

# COMPASS Information Series: Teaching Social Interaction and Play within a Peer Group

Depending on the age and skill of the child with autism, a peer group of two, the child with autism and another, or a peer group of three or more can be highly successful for teaching skills that many other children just pick up along the way. Children with autism are usually better at interacting with adults or older children since they are willing and able to carry more of the interaction burden and are more predictable. Peer groups that are carefully planned can help children with autism learn interaction skills and feel supported. These groups have to be structured for the child with autism to be successful. Merely being provided with the opportunity to be with sociable peers seldom is enough for children with autism to learn to successfully interact.

## Who are the peers?

Peers are usually close to the same age as the child with autism so they are models, but not “teachers”. Peers need to be able to follow directions and instructions. Peers who are outgoing, cooperative, persistent, fairly sure of themselves, tolerant of differences, and socially skilled are the easiest to include. Peers are facilitators and buddies to the child with autism. Peers need to be readily available and consistently present.

What makes this role difficult is that children with autism often don’t respond to social bids like other children. Peers may feel ignored, not liked, or bored by the attempts. On-going feedback and support from adults are necessary for peers to succeed. They must succeed and like the activity to stay involved. You might need to train several peers even though only one at a time will interact with the child with autism so there is always a peer available and you are striving for more than one at a time eventually.

## What activities are most successful?

Regardless of the age of the children, activities that have a degree of structure and create a need to cooperate are most successful in promoting and teaching interaction. Activities must be fun in order to be considered play. Therefore, the interests of the children involved is important to consider. Cooperative activities where the children are working together towards a common goal and where everyone is to be involved are preferred. These emphasize child interaction and proximity rather than teacher direction. Some ideas include:

*Large floor puzzles:* Peer is shown how to hand a piece to the child with autism and even show him where to put it. Peer is shown how to direct the child’s attention to where he is putting a piece.

*Painting a large box:* Each child can have a paintbrush and two can be on one side sharing a jar of paint.

*Pulling and pushing activities:* Use a wagon where turns are taken doing each. Playground equipment and balls can lend themselves to these activities, if structured.

*Running and following the leader activities:* Playing follow the leader especially through a structured obstacle course encourages imitation, turn-taking and watching others.

*Arts and crafts activities:* Materials are shared and there are models to follow, and children must be in close proximity.

*Cooking activities:* Each child can contribute towards the end.

*Drama/playacting:* For many children with autism this is a solitary thing they might do, especially by imitating something they have seen on a videotape. To include cooperation and turn-taking to get to a common end will require careful planning.

*Sand and water play:* This may work if there is structure provided through the objects included.

*Structured games:* Simple games that the children know how to play such as lotto or Candyland can be used. In order for these not to be completely adult centered and non-competitive the goal will have to be defined clearly.

*Music and movement:* Many children with autism enjoy music, but to make this interactive imitation, turn-taking, and structure have to be added.

*Helping with daily chores:* Setting the table, cleaning up the floor, gathering needed materials, or distributing materials can be done in a cooperative way that encourages each child helping the other. Being able to see that getting the task done together or cooperating has a good outcome helps. We set the table together so we can have a snack. Even having two leaders in line might work!

*Gaining a reward together:* This is a way to engage children in a more teacher directed activity where they become involved with caring what the other child is doing. If this is a work-type task, the reward can be given when there are no more chips on the table. A chip is given each time a child takes a turn, or helps another, or initiates an interaction with another child, or whatever the object of the lesson.

*Offering Choice:* Choice encourages children to participate and make decisions. It can also begin to help them understand that other people have things they like to do that are different from the person with autism. Turn-taking, sharing, even waiting can be introduced this way.

### **Structure of Peer Group**

*Where?* Clearly defined boundaries that help keep the children in close proximity and on-task are helpful. A large area outside or in the gym would have to be further defined. Tape, furniture, rugs, and play equipment can define space.

*When and How long?* The group should meet often enough that the children begin to feel comfortable with each other as well as the routine and structure. If the group is meeting within a school or preschool setting about 20 minutes three times a week might work well. If possible, even 5 days a week would establish a routine faster. However, if parents are doing this at home, even once a week for 30 minutes will help. Most young children need a variety of activities even within a short time. If summer play groups are being planned you can strive for much longer periods of time, realizing that the structured interaction component will only be part of that time.

### **Peer Training and Feedback**

*Explanation:* Meet with the peer or peers. Explain the purpose of the group to the peers. This might be stated as helping children who don't know how to play as well as they do learn to play. The peers should be informed that their buddies may not be able to say what they want or how they feel and that they might use other ways to tell people what they want. In addition, peers need information about common behaviors the child with autism might engage in and how to respond to these. Peers might be given pictures of the child and information about things their buddy likes or dislikes and some skills their buddy has. It is not necessary to label the child with autism, unless this has been agreed upon by parents and considered to be helpful. Questions the peers ask should be answered honestly and openly.

You may be training several peers to interact with one child as a play group, or you may be training several peers to interact with several children with autism. Each peer or group of peers should be assigned to one buddy at the beginning so that it is clear who has responsibility that day. These

assignments may stay the same for several weeks or months or may change, but trying to match children and encourage getting to know each other is often useful. However, sometimes certain children just don't get along well or it is important for the child with autism to be more flexible and generalize skills.

### ***Skills to be practiced by the peers***

One or more of these might be the focus of several group sessions. Depending on the peers and the assessment of the child with autism some of these may need to be modified to encourage the child with autism to practice the skills that have been targeted.

*Initiating:* Peers are often very good at coming up with ways to initiate play when asked for strategies to get the buddy to play. If the peers do not identify specific strategies then the trainers should provide them. These might include: imitating the buddy's actions, handing something to the buddy, inviting the buddy to join through a gesture or words, moving in close to the buddy and playing alongside for awhile then showing him/her a toy, or playing with what your buddy is playing with.

*Responding:* Appropriate responses to a buddy's initiation would include: smiling, saying something like "play with me", handing something to the buddy, accepting things that are offered, and following suggestions of the buddy just by being close and doing what he is doing. Peers may need some help to know when their buddy is initiating an interaction with them.

*Imitating:* Steps to encourage imitation could include: (1) showing a buddy a toy and making sure your buddy has a toy just like you do, (2) doing something over and over with the toy so your buddy can watch, (3) telling your buddy what you are doing or making the same sound over and over, (4) paying attention to what the buddy is doing and smiling at him, and (5) do this with actions too like making a sound or doing something with your body.

*Turn-taking:* Peers should know that this is difficult for their buddies. Some activities lend themselves to turn-taking better than others. For example, children take turns beating a large drum with one pair of drumsticks and hand the sticks to their buddy then put out their hands for them back. Another example would be kicking one ball at a target while one child kicks and the other gets it and throws it back. A signal for the turn to change can be established. Giving your buddy a place at the table or offering a toy when you are finished are ways to take turns with your buddy.

*Non-verbal communication:* Peers need to be shown nonverbal ways to initiate and play with their buddy because the language barrier may impede their verbal attempts. Discuss that the buddy learns best by watching and touching, guiding, handing, moving, and doing something over and over. These are ways to help your buddy understand and know what to do. Peers may need to be told that their buddy may not respond well to being touched by others to initiate play or interactions..

*Complimenting:* Smiling; saying you like something your buddy is doing, is playing with, or is wearing; patting an arm or shoulder if your buddy likes that; and saying and signing wow, great, or hi five are good ways to let your buddy know you like him or her.

### ***Teaching Skills to Peers***

Some strategies that work with peers are included in the following discussion. Peers are often innovative and full of ideas about how to teach skills, what skills the child needs to learn, what that really looks like in a peer group, and the needs of the child with autism. Establishing good rapport and dialogue with them is extremely helpful.

*Role-playing:* Know what peer skill is being emphasized and then demonstrate with adults how to use this skill to interact with a buddy. Set up a play situation and then demonstrate how to use this skill. Because children with autism may ignore the peer, push the peer away, or run away trainers can demonstrate ways the peer might deal with these events. Practice what you know the buddies are most

likely to do. After two trainers demonstrate the role playing, ask the buddies to role play with a trainer, then ask the peers to role play with each other. Discuss what is happening and ideas for developing the interactions you hope to have.

*Meeting and Planning:* Before the beginning of each group, trainers should meet with the peers to remind them that their job is to play with their buddy. This is the time to pair the peer with a buddy if this hasn't been done. If there are several pairs it is best to have the ratio 1- 1. If there is a more structured group there might be more than one peer for each buddy. Review the strategies they practiced in role playing and remind them to keep trying. They need to know that if their buddy doesn't play with them at first they can back off, then try again, and that this is not because their buddy doesn't like them. New strategies can be introduced at this time.

*Trainer Facilitation:* During each play group, the trainer functions as a facilitator. The trainer should refrain as much as possible from becoming involved in the children's play activities. If the peer is having difficulties, the trainer can provide suggestions to the peer. The trainer may need to prompt peers to initiate and maintain play with the buddy. The trainer can also provide encouragement and verbal reinforcement to peers when they are working hard even if their buddy is not responding.

*Feedback after group:* After each play session, trainers need to meet with the peers to give and receive feedback. Trainers can give specific examples of times that the peers were successfully interacting with their buddies. Peers can share effective and ineffective ways of initiating and playing with their buddies. If the child with autism is working on a particular skill, feedback should also be given individually to the child. Videotape can be used for feedback to emphasize positives or to review problems to figure out what could have been done differently. Even young children want feedback.

*Motivation:* Hopefully the activities are fun and rewarding in themselves. However, sometimes peers need external reinforcements to understand what they are to be doing, to keep trying, and for assurance. One system that could be used is charting initiations and positive interactions by the peers. Each time a peer is seen initiating with their buddy or using a learned or innovative positive strategy, he would receive a check or star. After the play group the marks can be reviewed for why they were given and all the peers given a reward. If such a system is implemented the peers need to have a clear understanding about what it takes to receive a mark. One problem with using such an external system is that sometimes competition develops among peers and cooperation is really the goal. Hopefully, the activities, having fun, and being positive and cooperative can be reward enough.

### **Assessing and Training the Child with Autism**

Each child's social skills need to be assessed across settings and with peers. This can be done informally, through videotape, with checklists, and in more formal ways. Specific skills need to be identified for the play group and objectives established. The child's likes, dislikes, learning style, special needs, communication skills, motor skills, and all other relevant information need to be gathered. Some skills might be practiced ahead of time or simultaneously with an adult. Some of these might be waiting, responding, imitating, and turn-taking. These can be worked on across settings and people and in a variety of situations.

### **Teaching Supports**

*Visual Supports:* These include pictures, pictures with words, words, objects, and demonstrations. Children with autism and many young children do much better with information that does not disappear and is quite neutral. Use visual schedules that sequence the activities of the group. Give demonstrations of the activities. Show the children where they are to be and what to do. Constantly pair words with a visual.

*Signals:* Establish signals which let the children know when it is time to transition such as clean up, sit down, or go to another room. This signal should account for the sensory needs of the children.

*Structure and routine:* Establish the routine of the group and the structure around the group early on and only modify as needed. Introduce new activities and play materials within this structure each time.

*Flexibility:* Remember that this is fun. If something isn't working try something else. If children are too caught up with rules, relax some. If the interest of the group can't stay with an activity very long have more choices of activities.

*Cooperative:* Emphasize cooperation rather than competition.

*Positive:* When demonstrating a way to do something, refrain from using don't and no very often. Encourage the children to play using positives and reward for these.

### **Summary**

The purpose of the play group is to enhance the social interaction and play skills of the children with autism with their peers. Peers will and should gain skills too. Most of the skills that will be taught and reinforced the peers already possess, but they may not have been highlighted for them. Teaching them to be facilitators for children with autism only helps them build positive social skills as well. Skills that the children with autism learn to use in the play groups can be and will be generalized when others know how to support them in their efforts. Having a supportive group of peers who know and interact with you in your community and school is a great asset for children with autism and their families.

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