

CHILDREN AND AUTISM · 7.8

Autistic Children and Friendships: Quality Over Quantity

Most autistic children want friends. The friends they want often look different from the non-autistic default: fewer and deeper, anchored in shared interest, with more side-by-side time and less small talk. The clinical question is not how many friends, but whether your child has the relationships they want.

FOR

Parents of autistic children

AUDIENCE AGE

6-17

REVIEWED

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PART OF

The NeuroFX resource library

IN SUMMARY

Autistic Children and Friendships: Quality Over Quantity

What friendship usually looks like

- **Fewer, deeper, interest-led.** Research on autistic children's own views finds something consistent. They tend to prefer one or two close friends to wider, shallower networks. Shared interest is usually the foundation; the social connection follows. Side-by-side activity is often more comfortable than constant face-to-face interaction.
- **Time alone is often a choice, not loneliness.** A child who has one good friend at school and prefers to spend break time in the library with a book is not necessarily lonely. They may be regulating, choosing, and having a satisfying social life on their own terms.
- **The double empathy framing matters.** Autistic social difficulty is not all in the child. Autistic and non-autistic children read each other differently; the miscommunication is mutual. Many autistic children communicate well with other autistic children, often better than with non-autistic peers.

When the worry is warranted

- **Wanting friends and being consistently rebuffed.** There is a difference between opting out of group social settings and being excluded from them. A child who has tried and is being shut out is not the same as a child who has chosen solitude.
- **One-directional or exploitative relationships.** Friendships where your child pursues and the other child tolerates. Peer relationships where differences are being used against your child. Bullying, especially in transitions (new school, Year 7, moving).
- **Loneliness named or visible.** Your child saying they are lonely, or behaviour shifts (withdrawal, low mood, anxiety, school refusal) that point to it. The friendships not replaced after a transition. These warrant attention; the social-difference baseline does not.

What helps and what does not

- **Lower the volume of social input.** Open playgrounds, large birthday parties, busy soft-play and unfamiliar after-school clubs are bad places to make friends for autistic children specifically. Smaller, quieter settings work better.
- **Match interest, not age.** A friendship anchored in shared interest is much more likely to hold for an autistic child than one matched by age and school year. Age-matching is a non-autistic default, not a requirement.
- **Structure makes social events easier.** A two-hour playdate with a shared activity, a clear start and end, and a snack at a defined time is usually more successful than an open-ended afternoon. Brief your child beforehand: who, what, when, where the quiet space is.
- **Recognise downtime as part of friendship, not a rejection of it.** Many autistic children need to recover from socialising in ways that look like rejecting friendship. Wanting to read alone after a playdate is the recovery after a good one, not a sign that it went badly.

WHEN TO SPEAK TO A PROFESSIONAL

Speak to the SENCo if your child is being bullied or isolated, or where social difficulty is affecting their wellbeing at school. Speak to your GP if loneliness, anxiety or low mood is part of the picture. CAMHS referral may be appropriate where mental health is significantly involved. Where the autism diagnostic picture is unclear or further assessment is needed, private autism assessment with a CQC-registered provider is a legitimate parallel route. Seek urgent help via 111, 999 or A&E for any acute mental health crisis or significant safety concern.

SOURCES

Milton 2012 (Disability and Society); Crompton et al. 2020 (Autism); Calder et al. 2013 (Autism); Lancet Commission on Autism (Lord et al. 2022); National Autistic Society

NEXT STEPS**Speak to NeuroFX**

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