

GROWING UP Together

Our world is made up of many different kinds of people.

Each one of us is special in our own way, but we are all very much alike. We all have friends and families, go to school, and have hobbies such as soccer, art, or music.

Children with autism may look like other kids, but if you met them you would find they are different in some ways. It may be hard for them to play, to make friends or to learn new things. Some may have trouble talking or understanding what people say. Some may talk too much about a favorite topic. But, just like you, children with autism are very special in many ways. They have families who love them very much, they go to school, and they have special interests.

This booklet is about people you may meet who have autism and how you can be their friend.

What Is Autism?

Autism affects the way a person's brain and body works. It is not a disease and is not contagious. You cannot catch autism from a classmate or friend. A person with autism may have a hard time communicating with other people, making friends, or following directions. However, with the help of teachers, classmates, families, and friends, children with autism often can find it easier to learn in spite of these challenges.



How Do Kids with Autism Act?

Children with autism may act in some unusual ways. Some may have difficulties with certain activities, but they may have strengths in other areas. For instance, a child with autism may be a math whiz, a great artist or unbeatable at computer games. Still, they may have trouble putting their thoughts into words or understanding what you say.

Some children with autism prefer that schedules stay the same or that people always sit in the same seats. They may have a difficult time when things change. Changes may be scary for them, so they may try telling others what to do or where to sit. You may think they are being “bossy” but it is really them trying to adjust to the changes. When schedules change and they do not know what is coming next, they can be very upset, sad or angry.

Some kids with autism may:

- Have trouble talking, make strange sounds, or not talk at all;
- Flap their hands, spin, or laugh a lot;
- Sit quietly and not look at others;
- Play or behave differently than other friends;
- Be very active or be very quiet and like to spend time alone;
- Have trouble looking directly at you; or
- Do or say the same things over and over again (like lining up toys or repeating a line from a movie).

Why Do Children with Autism Act This Way?

Some children with autism do not see, hear, or feel things the same way we do. For instance, the sound of the school bell or the noise of a parade may hurt their ears. Some may have trouble eating certain foods because of the way they taste. Others may be very sensitive to certain smells. Smells you like, such as cookies baking, may make them feel sick. On the other hand, things that bother most of us, like a bee sting, may not appear to be as painful to them.

It is hard for some children with autism to understand what we say or what our facial and body expressions mean. For example, if you are frowning or showing an angry expression on your face, your classmate with autism may not be able to understand that you are angry. However, this does not mean you should stop trying to talk to them.

Sometimes showing them a picture or an object helps them understand things better. For example, if you are talking about baseball, pointing to a baseball card or a bat may help your friend know what you mean. Just because someone with autism may not be able to use words, it does not mean he can't understand your words. Please talk to him as you do with your other friends.

Like all people, sometimes kids with autism can get frustrated and angry but they often cannot tell us why. Instead of words, they may use actions to express their feelings. When they are upset, confused, or bored, they may make noises or spin around. When they are excited or happy, they may flap their hands, jump up and down, or run in circles. Or they may do all these things at once to help them calm down.

Many children with autism get upset when their surroundings or schedules change because new or different things can be very difficult or scary for them. They may cry, hold their hands over



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their ears, or run away. They are not choosing to misbehave. Children with autism may have a hard time controlling their behavior because they have difficulty understanding or dealing with the world around them.

What Causes Autism?

No one knows why some people have autism, and there may be many different causes. Scientists are still trying to find out just what those causes are and how to best help people with autism.

Where Do Kids with Autism Go To School?

Kids with autism can be in many different types of classrooms and schools. They may be a member of your class or may be in a classroom that was set up especially for them. Many children with autism also participate in after-school activities with classmates, friends, and neighbors.

You may see some special arrangements used to help a child with autism participate in your class. He or she may have a special “coach,” sit at a special desk or table, or use pictures or symbols to communicate with you and the teacher. Some kids may even have special computers that “talk” for them. Friendly classmates can be the best help of all to a child with autism.

How Can I Be a Friend To Someone with Autism?

When you become a friend to a person with autism, you both learn a lot from each other. Here are some ideas that can help you be a better friend to a kid with autism:

- Accept your friend’s differences.
- Know that some kids with autism are really smart, just in a different way.
- Protect your friend from things that bother him or her.
- Talk in small sentences with simple words and use simple gestures like pointing.
- Use pictures or write down what you want to say to help your friend understand.
- Join your friend in activities that interest him or her.
- Be patient – understand that your friend doesn’t mean to bother you or others.
- Wait - give him or her extra time to answer your question or complete an activity.
- Invite your friend to play with you and to join you in group activities. Teach your friend how to play by showing him or her what to do in an activity or game.
- Sit near your friend whenever you can, and help him or her do things if they want you to.
- Never be afraid to ask your teacher questions about your classmates with autism.
- Help other kids learn about autism.

**For more information about autism, written by or for kids,
look for these and other books in your local library:**

Amenta, C. (1992). *Russell is extra special: A book about autism for children*. New York, NY: Magination Press.

Bishop, B. (2002). *My friend with autism*. Arlington, TX: Future Horizons, Inc.

Bleach, F. (2001). *Everybody is different: A book for young people who have brothers or sisters with autism*. Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Company.

Edwards, A. (2001). *Taking autism to school*. Plainview, NY: JayJo Books, LLC.

Ely, L. & Dunbar, P. (2004.) *Looking after Louis*. Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman & Company.

Keating-Velasco, J. (2007). *A is for autism, F is for friend*. Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Company.

Lowell, J. & Tuchel, T. (2005). *My best friend Will*. Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Company.

Messner, A. W. (1995). *Captain Tommy*. Stratham, NH: Potential Unlimited Publishing.

Murrell, D. (2001). *Tobin learns to make friends*. Arlington, TX: Future Horizons, Inc.

Simmons, K. (1997). *Little rainman: Autism through the eyes of a child*. Arlington, TX: Future Horizons, Inc.

Thompson, M. (1996). *Andy and his yellow frisbee*. Bethesda, MD: Woodbine House.



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The Growing Up Together information was developed by the Autism Society of America and revised by Brian Ketzner (Indiana Resource Center for Autism) and Kristie Lofland (Hamilton-Boone Madison Special Services Cooperative).

Additional funding was provided by the Indiana Department of Education, Center for Exceptional Learners, Office of Special Education.

