An Introduction to Building Social Skills in Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Audrey Blakeley-Smith, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Dept. of Psychiatry
JFK Partners
University of Colorado SOM
Audrey.blakeleysmith@ucdenver.edu

Developmental Trajectory of Social Skills

- Social and behavioral symptoms tend to improve with some consistency in children and adolescents with ASD (Shattuck et al. 2007)

- Progress tends to slow as these individuals enter adulthood (Taylor and Seitzner 2010).

Acknowledgements

- JFK Partners and CANDO

Non-Romantic Friendship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Social Phobia</th>
<th>Neurotypical</th>
<th>ASD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Within the last three years, how many friendships have you had for longer than one year?</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>6.28</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many close friends currently?</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Social Problems Commonly Seen In Adults with ASD

- Nonassertiveness
- Avoidance of emotional expression and conflict
- Over-reliance on a smaller number of relationships
- Difficulty with name recall and conversational turn taking
- Difficulty with flexible engagement

Friendship

- Friendship: 8.1%
- Peer relationship that involved some activities outside of a prearranged setting: 20.9%
- Relationships within prearranged settings: 24.3%
- No peer relationships meeting these criteria: 46.4%

Orsmond et al., 2004
Recreational Activities

- 74.5% of sample engaged in exercise or taking a walk once a week
- 41.3% of the sample worked on a hobby at least weekly
- 47.2% reported that they almost never worked on a hobby

Ormond et al., 2004

Employment

- Social skills are directly related to employment success
- Rates of gainful employment are lower than might be expected:
  - Approximately 50% of an ASD sample was employed
  - 1/5 of the participants held no job at all.
    (Renty & Roeyers, 2007)

Assessment of Problem

- Current relationships, day to day interaction, interests
- Cognitive aspects
- Behavioral aspects
- Explore meaning & history of symptoms
- Investigate coping strategies
- Lifestyle factors:
  - Comfort may maintain symptoms
  - Caffeine, alcohol, nicotine, food
  - Quality of relationships
  - Distance from desired lifestyle

Social Behavioral Patterns Are Not Uniform

- Some report primarily anxiety and social avoidance or withdrawal
- Others report emotional distancing and problems with being critical or angry toward others
- Others are observed to have an excessive interactional style
- All report different levels of need for support

Lorna Wing

Expand Your Focus Beyond the Individual

- During diagnostic evaluations and treatment, the focus should not solely be on the deficits of the individual with ASD
  (Renty & Royers, 2007)
- Look for opportunities to involve and include others

Who is in Your Life?
Examine your social network

Audrey Blakeley-Smith, PhD
University of Colorado / JFK Partners
Building Social Skills and Supports with Adults with ASD

6/30/14

Audrey Blakeley-Smith, PhD
University of Colorado / JFK Partners

What are Your Interests/Passions?

What are your Goals?

Opportunities for Intervention

- Psychoeducation of the adult with ASD and OTHERS within the individual’s network (e.g., person centered planning)
- Network creation/enhancement
- Social Skill Building

What is Your Daily Routine?

Identify Opportunities for Social Connection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sunday</th>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Wed.</th>
<th>Th.</th>
<th>Fri</th>
<th>Saturday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Psychoeducation: Adult with ASD

- Understanding steps in relationship and use of social support:
- Not all of the people who come for help would agree on the importance of friendship or social support
- Many adults want to bypass friendship and go straight to romantic relationships

Assessment of Interpersonal Functioning – Adult Life

- Current social activities
- Relationships during adult years –romantic relationships, close friendships, family
- Disruptions vs. Harmony in relationships
- Evaluation of emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in the social realm

Psychoeducation: Others

- Supporting adult with ASD in disclosing ASD to key people in their life
- Provision of support to key family members/partners
- Goal:
  - Provision of support and feedback from key people
  - Shift of attributions from intentional behaviors to behaviors that may reflect difficulty understanding social norms
Five Dimensions of Social Support

- Emotional support
- Social integration
- Esteem support
- Tangible aid
- Informational support

*Perceived support is actually more important than actual support.*

Support and Quality of Life

- **Perceived social support**: perception that one’s network is ready to provide support and aid if needed.
- **Actual social support**: transfer of advice, aid and affect through interpersonal networks

(Renty & Roeyers 2006)

Support Training For Spouse

- **Emotional responder**: Support training involves teaching both spouses how to respond effectively when their partner is experiencing individual or interpersonal difficulties
- **Emotional initiator**: How to best convey their own difficulties so as to solicit effective support from their partner

(Cutrona, 1996; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998, Renty & Roeyers, 2007)

Who is in Your Life?

Examine your social network

Reconnecting With Friends From the Past

- Assess whether past relationships would be valuable
- Consider reasons for not contacting – are some of these problems that could be solved
- Practice how contact could be made
- Develop realistic expectations

*John Walker, PhD*
### Establishing New Friendships
- Often more challenging than the other tasks
- Friendships often start through casual contacts
- Move to planning activities together
- Then move to more regular contact
- Hard to tell in advance which contact will turn into friendship
- Lots of try-outs necessary to find lasting friendships
- Helpful to see friendships as having different intensities and areas of focus

- John Walker, PhD

### Expand Acquaintances
- Connect with like minded people
  - Social activities
  - Hobby classes/clubs
  - Fitness classes/activities
  - Volunteer activities
  - Work activities

### Potential Areas of Social Difficulty
- Over focus on desire for a romantic relationship
- Over focus on one individual
- Looking for the perfect friend – no one is good enough, quick write off
- Interests don’t match with social

### Daily Practice
- Assignments and practice opportunities are selected together (30-60 minutes a day)
- Document practice
- Shift cognition: cannot control how others respond
- Use cognitive diary to keep track of important thoughts in homework situations

### What are the rules of eye contact?

### The Power of a Smile
- Spend a day or two monitoring how much you smile in social interactions
- It is helpful to practice smiling, especially when you greet people and say goodbye
Building Social Skills and Supports with Adults with ASD

6/30/14

Audrey Blakeley-Smith, PhD
University of Colorado / JFK Partners

Be a Good Listener

- Stay focused on what the other person is saying
- Use NONVERBALS and make supportive comments to show you are listening
- Ask questions

Helpful thoughts:
- Most people really appreciate a good listener
- Focusing on the other person can reduce difficulties with self consciousness

Warmth and Friendliness

- Helpful to take this approach with everyone. Don’t be concerned about whether they reciprocate.
- Helpful thoughts:
  - Focus on the value of kindness to others
  - Everyone does not have to like you. You can still feel good about yourself by showing kindness and interest in others.

Approaching other people and initiating interactions

- If a person rarely initiates social interactions this may be part of a pattern of avoidance
- Practice initiating brief interactions in as many situations as possible:
  - saying good morning to security person at work, hello to the salespeople at the grocery store, a brief comment to a neighbor when you see them go by
- When someone says something to you, take the time to make a follow up comment – don’t rush

Pivotal Social Behaviors

- Slipping into a conversation:
  - Watch and listen
  - Find a common interest
  - Wait for a quick pause
  - Join by making a comment or asking a question related to the topic
  - Trade information
  - Do not get too personal or be a conversation hog

Liz Laugeson, Psy. D.

Remembering Names

- Pay attention when someone is being introduced – rehearse the name quietly to yourself
- Do some detective work to find out and keep someone’s name handy
- Keep a mental (or physical) file card with a few key pieces of information about the person

Pivotal Social Behaviors, Cont’d

- Slipping out of a conversation:
  - Watch nonverbal
  - If you are not noting signs of interest, don’t take it personally: 50% of conversation starters are not successful
  - Use a cover story
Pivotal Social Behaviors

- Tease the tease
- Handling teasing and feedback
- Examine your reputation
- Be a good joke teller and receiver
- Online dating

To Summarize

- Social networks can be expanded, even without working on social skills.
- Psychoeducation is an important part of treatment.
- Skill building in a mindful way can reduce behaviors that may be barriers to friendship.