

The Indices of Friendship Observation Schedule (IFOS)

The assessment of friendship skills

An essential characteristic of autism is a deficit in developing, maintaining, and understanding friendships. To date, we do not have standardized tests of a child's friendship abilities. However, the IFOS is based on the first two of the four stages of friendship for typical children (Attwood, 2007; Rubin 2002), that is stage 1 three to six years, and stage 2, six to nine years.

Stage one of friendship- three to six years

Typical children from the ages of three to six years have a functional and egocentric conceptualization of friendship. When asked why a particular child is his or her friend, a typical child's reply is usually based on proximity (lives next door, sits at the same table) or possessions (the other child has toys that the child admires or wants to use). Toys and play activities are the focus of friendship and the child gradually moves from engaging primarily in parallel play to recognizing that some games and activities cannot happen unless there is an element of sharing and turn-taking. However, cooperative skills are limited, the main characteristics that define a friend being one-way and egocentric (he helps me, or she likes me). Conflict is usually associated with the possession and use of play equipment and toys and the violation of personal space. In the last year or two of stage one, conflict can be over the rules of games and who wins. Conflict resolution, from the child's perspective, is often achieved by ultimatums and the use of physical force. An adult may not be asked to adjudicate. Children may have some suggestions to comfort or help a distressed friend but consider emotional repair as the function of a parent or teacher rather than themselves.

If children from three to four years are asked what they did today, they tend to describe what they played with, while over the age of about four years they start to include whom they played with. Social play gradually becomes more than just the construction and completion of the activity. However, friendships are transitory, and the child has a personal agenda of what to do and how to do it.

Very young autistic children have a clear end product in mind when playing with toys; however, they may fail to effectively communicate this to a playmate, or tolerate or incorporate the other child's suggestions, as this would produce an unanticipated outcome. For example, the autistic child may have in mind while playing with construction equipment the mental image of the completed structure, and be extremely agitated when another child places a brick where, according to the mental image, there shouldn't be a brick. The typical child, meanwhile, does not understand why his or her act of cooperation is rejected.

The young autistic child often seeks predictability and control in play activities while typical peers seek spontaneity and collaboration. Other children often consider that the autistic child, who often prefers to play alone, does not welcome them. When other children are included, the autistic child may be dictatorial, tending not to play by conventional rules and considering the other child as subordinate. Such behaviour is perceived by other children as being bossy and sounding and behaving more like a teacher than a friend. Thus, the autistic child, who is

eventually avoided by other children, inadvertently becomes unpopular. Opportunities are then lost to use and develop friendship skills.

Encouragement for being friendly

When discussing childhood social experiences with young autistic adults I have listened to many descriptions of social confusion, and how, very often, the response of adults was criticism of social mistakes but rarely praise for what was appropriate. The child often assumed that at the end of an interaction, a lack of criticism, sarcasm or derisory laughter meant the interaction was successful but had no idea what he or she had done that was socially appropriate. As one young adult said of his childhood, ‘The only comments I had were when I did it wrong, but no one told me what I was doing right.’

If the child were completing a mathematics activity, the teacher’s tick or cross would indicate what was right or wrong. When completing a jigsaw puzzle or construction with building blocks, the child knows he or she has achieved success when all the pieces fit together, or the construction is complete and robust. The problem in social situations is that success may not be obvious, and there may be a relative lack of positive feedback. I strongly recommend that when an adult, peer or friend is interacting with a young autistic child a conscious effort should be made to point out and comment on what the child did that was appropriate.

For example, if the child was observed playing soccer with other children during lunchtime at school, he or she could be informed at the end of the game which actions were friendly and why. Positive feedback could be: ‘I noticed that when the ball got lost in the tall grass, you helped to find the ball. Excellent! Helping to find something is a friendly thing to do’; or, ‘When Joshua fell over and you came up to him and asked if he was okay, that was a caring and friendly thing to do’; or, ‘When Jessica scored a goal and you went up to her and said “Great goal”, that was a nice compliment, and a friendly thing to do’.

Social Stories™

An effective strategy to learn the relevant social cues, thoughts, feelings and behavioural script is to write Social Stories™, which were originally developed by Carol Gray in 1991, not from the academic application of a theoretical model of social cognition, but Carol’s working directly and collaboratively with autistic children (Gray 2010). Preparing Social Stories™ also enables other people (adults and peers) to understand the perspective of the autistic child, and why his or her social behaviour can appear confused, anxious, aggressive, or disobedient. Carol Gray regularly revises the guidelines for writing a Social Story™

Social Stories™ can be an extremely effective means of learning the relevant social cues at all stages of friendship, particularly at stage one. Young children will need guidance to understand the thoughts and feelings of the other person and the role or actions expected in a particular situation.

Topics for Social Stories™ in stage one of friendship include entry and exit skills (i.e., how to join in and leave an activity), when and how to provide help, and the importance of sharing and accepting play activities suggested by another child. The ability to successfully join a group of children is a particularly difficult skill for autistic children. The general advice for typical children is to watch, listen, move closer and then ease in (Rubin 2002). Each stage in the entry process may need a Social Story™; for example, the child may need help to recognize and

understand the entry signals to ease into a group, such as a welcome look or gesture, the natural pause in conversation or the transition between activities - the 'green light' signals.

Stage two of friendship – six to nine years

At this stage in the development of friendships, typical children start to recognize that they need a friend to play certain games and that their friend must also like those games. Children accept and incorporate the influences, preferences, and goals of their friends in their play. Typical children become more aware of the thoughts and feelings of their peers and how their actions and comments can hurt, both physically and emotionally. The child is prepared to inhibit some actions and thoughts, to 'think it, not say it', or to tell a 'white lie' in order not to hurt someone's feelings. There is greater reciprocity and mutual assistance expected in friendships at this stage.

A friendship may develop because both children have similar interests. Aspects of a friend's character rather than possessions are recognized (he's fun to be with, we laugh together). The concept of reciprocity (she comes to my party, and I go to hers), the genuine sharing of resources and being fair in games become increasingly important. When managing conflict, the child's view is that the offender must retract the action and a satisfactory resolution is to administer equal discomfort, or 'an eye for an eye'. The concept of responsibility and justice is based on who started the conflict, not what was subsequently done or how it ended. Around the age of eight years, the child can develop the concept of a best friend as not only his or her first choice for social play but also as someone who helps in practical terms (he knows how to fix the computer), and in times of emotional stress (she cheers me up when I'm feeling sad). However, not every child has a 'best friend' at this stage.

In stage two of friendship, children develop greater cooperation when playing with their peers and develop more constructive means of dealing with conflict. It is important that the autistic child learns the theory of, and gains practice in, various aspects of cooperative play using Social Stories™ and role-play activities. These can provide practice in aspects of cooperative play such as giving and receiving compliments, accepting suggestions, working towards a common goal, being aware of personal body space, proximity, and touch, coping with and giving criticism, and recognizing signs of boredom, embarrassment, and frustration and when and how to interrupt. The role-play and modelling of aspects of social interaction such as giving compliments can be recorded on video to provide practice and constructive feedback.

In situations of conflict or disagreement, the autistic child will need encouragement to seek an adult as an adjudicator, rather than act as the person to determine who is at fault and administer the consequences. Social Stories™ and role-play activities can focus on aspects such as the benefits of negotiation and compromise, being fair and the importance of an apology. Issues of control can be a problem. If the child tends to be autocratic, or dominant or to use threats and aggression to achieve his or her goal, other approaches can be explained and encouraged. You are more likely to get what you want by being nice to someone.

In stage two of friendship, I have noted that there can be different ways of acquiring friendship skills by autistic girls in comparison to autistic boys. Autistic girls are more likely to be interested observers of the social play of other girls and to imitate their play at home using dolls and imaginary friends or adopt the persona of a socially able girl. These activities can be a valuable opportunity to analyze and rehearse friendship skills.

Autistic girls can develop a special interest in reading fiction. This also provides an insight into thoughts, emotions and social relationships. An autistic boy can be encouraged to play with figures, usually masculine action heroes, but to re-enact everyday experiences rather than movies, and to read fiction, perhaps based on a special interest, for example, a book such as *The Railway Children* if the child is interested in trains.

One of the common replies of typical children at this stage in the development of friendship to the question ‘What makes a good friend?’ is ‘We like the same things’. Shared interests are a basis for friendship. I know an autistic child who had a remarkable interest in and knowledge of insects, especially ants. His peers tolerated his enthusiasm and monologues on ants, but he was not regarded as a potential friend as there was a limit to their enthusiasm for the topic. He was learning friendship skills such as how to have a reciprocal conversation, waiting for the other person to finish what he or she was saying, and how to give and receive compliments and show compassion. When he used these social skills with his class peers, they were achieved by intellectual effort and guidance and were perceived by other children as somewhat contrived and artificial. He had few genuine friends.

By chance, another autistic child lived close by, and also had an interest in ants. Their parents arranged a meeting of the two young entomologists; when they met, the social rapport between the new friends was remarkable. The two boys became regular companions on ant safaris, shared knowledge and resources on insects, made a joint ant study and regularly contacted each other with long and genuinely reciprocal conversations about their latest ant-related discoveries. When observing their interactions, it was clear that there was a natural balance to the conversation, with both children being able to wait patiently, listen attentively, show empathy and give compliments at a level not observed when they were with their typical peers.

How to use the Indices of Friendship Observation Schedule (IFOS)

The schedule is divided into stage one and stage two of friendship. In the left-hand column, there is a list of friendship skills for each stage and the adjacent column has a list of more specific friendship skills within each friendship skill.

The rating of friendship or team skills section can be used by an observer of the child’s social play and interactions with peers to rate each specific friendship skill. The rating of the friendship ability is from 1, limited to 4, age-appropriate.

The ratings can be used for successive observations and can provide a baseline of friendship skills and a measure of potential improvement due to programs designed to develop friendship skills.

There is a section to write any comments or observations related to friendship skills, for example, any relevant factors such as whom the child was playing with.

The IFOS can be used when developing the child’s social curriculum at school and with their family to identify those friendship abilities that are naturally occurring and to provide positive compliments and reinforcement to ensure they are maintained and to identify the abilities that need to be addressed by guidance and Social Stories™.

References

Attwood, T. (2007) *The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Gray, C. (2010) *The New Social Story Book* Future Horizons.

Rubin, K. (2002) *The Friendship Factor* Viking, The Penguin Group.