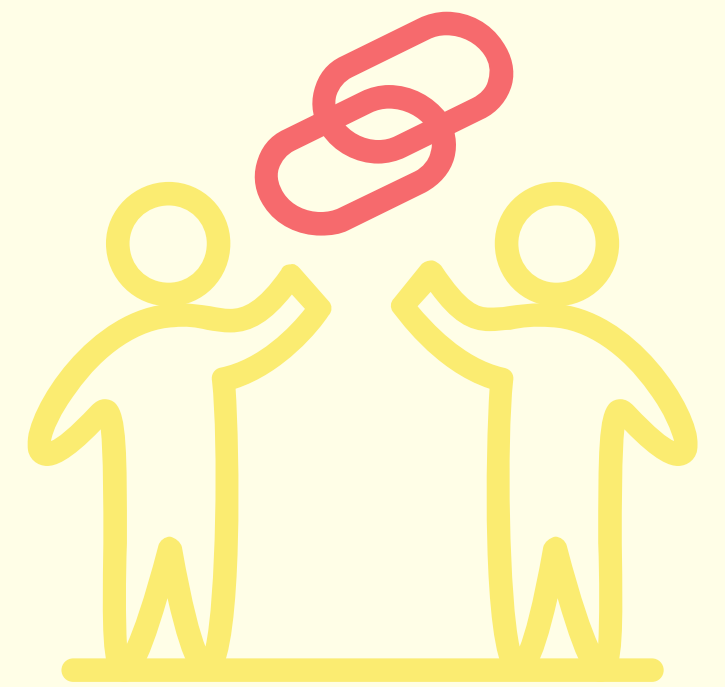


Friendships

Autistic individuals can sometimes prefer to be by themselves or may have a greater need for time alone. Often autistic people also enjoy socialising and wish to have meaningful connections. For some autistic people, socialising can take a lot of energy and effort. This can therefore mean it is particularly tiring and they may require 'down time' afterwards to recuperate. Some autistic people find one to one or small group situations easier to manage. For both autistic and non-autistic people, preferences around interactions and relationships will differ from person to person and it is key to support children and young people to develop a sense of what is important to them and makes them feel good.

Making friends tends to be easier where there are shared interests or experiences. Many autistic people can have particularly strong interests in certain areas. Finding activities or clubs related to special interests are likely to be good places to find like-minded friends. Similarly, preferred interests may serve a useful tool for engagement and inclusion, for example in learning or family activities. Autistic young people may benefit from support in understanding how they could also share in friends' interests that are different from their own and how this may strengthen friendships.

Misunderstandings in communication can contribute to difficulties in making and keeping friends. The 'double empathy problem' is a theory that highlights how misunderstandings between autistic and non-autistic people are a mutual, two-way issue occurring due to individuals having very differing experiences of the world.



Autistic children can be more socially vulnerable than their peers. Educating autistic children about healthy relationships and what is / is not healthy and acceptable behaviour (from everyone) is important in keeping them safe and protecting emotional wellbeing. It is important to support autistic children to develop assertiveness in letting others know what makes them happy or uncomfortable. Many autistic young people are likely to require additional support from adults at home and at school to consider and navigate any peer difficulties, as they may find it more difficult to express their needs and ask for help. When a new social situation is encountered or a breakdown in communication occurs, resources such as social stories and comic strip conversations can be useful in supporting an autistic child to understand what happened and why, through presenting information in a tangible way, including using visuals. This process can help to consider what those involved may be thinking or feeling and help to build perspective-taking. It is crucial that these approaches are delivered in a neuroaffirmative way, supporting the child's natural communication preferences and providing options and choice in how to respond, as opposed to providing instructions or attempting to teach neurotypical social skills. It is important that this process is used to consider and validate the experiences of all involved, recognising that both perspectives are equally as valid.

