

Supporting Individuals with **Autism Spectrum & Social Communication Disorders**



Kids Included Together

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Introduction

When you learn that a child has a disability, it is important to see the child as a unique person and focus on the supports that work for them. Even if they happen to have the same diagnosis, children are individuals who will need different things at any given time. **Always consider the following: what does this child need at this moment in time in this environment?** This booklet gives some information about autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and social communication disorder (SCD) with a specific focus on **support**: where individuals with ASD or SCD may need support and some different ways to provide it in your program. You can find additional information in the recommended resources and at www.kit.org.

Understanding Autism Spectrum & Social Communication Disorders

It is helpful to have some background information as you consider what a child may need. In the past, autism, Asperger's syndrome and pervasive developmental disorder - not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS) were considered separate disorders. Now, they are grouped into a single diagnosis called autism spectrum disorder (ASD). ASD affects three areas along a spectrum that looks different for each person:

1. social communication, 2. social interaction, and 3. behavior.

Children with ASD come from all ethnic backgrounds and have a range of skills in understanding social situations, using nonverbal cues like facial expressions to read someone's emotions, developing relationships, thinking flexibly, adapting to sudden or unexpected changes, and processing things they see, hear, and feel. There is also a related diagnosis called social communication disorder (SCD). SCD affects the social use of verbal and nonverbal communication. Children with SCD have a range of skills in reciprocal, or "back and forth", communication, which includes things like being understood in and understanding social exchanges, matching communication style to the situation, and following the flow of conversation.

A note about language

Language sends powerful messages about value and identity. Although we use "children and youth with autism spectrum disorder or ASD" throughout this booklet, some people prefer "autistic." To many people, having ASD is a part of their identity, just as their race, culture, gender, and other characteristics.

"I am Autistic. I am also East Asian, Chinese, U.S. American, a person of faith, leftist, and genderqueer. These are not qualities or conditions that I have. They are part of who I am. Being Autistic does not subtract from my value, worth, and dignity as a person."

- Lydia X.Z. Brown

Most of the time, you will simply use the person's name. When you do refer to the disability, respect the right of people to define themselves in ways that feel right to them. When working with children, listen carefully to words the family uses and ask if you should use the same terms. When working with older youth and teens, ask them how they choose to identify. Remember that a diagnosis is confidential information and should not be shared with others without permission from the youth or family.

Supporting Children with ASD & SCD

The best thing you can do for a child is to get to know them and pay attention to the things that seem to help them thrive. The three areas where they may need the most support are social communication, social interaction, and behavior. In an early childhood, school age or youth program, these include things like:

- Social greetings
- Back-and-forth interactions
- Following the flow of a conversation
- Joining in pretend play or social situations
- Taking someone else's point of view
- Speaking differently indoors versus outdoors
- Understanding humor, multiple meanings, and other inferences
- "Reading" body language and other non-verbal cues
- Using body language, expression, and tone to guess what someone else is thinking or feeling
- Coping with transitions, changes or uncertainty
- Shifting thinking in response to changing circumstances
- Reacting to light, sound, smell, touch, taste, and movement
- Processing speech sounds, frequencies, and volume

Social Communication

Social communication becomes more complex as children get older. By the time children are five years old, their systems of social interaction, social thinking, verbal and nonverbal messages, language, sensory processing, and memory are working together in complicated ways. For children with ASD or SCD, who may have differences in how those systems work together, it helps to clarify messages, simplify communication, and use visuals.

Clarify messages

Some kids have trouble making sense of non-verbal messages, like knowing what body language and facial expressions may mean for the person. You can explain these messages by describing what they look like, what they might mean, and what the child can do. For example, to help a youth interpret your body language when you are busy, tell them what to look for: *"When my head is down, and I am reading something, I am busy."* And what to do: *"You can ask me if I am busy or you can place your hand on my arm like this."*

Simplify communication

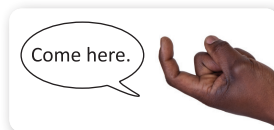
A loud, busy space can make it difficult for kids to hear and understand what you say. Many children with ASD process speech differently. It is not that they cannot understand your words, it is that they are often more sensitive to certain frequencies and volumes of speech. Try different ways to simplify communication and see what works best. You can:

- Use **fewer words**: “Please sit down” versus “Can you please come over here and sit down?”
- Break down activities into **smaller steps**
- Speak **clearly** and be aware of the background noise
- Give kids more **time to respond**: for example, wait an extra 10 seconds before repeating your request
- Monitor the **pitch** and **volume** of your voice

Video resources and KIT Tip Sheets on strategies to support communication are available at kit.org

Use visuals

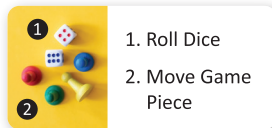
Visuals help support social communication for all children, and they can be particularly helpful for many children with ASD or SCD. You can add visuals to words, activities, games, and areas. For example:



Pair simple signs and gestures with spoken language



Take pictures of the steps involved in an activity



Give visual and verbal instructions for a game in a school-age program



Hold up an object that corresponds to the topic or directions

Social Interaction

Disability rights advocate and educational consultant Stephen Hinkleⁱⁱ explains what he calls the “hidden curriculum” as the unspoken social rules and norms that are very difficult for many children to “read” and understand. Some children with ASD or SCD will need you to uncover the hidden curriculum by teaching popular activities, explaining abstract concepts, and modeling.

Share popular activities

Identify the games, activities, movies, shows, characters, and pop culture references that are popular in your program. Watch what the children are doing during free play or choice time and listen to what topics come up in youth conversations. This will give you some insight into what is popular within each age group. Then, you can share your observations with the family. If they are comfortable with what the peers are interested in, they can expose their child to it at home and explain what kids like about it. This is a great way to make the hidden curriculum more obvious while still respecting the family perspective.

Explain abstract concepts

Metaphors and sayings are often difficult for people who interpret language literally. A common phrase, such as *“They’re feeling blue,”* might be confusing because a child might picture the person physically turning blue. Children with ASD or SCD may need help in learning what these phrases mean and how to interpret them. For example, you might say, *“Feeling blue is an expression. It means they are feeling sad.”* For older children, it might be difficult to grasp the meaning behind slang. Try to explain popular slang words that the kids are using, so a youth with ASD or SCD knows exactly what they mean.

Model social behavior

Some kids will need to see how to approach a social situation. To model social behavior, get the child’s attention, and explain what you plan to do. *“I see those kids are talking. I am going to walk over to them, listen to what they are saying so I know the topic, and wait for a pause to join in. When I join in, I am going to say something about the topic.”*



Tell and retell stories

Storytelling is a powerful teaching tool for social behavior. As you tell stories, point out how fictional characters or real people might have been feeling or thinking. For younger children, you might wonder about how the characters were feeling and why they acted certain ways in the Elephant & Piggie book series. For older kids, you might wonder aloud about how the poet Amanda Gorman might have felt to read one of her poems at the U.S. Capitol.

Retell stories about things that happened. Retelling stories encourages children with ASD and SCD to remember their own thoughts and feelings about events in addition to the facts. For example, if you went on a walk, you might retell the story and ask some questions along the way such as, “What were you thinking when we said we were going for a walk? I remember feeling excited to go outside and see if the spider’s web was still in the tree by the fence. What were you feeling?”



As children with ASD or SCD navigate your program, they are working hard to interpret social communication and interactions. One thing that sets children with ASD apart from children with SCD is they are also working hard to control their responses to changes in the environment or routine and sensory input. This can take a lot of effort to do. Establishing a predictable routine and paying attention to what children are sensitive to will help children feel secure and promote positive behavior.

Establish a consistent routine and schedule

Many kids find comfort in predictability. Following a consistent schedule will provide a base of support for every child. You can add in routines such as stretching before every circle time or homework hour to increase the predictability in your program.





Prepare children and youth for changes

Unexpected changes and events are inevitable. Many individuals with ASD rely on consistency. For someone who relies on consistency, sudden changes can feel devastating. Spend time talking about and explaining the changes before they happen. For example, if a child's teacher is going on vacation, let the child know ahead of time. You can show pictures of where the teacher is going and talk about what will happen while they are away. "Mr. Greg is going to Arizona to visit his brother. While he is away, Ms. Jazmin is going to be with our class."

Pay attention to the environment

Many children and youth with ASD are either over- or under-sensitive to lighting, sound, smell, material, movement, or touch. You can pay attention to what is going on in the environment and how the person reacts to discover the things that are calming and the things that cause stress. Quiet, small group activities might work best for one person, while active, movement-based activities work best for another.

Observe behavior

All people communicate through their behavior and children with ASD are no different. Behaviors tell you what is going on for a child when their words cannot. Once you understand the message behind the behavior, you can plan to support the child. Ask yourself questions like, “What does Sam’s behavior look like when they are having fun? What does it look like when they seem overwhelmed? What does it look like when they appear upset?” Watch carefully to learn what specific behaviors signal for specific children.



Help All Kids Connect

Take advantage of the opportunity you have to help **all** children connect and form positive relationships. This happens naturally for some children, and others will need support to develop authentic connections with other kids. Regardless of whether they have ASD, or SCD, or no diagnosis at all, every child benefits from a place where differences are respected and valued.

Everyone is unique

Spend time explaining to children and youth in your program that all people are individuals. People’s brains are as unique as their personalities. This means that sometimes a person may act in a way that we do not understand or have never seen before. Facilitate discussions and activities to help them realize how everyone is unique and behaves in different ways. Emphasize that it is okay to do things differently.

Senses help us explore our world

Explain that everything we see, hear, taste, touch, and smell affects how we feel. Some things are scary or unpleasant, like sudden noises or strong smells. Other things are fun or exciting, like blowing up a balloon or seeing your favorite person. Some children feel their senses very strongly, and it is harder for them to feel okay when something is scary, unpleasant, or overwhelming. Set up a quiet space where children can take a break. Show them what it is and how to use it. Encourage children to help each other use the quiet space when they seem overwhelmed.



All children and youth like to play and have fun

Emphasize that people play in different ways. Point out that sometimes kids may play alone when they have trouble understanding a game or activity. Encourage youth to find different ways to connect and spend time with one another. Facilitate small group activities and create opportunities for all children and youth to play.

CONSIDER

As you support children with ASD and SCD, remember to get to know them as individuals and consider the following:
What does this child need at this moment in time in this environment?



kit ACADEMY

At KIT Academy, you can access online training on how to meaningfully include kids with disabilities or complex needs. KIT Academy offers all of the Kids Included Together best-in-class disability inclusion and behavior support training and resources. You'll find information to help guide you on all kinds of topics for all age groups. Feel free to look around and search our eStore at LearnOnline.kit.org/store.

Military

Access KIT Academy at military.kit.org.

Public

Select our Annual Pass or an individual course at LearnOnline.kit.org to create your account.



As an IACET Accredited Provider, KIT offers IACET CEUs for KIT Academy courses that comply with the ANSI/IACET Continuing Education and Training Standard.

Additional Recommended Resources

The **Autistic Self-Advocacy Network** is a nonprofit run by and for autistic people.

The ASAN website includes a resource library with downloadable guides and resources that may be particularly helpful for teens:

<http://autisticadvocacy.org/resources/>

Carol Gray developed **Social Stories**, a social learning tool that supports the exchange of information. You can find sample stories and other activities to teach about how people are different at <http://carolgraysocialstories.com/social-stories/social-story-sampler/>

The **Center for Community Inclusion and Disability Studies** at the University of Maine has a resource page specifically for visual supports learning and templates at <https://ccids.umaine.edu/resources/visual-supports/>

ConnectABILITY is a website dedicated to lifelong learning and support for people who have an intellectual disability, their families and support networks. Create your own visual supports with their visuals engine at <http://connectability.ca/visuals-engine/>

CommunicationFIRST has a mission to educate the public, advocate for policy reform, and engage the judicial system to advance the rights, autonomy, opportunity, and dignity of people with speech-related communication disabilities and conditions. Find profiles, blogs, news, videos and other media features from diverse people of all ages with over two dozen known and unknown expressive communication-related conditions and disabilities at <http://communicationfirst.org/perspectives>

Do2Learn is a collaboration of teachers and clinicians that translates knowledge into useable formats. Access free social skill activities, songs, games, and communication cards at <http://www.do2learn.com/>

Social Thinking has a mission to help people develop their social competencies to better connect with others and live happier, more meaningful lives. You can filter their articles by age group and topic at <https://www.socialthinking.com/resources>

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ⁱ <http://www.autistichoya.com/2011/08/significance-of-semantics-person-first.html>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.stephen-hinkle.com/joomla/>



Changing **Attitudes**™
Changing **Practices**
Changing **Lives**

Research shows that ALL children benefit from shared experiences and friendships among kids with and without disabilities. Kids Included Together (KIT) was founded in 1997 to teach inclusive practices and behavior support to child and youth program providers and educators, so no child is excluded. KIT also provides observations, consultations, and recommendations to ensure organizations are confident in serving all children, including those with disabilities or other complex needs.

Learn more at www.kit.org

Free resources at
<https://LearnOnline.kit.org/store/about>