



CONNECTION

Enhancing relationships by accepting differences in social interaction styles

INTRODUCTION

Socializing allows us to get to know each other and positive relationships to develop. It is natural for people to socialize and relate to one another in a variety of different ways. Some of those differences are obvious and some are very subtle. Differences in how people interact may include how they initiate interactions, their understanding and use of body language, emotional expression, facial expression and eye contact. Expecting these common differences is helpful so everyone can focus on connection, not distractions.

Research shows that having even one or two strong connections helps to:

- buffer against stressful life events
- protect against mental health concerns
- increase independence and self-esteem
- reduce rates of withdrawal from school, and
- predict positive life adjustment over time

Non-autistic people sometimes misinterpret others' social behaviors as if that person is disinterested, or being aloof. While the social behaviors of others may be different, they are not wrong; they are simply different styles of social and emotional expression.

Many individuals (autistic and non-autistic alike) need support with learning how to interpret, understand, respond, and reflect on unfamiliar or different types of social situations.

Working with autistic individuals to build social connection through discussion, collaboration and practice can help enhance inclusion in their communities and support positive outcomes.

We all benefit when we take the time to understand each other's unique social differences and invest in strengthening relationships.

The following strategies can help to support strengthening social connections and relationships between non-autistic, autistic, and those who are neurodiverse. It is recommended that you work collaboratively with others to identify which strategies will best support their needs.

RECOMMENDED CONNECTION STRATEGIES

Develop strategies to reduce anxiety

Building social connections within school or work settings can invoke anxiety and uncertainty for some autistic and neurodiverse individuals.

It is important to identify and discuss strategies that will help to reduce or manage anxiety when the student or employee engages in social interactions.

Consider strategies such as the opportunity to retreat to a quiet place, or to work independently, for example.

Create open dialog with autistic individuals on what information is appropriate to share

Consider making yourself available to discuss what conversation topics are appropriate for the classroom or work environment and what topics to avoid. (For example, oversharing personal or confidential information).



Be deliberate and intentional in encouraging social interaction

It is important to gently encourage, promote and discuss social interaction with autistic students or employees. Discuss with them their preferences and support the design and structure of social situations that meet everyone's needs.

This will help everyone to feel more comfortable within social situations over time. For example, discussing and supporting mandatory versus optional social events and opportunities, or allowing people to connect in pairs or in a group if they wish.

Take time to understand how others socialize

It is important to ask, observe, and learn the autistic individual's "*social strengths*" and accept and appreciate how they socialize with you. Meeting people where they are means that we accept and value the differences we see. By avoiding judgment, we can appreciate the differences we experience.

Develop awareness of use of eye contact

Individuals on the autism spectrum, as well as members of many other non-western European cultures, may not use eye contact in the ways you are expecting. The eye contact may be perceived to be too intimate, anxiety provoking, or interpreted as disrespectful.

Alternatively, it may be the case that eye contact is overwhelming or even painful. If you are interacting with someone who is not making eye contact, as you would have expected, do not judge the situation negatively. Rather, accept the subtle social style as different and continue with your interaction.

RESOURCES

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