being aware of appropriate social boundaries



Developing Conversational Skills

Often students with communication and interaction difficulties find reciprocal conversation difficult, e.g., they may struggle to start a conversation or only want to talk about a particular topic.

Some students may benefit from a social group where adults specifically teach conversation skills. Most conversations focus on shared interests, so it is important that the adults leading the group spend time helping students to find out about each other's shared interests in initial sessions. Following sessions should then focus on explicitly teaching skills to enable conversations to develop and flow.

It is recommended that group sessions aimed at developing conversational skills should:

- Always start with a fun warm up activity (e.g., a fun game or quiz) to encourage the students to feel relaxed and engage with activities.
- Include adult modelling and/or video clips of the specific skills being taught (video clips are highly recommended and can include appropriate films, TV programmes, animations, soaps etc. Or specific clips aimed at teaching social skills, such as those provided by <https://everydayspeech.com>)
- Provide opportunities for students to practise their new skills, e.g., through role play or by going away and trying them out.

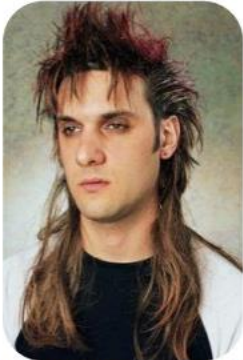

Remember for students with social communication difficulties, **modelling is essential** as it allows students to learn through watching the skills being used.

It is important to provide opportunities for role play, but never pressure students into taking part in role play, as if they are too uncomfortable this will put them off using the skills they have learnt, in real life situations.

Weekly Social Group Programme to Develop Conversational Skills:

Session 1: Discover shared interests.	This could be done by simply getting the students to write down their interests and then discussing any common interests in the group, or by putting categories on the board and getting the students to put their name underneath if the category is an interest for them, e.g., video games, animals, TV programmes, etc. Other ways of finding out shared interests are to teach the students to ask specific questions of each other, e.g. "What is your favourite...?" Or "What did you do last...?"
Session 2: Teach topic- starter questions.	Students should learn that topic-starter questions should be based on their friend's interests and ideally about recent events/activities. Use what the students have learnt in the previous session about shared interests to ask related questions, e.g., What did you learn at Judo last night? What good films have you seen recently? What is it you like about playing 'Fortnite'? etc. You want students to realise that topic-starter questions can be used anytime you are talking to a friend and that good conversations include relevant topic-starter questions.
Session 3: Teach how to make comments.	Students should learn how to make appropriate comments when their friend says or does something, and that by making a comment they show that they are interested and have listened. Teach that comments must be relevant and match the information, e.g. If a student says, "I love eating pizza", another student might comment, "Me too, my favourite is pepperoni." Teach that comments should also match the overall tone of information, e.g., sad comments for sad information and happier comments for happy information. For example, a student who says, "My sister is not well" might receive the comment, "I hope she feels better soon," and a student who says, "I came first in my swimming race last night," might receive the comment, "Wow! That's great!"

<p>Session 4: Teach how to make follow up questions and comments.</p>	<p>Model and practise the skills learnt. Watch lots of examples of conversations on video clips and discuss what follow up questions and comments were used. Make sure students continue to be aware of following others' topics as well as their own special interests.</p>
<p>Session 5: Teach how to change topics.</p>	<p>These three rules are useful to teach here:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students should be part of the conversation before they change the topic. 2. Students should try to choose a topic that they know will interest their friend too. 3. Students should only change the topic in an appropriate gap. <p>Model these rules to students. Watch lots of examples of conversations on video clips and discuss how the rules are followed.</p>
<p>Session 6: Teach how to use eyes and body to communicate.</p>	<p>Students may not be aware that their body language communicates information to their friends. Explain that in our culture, turning away while someone is talking is considered rude. We need to use our bodies to show we are interested in our friends. Demonstrate different body orientations and explain what they communicate. Also demonstrate different levels of eye contact and what these communicate - However it is important to note that some autistic students will find eye contact exceptionally difficult, so a stronger focus on body orientation is better for these students.</p>
<p>Session 7: Teach how to filter thoughts/comments before making them.</p>	<p>All children need to learn to filter what they are thinking to avoid making rude or awkward comments. Students with social communication difficulties often need extra support in learning this skill. Teach students that it is okay to have negative thoughts, but we often need to filter what we say. Model to students how saying whatever comes into your head can lead to hurting other people's feelings - A good video clip to demonstrate this is available at:</p> <p>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NLM2BuW73m4</p>

	<p>Giving students examples of social scenarios can encourage discussion and help students to decide whether they should just think something or say it.</p> <div data-bbox="608 371 1297 864" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin: 10px 0;"> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>Your brother asks if you like his new haircut. You think his hair looks awful.</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>A classmate gives a wrong answer in class. You think he is stupid.</p> </div> </div> </div> <p>Social scenario cards are a great resource to support - Should you think it or say it?</p>
<p>Session 8: Teach how to begin and end a conversation.</p>	<p>Children with social communication difficulties sometimes launch into a conversation about their special interest without any greetings or conversation warm-ups. Similarly, they may walk away when they are finished talking without ending the conversation appropriately. Teach students how to begin a conversation by using appropriate greetings and warm-ups, e.g., "Hi. How are you?" Teach students to end a conversation by making sure they don't appear rude by walking off when someone is still talking and explaining that depending on the social situation we may need to say, "Goodbye" or "See you later" to fully end a conversation.</p>
<p>Sessions 9/10: Practice skills.</p>	<p>Recap and practise skills learnt. It is a good idea to encourage students to practise their skills in a variety of different social situations.</p>

(Some ideas adapted from Toole, 2016)

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Conversation Flashcards:

You go to the library to study. You see some kids from your class. Role play how you would join their conversation.



Points to consider:

- Walk up to the group, make eye contact and smile, and don't interrupt!
- Listen closely to identify what they are talking about.
- Maintain appropriate personal space.
- Use a nice, friendly, quiet voice.
- Try to add to the conversation by talking about the class or current class project
- Take turns talking and listening with others.
- Talk about the books, articles, etc. you found that relate to the current class project.

In the lunch room, you see some friends talking together. You want to join the conversation. Demonstrate how you would do that.



Points to consider:

- Walk up to the group, make eye contact and smile, and don't interrupt!
- Listen closely to identify what they are talking about.
- Maintain appropriate personal space.
- Use a nice, friendly voice.
- Try to add to the conversation by relating a common experience you have had.
- Ask questions (not more than 2) about the conversation topic.
- Take turns talking and listening with others.

You are dropped off at the bowling alley to meet a group of friends. After arriving you see your friends you walk up and greet them. Role play ways you could join the conversation.



Points to consider:

- Walk over and greet your friends, make eye contact and smile, and don't interrupt!
- Maintain appropriate personal space.
- A louder than inside voice may be necessary due to the noise level in the bowling alley.
- Listen to identify the topic. Take turns talking. Remember to stay on topic.
- Ask about the bowling activity – team members, number of games, etc.
- Show support and encourage your team mates and friends.

(Resource sample from: abcteach.com (2013))

Resolving Conflict

Being a tween or teen can be stressful time, particularly when students have arguments with their peers. Often students with social communication difficulties struggle to resolve conflict with their peers, as they can struggle more with emotional regulation, and sometimes find it hard to understand the social perspective of others (just as a neurotypical student may struggle to understand an autistic perspective!).

As with any student, when dealing with a student with social communication difficulties immediately after they have been in an argument, they will need time to calm down and process how they are feeling. Then later, strategies and resources that develop the understanding of the perspective of others and unable students to see their available choices, can be useful to support conflict resolution. Some of these strategies/resources are listed below:

Comic Strip Conversations

Comic strip conversations use simple drawings to visually represent a social situation or conversation that a student has experienced. This supports the student to explore their thoughts and feelings about the situation and enables the adult to gain an insight into how the student perceives the situation.

Comic strip conversations can show:

- What was said during the conversation
- How students might have been feeling
- What students' intentions might have been

The use of comic strip conversations supports students to understand more about the way they, and others communicate and why a misunderstanding may have occurred. They are also a helpful tool for supporting students to solve social problems and consider new or different ways of communicating or approaching a situation.

Comic strip conversations provide visual representations of the different levels of communication that take place in a conversation. This enables some of the abstract elements of social communication (for example recognising the perspective of others) to be made more concrete and therefore easier to understand.

An example of a comic strip conversation:



Steps for creating a comic strip conversation:

- Draw who was involved, what was happening and use speech bubbles to record what was said.
- Use thought bubbles to identify how people were feeling during the interaction. The student may require support to consider this.
- Guide the student throughout the drawing process by asking questions to help them consider the event.
- Summarise the situation or event using the drawings as a guide.
- Consider how any problems or concerns that have been identified could be addressed. This could involve drawing out other possible scenarios and exploring the possible outcomes.
- Develop an action plan for similar situations in the future.

(Information adapted from Kent Educational Psychology Service, 2021)

SOCCSS

The SOCCSS (Situation-Options-Consequences-Choices-Strategies-Simulation) technique helps a student to reflect on a problem, situation, or conflict, determine alternative options and strategies, recognise consequences, consider the perspective of others, and choose an appropriate course of action.

- **Situation:** Who, what, when, where, why
- **Options:** Brainstorm possible options to the situation
- **Consequences:** List a possible consequence to each brainstorm option
- **Choices:** Choose best option after prioritising in a list
- **Strategies:** Develop a plan using the option in case the situation occurs again
- **Simulation:** Practice the plan, e.g., role play

An example of SOCCSS:

- **Situation:** Liam wanted me to play football with him at break time. I got mad because I wanted to show him a new game on my phone.
- **Options I could have taken:**
 - (a) I could have tried to make Liam look at the new game on my phone.
(This is what I did)
 - (b) I could have played football with Liam.
 - (c) I could have played on my phone and Liam could have played football by himself.
 - (d) We could have played football for a while and then Liam could have looked at my new game.
- **Consequences:**
 - (a) **Liam didn't like me making him do something he didn't want to do, and this made me cross and caused an argument.**
 - (b) I wouldn't have liked playing football all break time.
 - (c) We would have both been alone.
 - (d) We would have both got to do some of what we wanted to do.

- **Choices:** Prioritising my choices now I would choose (d), (c), (b) and then (a), so I would choose (d) from now on.
- **Strategies:** When I am with a friend, I need to do some of what we each want to do even if what my friend wants to do isn't a lot of fun for me.
- **Simulation:** I can role play this at school. I can practise with Mum and Dad at home, e.g., Mum and dad give me choices of things to do with them, even though some aren't my favourites, and then they do something I like to do too.

Another example using a template:

(See: https://www.ocali.org/project/resource_gallery_of_interventions/page/soccss)

SOCSS Worksheet - Arrival to School Example

Situation		
Who: Sam and the teacher		
When: Entering the classroom from the bus		
What: Sam refused to take off his jacket or the hood off his head. He also refused to explain why he wanted to keep the jacket on		
Why: Sam was embarrassed-"bad hair day." he was angry because the children on the bus made fun of his hair style.		
Where: Classroom		
Desired Outcome:		
Options	Consequences	Choices
1. Keep the jacket on – refuse to talk	Punishment for not answering or removing jacket	3
2. Take the jacket off when asked	More teasing by the other kids	4
3. Explain to the teacher/principal	Teacher tells Sam he can wet his hair; no punishment	1
4. Ask to go wet his hair, remove jacket and go back to class ; no explanation	Teacher might still be angry; possible punishment	2
Strategy: Action Plan (choose the option)		
Option #3 – Talk to the teacher in private. Apologize for "clamming up" and explain how he was feeling (angry and embarrassed). Explain that sometimes when he's angry he cannot talk; he needs to be aware of this and work through it. He will try to in the future.		
Simulation		Select One
1. Find a quiet place, sit back and imagine how your Situation would work (or not work) based on the various Options and Consequences.		
2. Talk with peer, staff, or an other person about your plan of action.		
3. Write down on paper what may happen in your Situation based on your Options and Consequences.		
4. Practice your Options with one or more people using behavior rehearsal. Start simple and easy. Only make it difficult to test the learning.		Role-play with the social worker and another adult
Simulation Outcomes		
Sam watched the social worker and speech pathologist role-play Option #3. Sam was able to role-play the Situation using Option #3 with the social worker and then with the speech pathologist.		
Follow-Up		
1. Sam explained to the teacher and was allowed to wet his hair down. No punishment given. 2. Use SOCCSS in future sessions on other Situations where Sam controlled his anger or did not.		

Adapted from Roosa, 1995

Other resources/strategies to teach conflict resolution:

Remember for students with social communication difficulties, **modelling is essential** as it allows students to learn through watching the skills being used. Therefore, adult modelling and/or video clips of the specific skills being taught is highly recommended.



Role play is also useful but only if students are happy to take part.

Conflict scenario cards are also useful to encourage discussion and highlight the appropriate choices to avoid conflict.

(Sample resource from: https://www.acealabama.org/uploads/9/5/5/2/95521332/dealing_with_disagreements.pdf)

<p>You set your tray down on a table in the cafeteria. A classmate at the table says, "You can't sit there. I'm saving that seat for someone else."</p>	<p>Another student cuts in front of you while you are waiting at a water fountain. When you tell the student to go to the end of the line, the person ignores you.</p>
<p>A classmate asks to copy your homework. When you say no, the classmate calls you a mean name.</p>	<p>You loaned your favorite pen to a friend. When you ask for it back, the friend tells you that she lost it.</p>
<p>Your friend who always plays with you on the playground is playing with someone else.</p>	<p>The student who sits next to you keeps trying to talk to you during a lesson. You want to pay attention, but this student is making that almost impossible.</p>
<p>A classmate accidentally spills water on your art project.</p>	<p>You catch a classmate looking in your backpack without your permission.</p>

Being Aware of Appropriate Social Boundaries

Often students with communication and interaction difficulties struggle to interpret appropriate social boundaries. Students may have to be explicitly taught about issues of personal space and consent.

Personal Space

A good way of teaching personal space is that it is like an imaginary bubble that surrounds you when you are interacting with someone.



Personal Space

Teach students that if they stand too close to another person, they may pop the imaginary bubble, which means they may make the person feel uncomfortable in the interaction. Teach students to look for cues from the person they are interacting with and mirror their use of personal space, e.g. If someone takes a small step closer this could be a sign that they are eager to interact, so if the student is comfortable, they may also move slightly nearer. Similarly, if someone leans back it may be a signal that the person needs more space, etc.

(Information adapted from: Sterling, 2020)

Social stories can be a useful resource to explain personal space, but it is important to make sure that these are age appropriate for tweens and teens.

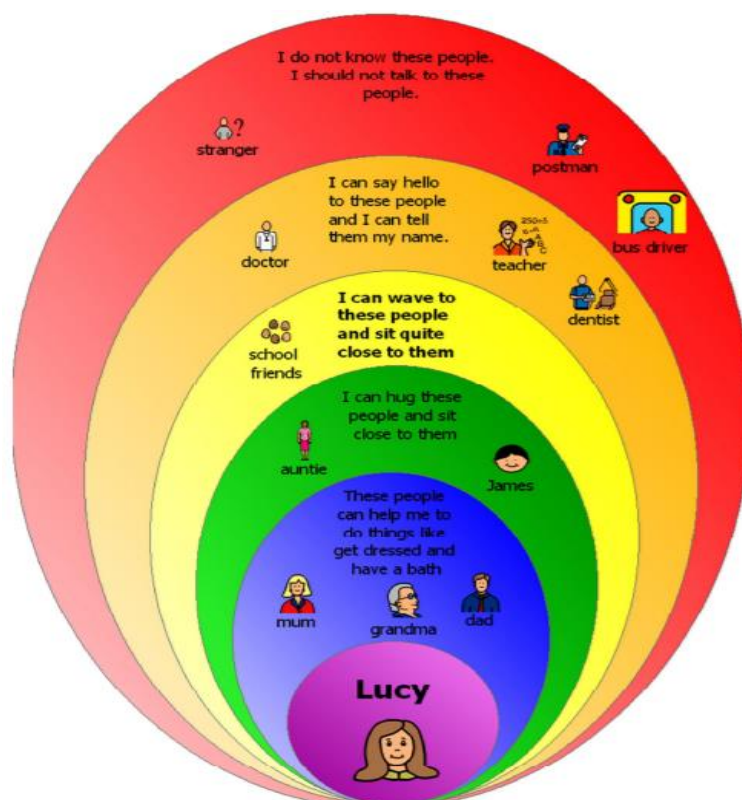
Levels of appropriate intimacy also link to personal space.

Intimacy Circles

Intimacy circles are a useful visual resource, that:

- Can be used to help teach social rules and to form positive relationships.
- Can be used to help individuals understand how to modify their behaviour depending on the person and context - for example you can hug people in the blue and green circle, but you should not hug anyone outside of that.
- Can help to teach individuals social boundaries and how to be safe in the community - for example you can use it to teach who you can talk to and who not to talk to.
- Can be used in a variety of different ways such as teaching how close you can stand next to somebody, who you are allowed to touch and who can touch you, and who you can give personal information to (name and address etc.).

An example of an intimacy circle is below:



(Information adapted from: <https://autismwestmidlands.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/visual-resources-intimacy-circle.pdf>)

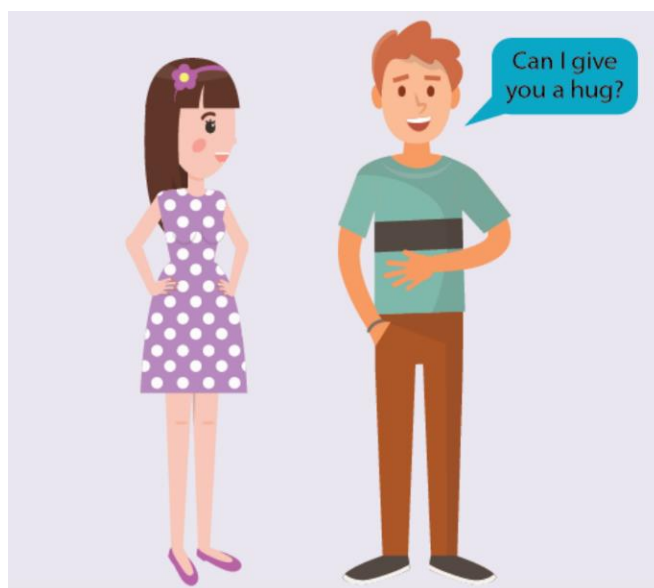
Consent

It is important that as children develop to tweens and teens, they become more aware of the issue of consent.

Communication, respect, and honesty are the building blocks of healthy relationships, and consent is about all those things.

Teaching students about consent can help reduce sexual coercion, harassment, and even assault. When we teach students about consent, we help them learn how to express what they want and don't want. We give them tools to express their limits. We teach them that they deserve to be treated in a respectful way. Teaching consent also means teaching students that it's just as important to respect others' limits and wishes. We teach them that their friends have a right to say "no" and "yes" and have that be respected.

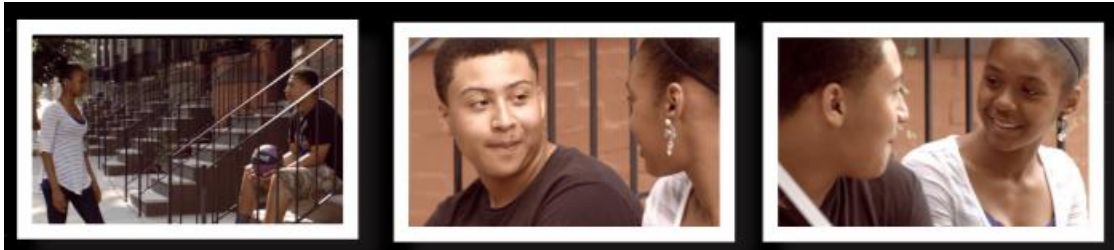
Age-appropriate videos and social stories are both highly useful to teach students with communication and interaction difficulties about consent.



Ensuring that particularly vulnerable students have access to a trusted adult to talk to is essential.

Consent Activity

The 'Ask. Listen. Respect,' video (www.teachconsent.org) is a very short video that can be used to spark conversations with students about respectful relationships, the importance of consent, and how teens can ask for and give consent in their friendships and dating relationships.



Possible conversation starters after watching the video:

- "This video is about consent. What does 'consent' mean to you?"
- "Can you spot 2 or 3 examples in the video for how each person asked for consent?"
- Here are the examples of asking for consent in the video:
 - Girl: "Can I come over?"
 - Boy's response: "Sure"
 - Boy: "Want to shoot some hoops?"
 - Girl's response: "Um no, not really."
 - Girl: "Do you want to play [this video game]?"
 - Boy's response: "Yeah"
 - Girl: "Hey, do you want to go see a movie?"
 - Boy's response: "Nah..."
 - Boy: "You want to kiss?" Girl's response: (smiles) "Yeah!"
- When did the girl/boy not give consent?
- How did each person respond when the other said "no"?
- In the video, the teens ask direct questions to see what the other person wants to do. How do you ask for consent with your friends?

(Information adapted from: <http://www.teachconsent.org>)

When discussing social boundaries with tweens and teens, interactions that occur on social media should also be included. Explicitly teach safe social media use:

Safe Social Media Use

Online Persona:

- Make sure students understand that there is a record of everything they post online.
- Encourage students to check with a trusted adult if they are unsure whether something should be posted online.
- Encourage students to think carefully before commenting on others' profiles and ensure that they are aware that their comments will be visible to others.
- Encourage students to make sure their account is private. On most social media networks, you can go to settings and find the privacy page.

Reacting to different Opinions

- Explain to students that certain comments might trigger certain feelings, but they should try to avoid overreacting, as their ideas and opinions might change one day, and they may regret that there is a permanent record of their thoughts.

Oversharing

- While it is nice to post an occasional picture or update on social media, encourage students not to over-post.
- Some important questions to ask students before sharing online are:
 - Is there a chance you would change your mind about this post in a few days?
 - Would your post upset others even if you find it funny?
 - Would you show this post to your parents and teachers?
 - How would you feel if someone at school asked you about your post?
- Teach students to **NEVER** share personal information online, e.g., phone number, address, etc.
- Teach students that they should **NEVER** agree to meet someone new online and they should discuss any requests to do so with a trusted adult.

(Information adapted from: Sterling, 2020)

References

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Sterling, L. (2020). *The social survival guide for teens on the autism spectrum: How to make friends and navigate your emotions*. California: Rockridge Press.

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