

How do I make friends?

Guidance for Young People with an Autism Spectrum Condition

We're all told it's important to have friends. But if you have autism, very often socialising can be difficult and tiring – often because you don't know if you're doing it right. Here are our top tips for 'getting to know' someone.

What are friends?

This might sound like a silly question, but friendship can mean different things to different people, which can be confusing. But, generally, a friend is someone you choose to spend time with because you enjoy their company and being with them makes you feel happy and safe.

You trust them, and you know they have your best interests at heart. You may also share interests and have common views.

I find socialising hard – do I have to have friends?

This is totally up to you! Some people with autism find it difficult being around other people. If this is you, and you're happy in your own company, don't feel pressured to 'make yourself' have friends.

There's a lot of social pressure to have friends, but if you want to be on your own, that's fine. As long as you're happy, that's all that's important.

How can I tell if someone's a 'real friend'?

Human beings can be just plain peculiar when it comes to social relationships, so knowing whether someone's a true friend can be difficult. Here are some common problems to look out for:

- If someone accepts your friend's request online, it doesn't always mean they consider you a friend. They may just be being polite or want to look popular. If you write them more than two messages online and they don't reply, it's best to leave them alone at this point.
- If someone is initially friendly, but then acts really bored when you start talking to them, they're unlikely to be a potential friend. Say goodbye and put your efforts into someone who acts like they're pleased to see you.
- If someone makes jokes about you or makes you do things you don't want to do, they're not a friend. Friends don't make each other feel like that.

How do you make friends if you have autism?

The same way as everybody does – by talking to people so you can get to know them and see if you get on. It can be scary speaking to new people. However, this isn't just an autism thing. Most people find this a bit daunting.

If you're meeting someone face to face and;

- They make eye contact with you / look in your direction
- They approach you and say hi
- They turn their body towards you
- They aren't already talking to someone else.....



then chances are, they're happy to talk to you.

What do I talk about?

When you don't know someone very well, it's best to stick to 'neutral' topics of conversation, such as films, school / college, TV programmes and music. Sometimes people with autism have subjects they're really interested in and want to talk about lots. However, potential new friends may find this off-putting.

What to say to start the conversation

Saying 'Hello' is normally a good way to start a conversation, or 'Excuse me' if you want to attract someone's attention. Using the person's name will help the person know you want to talk to him or her.

What to say depends on the situation and the person you're talking to. For example, you might say 'Hi' to a friend but 'Hello' to a teacher.

It's a good idea to start with something general rather than starting on a particular topic. Some ideas include 'How are you?' or 'It's nice to see you'

Make note of something pleasant, "I was really interested in ____?"

Ask for information, "Do you know when / what/ how ____?"

Solicit an opinion, "What did you think of ____ last lesson?"

Top tip – ask questions

One of the best ways to make conversation is to ask questions and really listen to the answers. It shows that you're interested in that person. Then, if they ask you questions back, you can begin to have a conversation.

Things not to do in a conversation

- Interrupt. Wait for a gap in talking before you say something.
- Go suddenly off topic – if someone's talking about, say, the weather, it's best to stick to what they're talking about.
- Try not to make personal comments or ask intrusive questions.
- Try not to make comments on their appearance, unless it's something you like about how they look. Even then, be careful. Any comment about their body is usually a dangerous area. So, "I like your T-shirt; it's cool," is OK, but, "I like how long your legs are," isn't.

What if someone's being unfriendly?

You may find some people just aren't very receptive when you're trying to talk to them. If they're looking away, yawning, or saying they 'must go now', it usually means they want the conversation to end.

It's worth remembering that this isn't always a reflection on you, or whether or not they like you. Sometimes people are tired because they've not slept well, or they might be in a rush to get somewhere else. They may even be feeling sad because of something else happening in their life and just aren't in the mood for talking.

What to do if there's a problem in the conversation

If you make a mistake and upset someone, it doesn't mean they don't like you. Saying sorry usually helps. If you're not sure what you've done to upset someone, or if you're not sure how someone is feeling, ask

Ending a conversation

If you want to end the conversation, say something like, "Well I'd better be going now" before then saying 'bye'. This is more polite than just saying "bye" and walking away.

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