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Helping Your Child Build Friendships

Dear Triumph ABA Parents,

Building friendships is an important—and sometimes challenging—part of childhood. For children on the autism spectrum, making and maintaining friendships can feel especially complex. Social rules that come naturally to others—like taking turns, reading facial expressions, or knowing how to join a game—often need to be explicitly taught and practiced.

Friendship doesn't always look the same for every child. Some children may enjoy playing alongside peers rather than directly with them, while others may form strong bonds around shared interests or routines. All of these experiences are valid, and every step toward connection matters.

In this month's newsletter, we'll explore practical ways to support your child in building friendships at their own pace. From creating opportunities for positive social interactions to teaching foundational social skills, our goal is to help children feel confident, included, and supported as they develop meaningful connections with others.



NEWSLETTER



Tips for Parents: Supporting Friendship Skills at Home

1

Start with Shared Interests

Friendships often grow from common interests. Notice what your child enjoys—trains, art, music, sports, or games—and look for opportunities to connect them with peers who share those interests.

Try this:

Invite one peer over for a short, structured activity centered around something your child loves.

2

Practice Social Skills in Low-Pressure Settings

Skills like greeting others, taking turns, and asking for help can be practiced at home before being used with peers.

Try this:

Role-play simple scenarios such as saying hello, asking to join a game, or responding when someone says “no.”

3

Keep Playdates Short and Structured

Long, unstructured social interactions can feel overwhelming. Short playdates with a clear plan often lead to more success.

Try this:

Plan a 30-minute playdate with one activity (a game, puzzle, or craft) and a clear ending.

4

Teach Flexibility and Problem-Solving

Friendships involve compromise and unexpected changes. Helping children learn flexibility supports smoother social interactions.

Try this:

Model calm responses when plans change and talk through alternative solutions together.

5

5. Celebrate Effort, Not Just Outcomes

Building friendships takes time. A small step—like sitting near a peer or responding to a greeting—is meaningful progress.

Try this:

Praise your child for trying, even if the interaction didn't go perfectly.

Books

TO
CHECK
OUT

We Can Be
Friends!
by Amanda
McLeod

Have You
Filled a Bucket
Today?
by Carol
McCloud

My Friend
Has Autism
by Amanda
Doering
Tourville

These books help
introduce friendship
concepts such as
kindness, inclusion,
and understanding in
a child-friendly way.



REAL STORIES
FROM OUR
BCBAS

Interview

Since this month's newsletter focuses on promoting friendship and meaningful peer interaction, we reached out to one of our own BCBA's and social skills specialists, Esther Rosenblatt, MS, BCBA, LBA, to share her expertise. Esther has extensive experience designing and facilitating social groups for children across all levels of the spectrum, with a focus on building independence, socialization, friendship, and functional communication. She has generously provided a simple, practical social group framework along with easy-to-implement activity ideas that can be adapted for a variety of settings. Whether you are a parent or a provider, these strategies can be seamlessly incorporated at home or in the community with siblings, neighbors, and friends to help create natural opportunities for connection and play.

In our center-based social group for students with very limited communication and functional skills, we intentionally structure each session to promote engagement, peer interaction, and group readiness through consistent routines and shared responsibilities. The group begins with one student helping to call the others out of their classrooms, fostering leadership and

participation from the start. Students line up at the wall, greet the group leaders, and have their picture placed on the visual schedule/token board, earning an initial "green choice" token for being ready to join. They then sit in assigned seats at the table with a provider positioned between every two students (2:4 ratio). Activities often begin with gathering materials; students are prompted to identify what is needed and volunteer for jobs retrieving supplies from familiar locations, encouraging independence and purposeful movement. During the task, each child is assigned responsibility for specific materials (e.g., glue, scissors, crayons), which naturally creates opportunities to request, share, trade, and wait for peers. Providers model and prompt functional communication throughout. A second token is awarded to students who remain with the group and follow along, while their individual picture on the board serves as a visual cue for participation and may be removed if they



leave or are not demonstrating readiness. Activities are designed so that every child's contribution is necessary for the group's success—such as preparing food, distributing plates, or counting materials—while reinforcing concepts like counting group members and using peers' names. After the main task, students transition to movement-based or floor activities (e.g., games, puzzles, freeze dance, pretend play) to support regulation and continued cooperation. The session ends with lining up again, and a third token is given for successful transitions and sustained participation; students who earn all three tokens receive praise or a small reward, with occasional edible reinforcers used strategically to maintain engagement. Overall, crafts, cooking projects, and interactive games are carefully selected to build communication, turn-taking, shared responsibility, and a sense of teamwork within a highly supported, predictable framework.

Families and providers can replicate this same interactive, shared-responsibility structure at home or in other settings by choosing simple, hands-on activities that naturally require cooperation, turn-taking, and communication. For example, children can string colorful cereal or beads by sorting for specific colors or creating patterns together; create art collages where each child is responsible for collecting or contributing one designated color; or assemble paper plate puppets with each child holding the materials for one component. Cooking and food decorating tasks—such as baking personal pizzas with ready-made dough or decorating cookies with snacks to create faces—encourage

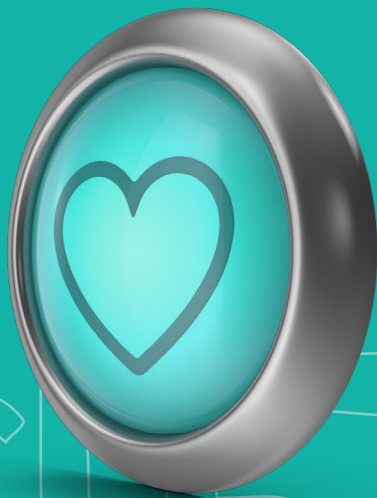
requesting, waiting, and teamwork. Structured crafts like sticker-by-number pages or painting dry macaroni to place into shapes build focus and shared goals. Group games such as wraparound/pass-the-package, freeze dance, musical chairs, or simple movement activities add opportunities for listening, transitions, and regulation. Collaborative projects, like making a large poster where each child decorates one section, further reinforce contribution to a group outcome. Even playful routines like bubble-blowing turns based on a child's name or features or working together to complete a puzzle by retrieving pieces one at a time, can motivate participation while strengthening social awareness. These types of activities are most effective when paired with clear roles, visual supports, and positive reinforcement, helping children practice functional communication and cooperation in a fun, meaningful way.



Quote of the month:


Friendship is born at that moment when one person says to another, 'What! You too? I thought I was the only one.'

— C.S. Lewis



NEWSLETTER

A Gentle Reminder for Parents



Friendship development looks different for every child—and that's okay. Progress may be gradual, but with patience, support, and consistent practice, meaningful connections can grow. If you ever have questions or concerns about your child's social development, don't hesitate to reach out to your child's BCBA for guidance, encouragement, and strategies tailored to your child's needs.

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