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Facilitating Social Awareness

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Social difficulties are a hallmark of autism spectrum disorders (ASDs). Parents of children with ASDs constantly struggle to help their children understand social nuances. For non-ASD children, social skills develop naturally from infancy through adulthood. In fact, when these children become adults, they will have difficulty recalling that development. Social skill development is a complex puzzle, and teaching social skills to children on the spectrum requires breaking the skill set down into meaningful pieces. Nonverbal communication is one of those pieces.

Most children and teenagers with ASDs are in therapy and/or social skills groups. Professional help plays an integral role in the treatment of ASDs. It is important for parents to have an expert, an outsider who can objectively evaluate an individual and develop and implement a treatment plan. However, an hour or so per week is insufficient to help individuals become as socially competent as they can be. And most parents simply can't afford to have their child see a professional on a daily basis. There are some simple and cost-free ways parents can facilitate social awareness in daily life.

Social skills don't exist in a vacuum. They are more than basic manners. A socially skilled individual first has to be socially aware in order to engage with others meaningfully and appropriately. However, some treatment models focus on teaching autistic individuals to merely appear "normal," rather than helping them understand the mechanics of meaningful interpersonal interactions. Eye contact and appropriate ways of responding to certain questions, for example, are often indicators of treatment success. While those things enable initial interactions, such surface indicators should not be the ultimate treatment objective.

Individuals need to learn to understand themselves and how others see the world – not only that eye contact is respectful and expected. For individuals with ASDs, understanding how others see the world – a concept called "theory of mind" – is a challenge. Parents and professionals work on this daily.

Studies have shown that watching too much television can be damaging. However, most people do watch TV, so try to use that time to your advantage. I advocate using children's interests to help them learn and to eventually pull them out of their comfort zones. Any show that involves families and/or friends provides learning opportunities. For example, ask a child how characters are related. Are they friends? Siblings? Coworkers? What led to a particular conclusion? Body language is often more revealing than the spoken word. Shows can even be watched without sound to gauge a child's awareness of social nuance.

There are many opportunities in daily life to learn and reinforce social awareness. At the park, for instance, while observing a group of people interact, try asking your child to describe the relationships among them. It does not matter whether they get it right - what's important is that the child is thinking about how social cues are informative. If your child is hesitant to engage, start by describing your own thought process. You can even say the exact opposite of what might be obvious in an attempt to draw your child out of silence. Children like to challenge parents!

Creative problem-solving is a virtue for parents and professionals who spend time with individuals with ASDs. There are ways to practice social skills outside of therapy and the classroom. The difficulties these children (and adults) face tend to be tied to difficulties drawing social inferences, not to a fundamental inability to connect. Enhancing an individual's understanding of nonverbal communication in daily life can really help a person become more socially aware, competent, and confident.

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