

Social Activity Groups: Another Approach for Helping to Bridge the Friendship Gap

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Social relationships are an integral and critical part of life. For all people, social skills deficits are associated with peer acceptance and school performance in childhood and later with mental health issues and employment success in adulthood. Social deficits are a defining characteristic of autism spectrum disorders. Individuals with autism spectrum disorders do not typically learn appropriate behavior through exposure to socially competent peers. Most social skills have to be systematically taught and consistently practiced. Opportunities to practice social skills are lacking for many individuals on the spectrum. This lack of knowledge, opportunity and practice leads to continued social skills deficits, and a continued cycle of peer rejection and isolation.

Teaching social skills to individuals on the autism spectrum can be a daunting challenge for professionals and families. There are many aspects to understanding, acquiring, and performing social skills. Currently there is a major shortage of formal social skills training group opportunities. Some parents whose children have received formal social skills training still find the need for a variety of opportunities to practice new skills that have been taught. Parents are expressing the need to start their own social activity groups as an avenue to provide social opportunities and practice as well as to help facilitate social networks for their children.

Some parents and professionals are now taking the lead in establishing social activity groups. The Indiana Resource Center for Autism continues to receive an increasing number of calls about social skills instruction. Presently, professionals and parents express the need for information on both formal social skills training groups and informal social activity groups. Both types of groups are important avenues for individuals with autism spectrum disorders to develop and practice social skills.

Social skills training groups typically provide a systematic approach which includes assessment, development of goals, selection of strategies and techniques, and then instruction. A trained professional leads the group and monitors progress toward mastery of designated goals. Social activity groups are much more informal and focus on providing opportunities for engaging in activities with others in a social setting. The information in this article will focus on the development of informal social activity groups.

The purpose of a social activity group is:

- To provide planned and organized opportunities for social activities and experiences with others;
- To provide opportunities to informally practice social skills with others;
- To provide an accommodating environment to experience successful social interactions; and
- To provide opportunities for various types of recreational events with others.

Often there are additional outcomes such as the development of long-term friendships, and/or mentoring relationships, and of course just plain fun!

Groups can be developed for individuals of all ages and functioning levels. The suggestions outlined here were informally gathered from those who have had successful experiences establishing a social activity group for individuals on the autism spectrum. The information is summarized briefly and includes hints and resources that others have found to be helpful to the planning and ultimate success of their groups.

First, before sharing the suggestions and resources that others have found helpful, I will briefly describe two social activity groups in Bloomington that have been very successful over the past several years. Initially an adult group for individuals 16+ years old was started. The adult group was the result of the persistence of a young man with an

autism spectrum disorder who continually shared with the local Autism Society of America (ASA) chapter information about the need for such a group. He also provided information on similar groups for adults that he found around the country. Shortly thereafter parents in the local ASA chapter developed a social activity group for their children ages 10 through early teens.

Both groups were formed and maintained by a small group of dedicated volunteers associated with the local ASA chapter. The volunteers are 2-3 professionals and 2-3 parents who organize and facilitate the groups. Both groups continue to be supported in part by the local ASA. For example, funding for activities and/or transportation is subsidized if a participant needs assistance. A scrapbook of pictures taken during activities is maintained by the local chapter. Initially when both social activity groups were started, they met at the same facility as the ASA chapter, sometimes at the same date and time. At times there has been discussion of forming a group for younger children ages 6-10, though no volunteers have committed to actually starting a group.

Both groups were formed as social activity groups for individuals with autism spectrum disorders. Age groups were targeted as mentioned above and no limits were imposed as to the number of members. Recruitment of members was done by informing those on the local ASA contact list. Initially, for each group, two hours was set aside with a clear start and finish time. Currently the length of meetings depends on the activity scheduled.

Each group schedules monthly meetings with both groups occasionally meeting together for activities such as a trip to a local lake, museum, or an Indiana University sporting event. The adult group generally has two meetings a month; one meeting at a local restaurant for dinner (the group usually chooses to meet at the same one each month) and the second meeting is an activity. The activity for the month is decided upon by the members attending the dinner. Those not attending the dinner are informed and invited to attend the newly scheduled event. Many of the adults in the group do live independently or with support in their own apartment. Others live with their parents or are college students who may, or may not, live in town. Information about meetings is sent out via email to parents of the younger group and frequently to both individuals and parents of the adult group. Occasionally phone calls are made as reminders for an upcoming event or to get a response before an event to gauge attendance. Sometimes more exact numbers of those planning to attend are needed so arrangements for transportation, tickets to an event, or chaperones can be made in advance.

Most activities scheduled for the younger group are also open to attendance by siblings and friends of group members. Parents are always welcome and generally make the decision as to whether or not their child needs their support. Contact with parents and/or support personnel is rather informal; group email messages and phone chains as needed and/or individual phone calls, emails, or discussion at pick up/drop off times.

There is a lot of informal instruction and practice of social skills but this instruction is clearly not the focus of these social activity groups. Regardless, there have been many positive social benefits for members of both groups. Invitations to the birthday parties of group members, the increased knowledge and desire to use the phone, expanded interest in community activities, events, and places, and an expanded network of playmates and peers to interact with on a regular basis are positive benefits seen among members of the younger group. Members of the adult group have the benefit of enjoying activities of their choosing with peers. Others gain greater independence and responsibility for their leisure time. Children and adults are more confident and better able to socialize in the community as reported by themselves and/or their families.

Considerations When Developing Social Activity Groups for Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders

There are important decisions to be made when starting a social activity group. Some of the decisions are rather obvious but need to be recognized and articulated clearly from the start.

Initial decisions to make include:

1. What is the purpose of the Social Activity Group?
2. Will your group be affiliated with another organization?
3. Will others be recruited to help facilitate/coordinate activities?
4. Where will the group meet?
5. What is the structure of the group?
6. What are the ages of group members?
7. What will be the size of the group?
8. How will members be recruited?
9. What will be the length and time of meetings?
10. How often will there be meetings?
11. How will the meetings be structured?
12. What activities will be planned and who plans them?
13. What will you name the group?
14. How will the list of group members and any relevant information on members be maintained?
15. How will members be informed of upcoming meetings and activities?
16. Will transportation be provided to activities?
17. Will individuals be invited to participate regardless of their ability to pay for some of the activities?

Successful social skills lead to success in many areas of life. In the past few years there has been a heightened interest in establishing programs to enhance social skills development for individuals with autism spectrum disorders. Not everyone has access to a formal social skills training program. Focusing exclusively on formal social skills training programs will not meet everyone's needs. An informal social activity group has potential benefits for all participants.

In addition to the two groups in Bloomington, IRCA has had contact with a parent who has facilitated a social activity group for teens in Greenwood. IRCA also receives meeting announcements from a social activity group for older teens and adults that has started meeting again in the Indianapolis area. Please contact the Indiana Resource Center for Autism if you or if others you know have an established informal social activity group and/or are starting to organize one. Others may want to contact you to find out more and maybe get involved, too!

Wheeler, M. (2005). Social activity groups: Another approach for helping to bridge the friendship gap. *The Reporter*, 10(3), 8-9, 19.