



# Tanya Tennant

Autism Training and Consultancy

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## "Passionate about Autism"

Autism - Building confidence and reducing social isolation

90 x minute Zoom training session



Tanya Tennant Autism Training and Consultancy

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- What is self-esteem
- Building positive self-esteem
- Why can spending time with other people be difficult?
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## What is self-esteem?

Self-esteem is how we feel about ourselves. When we have healthy self-esteem, we tend to feel more positive about ourselves and our life, which can make it easier to deal with any challenges that we come across.

Our personality and temperament can have an influence on our self-esteem, as can our life experience, including the reactions we get from those around us.

Self-esteem can affect how we act and feel on a daily basis. How we feel about ourselves can fluctuate, but if we generally feel more positive, this can make us more emotionally resilient.

## Self-esteem in autistic children and young people

Many autistic children and young people can have difficulties in developing and maintaining high or positive self-esteem. There can be a variety of reasons for this, which could vary considerably for each individual.

Some of the characteristics of autism, such as not understanding other people's intentions or experiencing high levels of anxiety can all contribute to low feelings of self-esteem. The differences in communication can mean that autistic children have missed out on the regular non-verbal positive feedback that non-autistic children may experience regularly, along with not understanding the expectations in different situations, leading to a feeling of getting it wrong all the time.

*"No-one ever told me when I was getting it right"*

**Autistic adult**

Other reasons could include bullying, being excluded from activities or being made to feel that being autistic is a very sad or negative thing, particularly through hearing negative descriptions or terms.

## Positive self-esteem

Having positive self-esteem and self-image can make people feel more positive about themselves and help them to have more emotional resilience.

Most people, autistic or otherwise, will not feel fantastically about themselves all of the time. However, if you generally feel ok or good about yourself, this can enable you to cope with the stresses that life can throw up more effectively. Feeling good about yourself is an important step towards good mental health.

Positive self-esteem can help with;

- The ability to cope with and bounce back from mistakes
- Taking pride in your own efforts and achievements
- Coping with direction from others
- Accepting criticism from others
- Feeling optimistic

There are a range of different things that we can do to try and help develop and maintain positive self-esteem in autistic children. It might be something that will take time and will be an on-going process. As with all the strategies we will discuss throughout the session, everything we do with autistic children will have to take into account their level of understanding.

## Knowing that you are on their side

### **Being open about your child's own diagnosis**

It can be really helpful for autistic people to know that they are autistic - at a level which they can understand. Having open discussions about autism which include both the positive and challenging aspects can help with understanding themselves, an important step on the way to healthy self-esteem.

Support for parents and carers on telling your child about their diagnosis:

<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/diagnosis/disclosing-your-autism/parents-and-carers>

## Positive information about autism and role-models

It is important to think about the communication we use regarding autism. Simple changes could include trying not to be negative about autism, avoiding terms such as deficit or impairment and focusing more on challenges can help with this. There is a strong move towards the notion of neurodiversity in the autism world.

*"One of the most promising developments...has been the emergence of the concept of neurodiversity: the notion that conditions like autism, dyslexia, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) should be regarded as naturally occurring variations with distinctive strengths that have contributed to the evolution of technology and culture rather than mere checklists of deficits and dysfunctions."*

**Steve Silberman**  
Neurotribes (2015)

How people feel about autism can vary immensely. Autistic children, teenagers or adults, parents or professionals may all hold different views on what they think autism is and how it should be described. Whilst being sensitive to these differing opinions, it is still important to try and help your child understand and accept their autism in a way that makes sense to them.

Support your child with access to information about autism and how it affects them. Build in opportunities to watch clips of other autistic people or read blogs or biographies written by autistic people. Some children and adults may find it useful to be aware of the growing autism culture;

The spectrum magazine [The Spectrum magazine \(autism.org.uk\)](http://autism.org.uk) - a quarterly magazine for age 16+ (although some parents subscribe on behalf of their under-16s), edited by an autistic person and written by people on the autism spectrum, including Asperger syndrome, or (occasionally) by professionals with this group specifically in mind. Each issue contains contributions from the UK and overseas, personal accounts of having autism, a pen pal page, letters to the editor, poems, artwork and short stories.

*Autscape* ([www.autscape.org](http://www.autscape.org)) - an annual conference that is run specifically by and for autistic people. Autscape lasts three days in which there are workshops, leisure activities, social opportunities, and more, all specifically oriented to the needs and preferences of autistic people..

*Web Forums* - there are a number of web forums specifically for autistic people. Many are also suitable and accessible for teenagers and parents.

The section on the NAS website about social skills sheet has an up to date list ([www.autism.org.uk/socialskills](http://www.autism.org.uk/socialskills)). A well established and frequently recommended site is Oops Wrong Planet ([www.wrongplanet.net](http://www.wrongplanet.net)).

Many local autism organisations will occasionally have autistic speakers to meetings and are often happy for teenagers to attend these talks.

### **Lots of opportunities for feel-good experiences**

Think about which activities your child enjoys doing, who they enjoy spending time with and what they find makes them happy or relaxed. It is important for everyone to have regular feel-good experiences in our life, as this can make us feel better about ourselves.

It is important to recognise that a feel-good experience for someone on the autism spectrum might be different to others. And also, an activity that one person enjoys or find relaxing, may have the opposite effect for your child.

Some autistic children may prefer these feel-good activities to be more solitary (e.g. spending time in bedroom on their own or on their computer). When we're doing activities we enjoy, this helps release endorphins which will make us feel happier.

Spending time doing things we enjoy or with people who make us feel happy, safe or secure can help to build our confidence, another important aspect of working towards healthy self-esteem.

## **Value your child's choice of activities or interests**

It is important to recognise and respect your child's choice of activities (if it is safe and legal), even if it might not be something that you yourself enjoy. If possible, spending time with them whilst they're doing it can be really helpful.

Showing interest in something your child is interested in can be a positive way to spend time with them and make them feel valued; this may mean having to learn more than you wanted about Minecraft, traffic lights, trains, medieval kings and queens!

## **Value your child's knowledge and give positive feedback**

Ask your child for advice or to help you - show them you value their knowledge. It might be practical help like fixing your computer, showing you how your mobile phone works, or feeding the dog. If you have an ordinary problem sometimes asking their advice shows you value their thinking. Also ask their opinion on TV programmes, music or anything else they will discuss.

Carefully praise the things they are good at - point out their unique gifts and skills. All children need praise, but this is especially important for those on the autism spectrum, and they often need to be told regularly. Praise can be difficult for some autistic children so how you tell them how good you think they are may need to be done carefully.

It is important to find a way to tell your child when they are doing things right or well. Taking into account their preferred method of communication, this may be done in a variety of ways, including verbal feedback, a thumbs up gesture, post-it notes, written message on a communication board, text message or sticker. The thing to remember is that if we don't give positive feedback when they are doing something well, then the only feedback they will generally be aware of is when they get things wrong.

## Adjusting your communication

If we can try and make life easier and more understandable for autistic children, this can also help with them feeling better about themselves. Potential difficulties in understanding other people's communication can result in autistic children feeling overwhelmed and frustrated, so adapting the communication that we use on a daily basis can be a positive step.

### **Using someone's name can help create a positive self-image and identity**

Getting your child's attention before trying to communicate something to them is sometimes quite difficult. Key things to remember are;

*Use their name* - this can help with getting attention by letting them know you are talking to them

*Be in the same room* - although this sounds obvious, in family life, we frequently talk to other people from adjoining rooms, which can often make communication harder to process and is not always obvious who is being spoken to

*Mention something your child is interested in* - this may help with focusing their attention onto your communication

A firm touch on their arm may help. Do not touch them suddenly as they may get a fright.

**Remember** - just because your child is not looking at you does not mean they are not listening. Requesting eye-contact is not always the best way to ensure good communication.

### **Use clear and calm communication**

It is vital to communicate in a way that your child can understand. It is evident from autistic people themselves, and research confirms this, that clear communication is easier to process.



Many autistic people will understand communication in a very literal way. This means that people who may not always communicate in a literal way need to remember to be clear in what they are saying and not assuming that tone of voice or facial expressions to indicate meaning will be understood.

Clear and calm communication involves;

#### Verbal communication

- Reducing the amount of words that are used
- Speaking in a calm clear voice
- Keeping your tone of voice consistent (getting angry can often be harder to process)
- Using clear and specific language
- Trying to avoid using metaphors, irony and sarcasm (or making sure you explain them if you do!)

#### Non-verbal communication

- Keeping your body language calm and consistent (trying to avoid flapping your hands about whilst talking!)
- Not relying on facial expressions or eye-contact to communicate something (as this could easily be not seen or not interpreted)

#### Alternative means of communication

- Use visual supports - this just means anything that you look at and that helps you learn, remember or understand. These could include pictures, symbols, photo's, written lists or gestures
- Electronic communication aids can be helpful for many autistic children. Examples can include pictures on their iPad, using reminders on mobile phones or using apps to help with daily planning

#### **Allow time for processing**

Sometimes, when we talk to an autistic child, we may repeat things or keep rephrasing them, particularly if we assume they are not listening.

In non-autistic people, if someone calls your name or speaks to you, a typical response is to look at the other person and often to also respond with a gesture or a short verbal response; this shows the person that you are listening to them. This response is a social response that often occurs without people realising it.

In autistic people, this social response may not be their natural style of communicating. It is vital to recognise that just because someone doesn't do this response, does not mean they are not listening. Their response may also be taking longer as it may take an autistic person more time to process what has been said.

- Allow more time to process what has been said
- Remember that information given verbally can often take longer to process
- Many families use 'The Six Second Rule' with autistic children and adults
  - when giving verbal information, count to six in your head to allow more processing time
- If you need to repeat the information, use the same words

### **Positive information and comments**

Tell your autistic child what to do rather than what not to do. It is a good rule of thumb to remember '*unless you have actually told your child something they won't know it*'. Never rely on vague instructions - you need to explain things simply and clearly.

Consider how your language can have a positive or negative impact on an autistic child's self-esteem. If they are constantly confused by what you say - this can add to them feeling negative about themselves.

Be precise in what you say and try and give autistic children positive instructions.

## **Structure to the day - visual**

Having structure to their day can help autistic children feel safe and in control. This does not mean doing the same thing every day. It means any changes are planned for.

Knowing the answer to these questions may help an autistic child feel less anxious;

- What will happen during the day?
- What do I need to do and how?
- When will it start?
- How long will it last?

Using clear visual information can be helpful with understanding what the structure of the day is going to be.

All individuals will vary in terms of how far ahead they need to know and understand their structure. Some autistic children will just need to know what is happening that day, whilst others might need to know the plan for the next three months.

## **Explaining things**

It is important to give autistic children as much information as they need, without overloading them, about what is going on, why people do certain things and what is realistic.

### **Explain some of the 'secret rules'**

Jennifer Cook O-Toole's book *The Asperkid's secret book of social rules* talks in depth about the secret rules that non-autistic people all understand easily which autistic people can find very difficult.

Jennifer, along with many other people across the world, uses the term NT or Neurotypical to describe people who are not on the autism spectrum.

One of the things she discusses in her book is the need for perfection in some autistic people and how this can inadvertently come across to NTs as not valuing what other people have achieved. She also looks at an autistic person's tendency for correcting errors in others, potentially linked with their strengths in detail focus - but which can actually upset those who are having their errors pointed out.

### **Explaining how life is for other people**

Some autistic children can assume that everyone else has a perfect life and is happy all the time, so they may feel that they have failed because they don't feel like this. This may also link with the intense need for perfectionism that many autistic people have, which can also be a significant contributor to low self-esteem.

Sarah Hendrickx (Autistic Author and Trainer) talks about the importance of explaining that people are not always happy all of the time. She finds that explaining that other people can feel overwhelmed, depressed and anxious at points during the day, even when they are having a really good day. This is something that non-autistic people often just instinctively understand whereas it may come as new information to autistic children.

*"If you're looking for a perfect life - you won't find one..."*

*...I work on a 70:30 ratio - if 70% of my life is good - then this is OK"*

**Sarah Hendrickx**  
NAS Masterclass, 2016

As the quote says, she uses a ratio to work her own life, feeling that if her life is good for 70% of the time, then this is OK. This fits in with the systematic way of thinking that many autistic people prefer.

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## Praise and positives

This is all about helping your autistic child feel better about themselves. Much of the focus will often be on helping autistic children overcome their challenges and learning new skills, but it is vital that we also focus on developing their self-worth and encouraging them to like themselves.

### **Celebrate their strengths and interests**

Celebrating the things, they are good at can really help with making someone feel better about themselves. Spending time alongside people doing activities they enjoy can show that you value their interests.

Finding ways to help remind your autistic child of things they are good at, experiences they have enjoyed or favourite people in their life can be helpful. Ideas could include writing Social Stories about positive experiences, pictures or photographs, diaries or life story books;

- Have framed photos of happy events and achievements on their wall. Your child may need visual reminders of the things that they have achieved. If there are precious certificates or photos make sure you have duplicates or use copies in case, they get damaged.
- Diary to record good things that happen to them and their successes. A common technique psychologist's use is to ask a person who is depressed to record five good things that have happened each day or five things to be grateful for.
- Photo book of favourite food, uncle, game or place to focus on (to counteract negative thoughts).
- Make a life story book with pictures or words about their life and achievements. Seeing things, they have enjoyed or done well at may work better than just talking. It may also help your child remember the order of events in their life.

- Join in with them doing their fun activities or watching their TV programmes. You might not enjoy it especially, but it shows you value their company and want to be on their side and understand them.
- Ask your son or daughter for advice or to help you - show them you value their knowledge. It might be practical help like fixing your computer, showing you how your mobile phone works, or feeding the dog. If you have an ordinary problem sometimes asking their advice shows you value their thinking. Also ask their opinion on TV programmes, music or anything else they will discuss.
- Carefully praise the things they are good at - point out their unique gifts and skills. All children need praise, but this is especially important for children with autism or Asperger syndrome - they need to be told regularly. Praise can be difficult for some autistic children so how you tell them how good you think they are needs to be done carefully.

### **Be specific when offering praise**

If giving praise or compliments, try and make it as specific as possible. Tell your autistic child exactly when you're praising them for.

Some children can find praise difficult, so you may need to try and provide it an alternative manner. Some parents have tried giving praise by writing it down. Many people struggle to know how to respond to verbal praise, and for an autistic child, this can make them feel more anxious.

If you are using rewards for specific behaviours or achievements, remember it is also important to sometimes just reward them for being themselves.

### **Model a positive response to changes and mistakes**

Many autistic people have a strong need for perfection alongside also finding change potentially very difficult. Modelling yourself coping with things

changing or setting up situations where you get things wrong can help in the long term with learning how to respond to things differently.

We often try and hide mistakes from children and teenagers, so it is important to try and help children learn that not everyone gets things perfect all of the time, and that this is OK.

*"Compliments given to others are not insults to you in disguise"*  
**Jennifer Cook O-Toole**  
The Asperkid's secret book of social rules, 2013

It is also really important to point out to autistic children that praise, or compliments given to other people for a task does not mean that what they did themselves was bad.

### **Catastrophising**

*"Mentally going from zero to Mach 100 in no seconds flat. Your mind runs away with dire tragedies or utter failure, no matter how unlikely or ridiculous your logic.....NTs would call it overreacting...but I find that infuriating.*

*If someone is mad or afraid, that feeling deserves respect....It's Aspie-reacting....we don't see how any other (better) outcomes could possibly happen instead...*

*...The secret to avoiding this craziness is stopping to realise that from one step to the next, our logic isn't always correct...and always asking 'why might this not happen' "*

**Jennifer Cook O-Toole**  
The Asperkid's secret book of social rules, 2013

This is a term that Jennifer O'Toole uses in her books which several other autistic people also refer to. It refers to the fact that many autistic people can worry or panic extremely quickly about things.

It is important not to trivialise this as 'just overanalysing' things and understand that it is something that can lead to real stress and anxiety for people.

If an autistic child is catastrophising, this could mean they show reactions to things that seem to others to be a very extreme reaction or response. Jennifer Cook O-Toole gives the analogy of a reaction being like calling the fire brigade to put out a major blaze when your sister has only burnt some popcorn.

*"A tendency to catastrophise with emotions..... that when you get an emotion it tends to be in maximum volume...*

*...so if you're anxious you hit the panic button"*

**Tony Attwood**

Ask Dr Tony, YouTube, 2011

Many autistic children will need help in breaking down the problem they are worrying about into stages, then coming up with scenarios for "why might this not happen".

A technique to help with catastrophising is to help the autistic children evaluate the 'chain of catastrophe' by breaking down each aspect, and logically evaluating how likely it is that it will happen and what you can do to make things better.

## **Why can spending time with other people be difficult?**

If we think about some of the key differences in social communication and interaction that we discussed in the first session, then these can help us explain why many autistic children find spending time with other people difficult.

Autistic children often have difficulty recognising or understanding other people's emotions and feelings, as well as expressing their own, which can make it more difficult for them to fit in socially. They may also find it difficult to



understand the unwritten social rules, which can often vary from one situation to another.

Differences in communication, whether those be in using and understanding verbal or non-verbal communication, can make it potentially difficult and stressful to spend time with other people.

### **Less instinctual understanding of how to do it and why**

Many autistic children find they do not automatically understand what to do when they're with other people. This can include difficulties in making and keeping friends or knowing how to respond to other people.

Understanding instinctively how to react in social situations is something that many autistic people find extremely difficult and is something that non-autistic people seem to learn far more easily, without even realising it.

There may be some autistic children who also don't really understand why you would want to spend time with other people, particularly if their experiences of being with others hasn't previously been enjoyable.

### **Different interests to other people**

There may be a variety of reasons why autistic children have different interests to their peers or their family.

Some interests may be more similar to those of much younger children - autistic children are often considered to be socially and emotionally younger than those not on the autism spectrum, and many will also have additional learning disabilities, which could be a potential explanation behind why they may retain interests typically associated with younger children. However, another important reason might be they simply continue to enjoy them and are not as influenced by societal expectations and norms to stop or hide their favourite interests.

It is important to remember that there is no set age where we are supposed to stop liking Pepper Pig, Thomas the Tank Engine, Dr Who, Lego or stuffed animals!

Interests may be intense - if an autistic child has an intense interest, they may find it really difficult to understand that other people are not as fascinated about it as they are.

Interests may be more personal or solitary - many autistic children prefer to engage in their interests on their own. This can sometimes be interpreted as them being anti-social, where it might just be more about their interest is better on their own.

Interests might just be different - non-autistic children and teenagers can often have more similar interests to each other, particularly as they may be influenced by wanting to 'fit in' and not stand out as being different. Autistic children and teenagers may not be influenced in the same way, and many of their interests can be quite individual to them or can be very much linked with collecting information, classifying things or creating systems and a sense of routine.

### **Past experiences**

If your previous experiences of spending time with other people has been negative, you may be much less likely to want to engage in it again. Negative experiences could include being teased, excluded or bullied, being unable to predict other people's behaviour or feeling overwhelmed with too many people or experiencing sensory overload in busy environments.

### **Understanding the social rules (or secret rules!)**

As mentioned in the earlier in the session, many autistic children can find it really difficult to understand the social rules involved in spending time with other people. Jennifer Cook O-Toole (2012) describes these as the 'secret rules', and explains that for autistic people, getting along with others is like

trying to follow a set of hidden social rules without the rule book, saying to her they're not rules, they're secrets.

These social rules can include understanding social conventions and changing social etiquette. Other examples might be understanding and knowing how and why to engage in small talk, knowing if and when it is ok to correct other's mistakes.

Literal understanding can make it potentially difficult to understand many of the non-verbal aspects of communication and interaction, such as how close should I be to someone, tone of voice, intonation and sarcasm or body language.

### **Social anxiety**

Worrying about going into new social situations or feeling very anxious how meeting both new or familiar people can cause great social anxiety. These are some of the questions that an autistic child may be thinking in such situations; will I understand what they say, will I get things wrong or am I too exhausted to be social today.

Some autistic children may find that they are analysing what is the correct social behaviour in minute detail, which can be exhausting.

'Social fluff' is a phrase used by an autistic adult to describe all the extra social communication that non-autistic people often engage in; small talk, talking around something and not just getting straight to the point, little white lies and euphemisms. Much of which can seem confusing and pointless to the autistic person.

### **Expectations from other people**

What other people count as 'successful social interaction' might be very different to what the autistic children sees as successful or enjoyable. It is important not to project non-autistic preferences for spending time with other people onto autistic children.

There will be some autistic children who love spending time with other people and like to do this as often as possible. However, there may be many autistic children who may enjoy spending time with other people, but do not want to do this too often.

An Autistic child's behaviour can sometimes appear rude to others without meaning to, generally linked to misunderstanding social rules; perhaps walking off in the middle of a conversation, only focusing on one person in a group, looking aloof or unfriendly, or appearing over-friendly and coming across as too intense.

### **Understanding what friends are for**

Not all autistic children will seek friends, and this should not be seen just as a sign of loneliness but potentially could be a desire for solitude. Others may wish for friendships but struggle with social aspects of how to make friends. It is important to work out whether your child does want to make friends and whether they then need some support with this.

Many autistic children struggle to assess true friendship and distinguish it from peers who are exploiting them.

Defining friendship is challenging as it means different things to different people. Consider using books and autistic experiences to aid learning the social hierarchies and levels of friendships from stranger, colleague, friend or romantic partner.

### **Wanting to spend time with other people**

What counts as 'successful social interaction' may vary from one person to another.

'Being alone' might be a very different thing from 'being lonely'.

It is important to clarify individual differences around what is social 'isolation' or not. What a parent may feel is socially isolated (e.g. one friend only in

occasional contact with), is not necessarily the opinion of their autistic child. They may be quite happy with this level of social interaction.

However, if your child feels they would like more friends (not that they 'should' have more friends just because other people do), then this is social isolation and you may want to support this to change.

*"I have about five people that I spend any time with outside my immediate family...*

*...I like these people very much, but find that after around two hours I have run out of things to say, have exhausted myself with 'performing' and need to leave, go home and have a nap"*

**Sarah Hendrickx**

Women and Girls with Autism Spectrum Disorder, 2015

### **Practical considerations**

Time on your own - many autistic children may need more time on their own than other children and may actively enjoy this.

Recovery time - is often needed after spending time with other people. Many autistic children find social interaction extremely tiring, potentially as a result of the social demands, processing language and analysing other people's communication and behaviour. Time on their own engaged in a relaxing activity can be essential.

Energy accounting is a tool developed by Maja Toudal, an autistic female.

In an interview with Network Autism Maja explains:

"Energy accounting is a tool that I created when I was studying to relieve the amount of depressions and meltdowns and anxiety attacks that I had to deal with. This was several years ago, before I started at university, and I was taking preliminary classes to qualify for university, and school has always

been very difficult for me, and so I needed a tool to manage my own stress and all of that. And so that's where it comes from".

The energy accounting activity involves sitting down with a person with autism and creating two lists. A list of things that sap energy (withdrawals) and a list of things that replenish energy (deposits).

A numerical value is then assigned to each withdrawal and deposit to give it a weighting. Say 10 points means the activity gives/takes a *little* energy and 100 points means it gives/takes a *lot* of energy.

The idea is that when a withdrawal, or numerous withdrawals are made, deposits have to be made in order to prevent the account running into overdraft and a meltdown occurring.

More information on autistic fatigue can be found here: [Autistic fatigue](#)



### How to help: Energy Accounting

- Use the concept of an energy bank account
- Many actions or tasks can cause an "energy withdrawal"
- Need to ensure we then make an energy deposit or replenish the energy account - to balance the books
- Energy depletion can lead to physical and mental health problems.

#### Withdrawal

Socialising  
Change  
Making a mistake  
Sensory sensitivity  
Daily living skills  
Sensitivity to other people's moods  
Being teased or excluded

#### Deposit

Solitude  
Special interest  
Physical activity  
Animals and nature  
Computer games  
Meditation or mindfulness  
Sleep

Alternative ways of communicating with friends - increasingly, many people are finding alternative ways of communicating with friends, and this includes autistic children.

For some, social media platforms may give autistic teenagers the ability to communicate with people who they find they have more in common with.

It is also vital to remember, for those with or without verbal skills, that communicating with friends does not always have to be done with the spoken word. For many autistic children, spending time with other people whilst doing the same activity, even without spoken language, can be a positive (and possibly even preferred!) social interaction.

## Social health

*"Social health is how you get along with people, how other people react to you, and how you interact with society...."*

*...Developing social skills can improve the relationships you have with other people and help you to make friends...*

*...Good social skills can also help you in your career and to live independently in adult life."*

**The Den**  
Autism Education Trust

Alongside potentially needing some help with learning about social skills, autistic children may need some support to understand the benefits of doing so. It is important to find the balance between not pressuring children into unwanted social interaction and ensuring they do spend some time with other people, as evidence shows that being completely isolated is potentially bad for mental health.

### **Benefits of spending time with other people**

It might help to point out the potential benefits of spending time with other people and developing their social skills to enable them to do this.

These can include;

- Can find other people who have similar interests to you so you can play games with them or talk to them about your interests
- Someone to go out with who isn't a family member

- Other people might be able to help you do things (that you find difficult on your own)
- Can help avoiding problems such as teasing and bullying when you're not on your own
- Finding people who think like you (often other autistic people)
- Finding people who can be a 'social navigator' (often a non-autistic person)
- Can help with allowing you to be more independent
- Having a job (easier if you are already used to spending time with other people)

*"Build yourself a team of trustworthy, patient NT 'advisors'. You can check in with them if you feel confused about a social situation."*

**Jennifer Cook O-Toole**

The Asperkid's secret book of social rules, 2013

## Supporting children and young people to spend time with other people

### Recognising different preferences

As discussed earlier, preferences for how much time to spend with other people can vary in autistic children and may be very different to those preferences of non-autistic children.

As also mentioned, autistic children may enjoy different activities to other children, and may not necessarily enjoy spending time with other people doing things like going out to eat, playing or watching sport, shopping or simply sitting around chatting.



## Engaging with people about their interests

*"Zone in on special interests...as there's no more potent way to understand the person or to motivate us."*

**Jennifer Cook O-Toole**  
NAS Conference, 2015

If we can show an interest in what autistic children are interested in, particularly when this is an intense interest, this may help in spending time with them.

As discussed on the self-esteem section, valuing an autistic child's interests can make them feel better about themselves, and potentially more open to spending time with other people if they feel that person is interested in what they like.

### **Making friends**

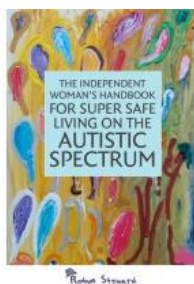
Although some autistic children may make friends independently, others may need a bit of help with this. Finding other people with similar interests can often be an important step.

Many autistic people say they have friends of different ages, and often have friends that are older than them. Tony Attwood has often been quoted as saying that it is only during your school years that your friends need to be six months either side of your birthday!

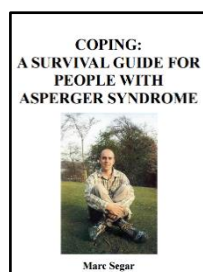
Some parents have found that encouraging their autistic child to join activity sessions or clubs has helped them meet people with similar interests and has led to them becoming friends.

There are several books that can help autistic children with learning the 'do's and don'ts' of friendships; covering topics such as where to meet people, how often you should contact them and the types of things you should talk about.

Many autistic children will need help with understanding what a friend is.



Robyn Steward's book *The Independent Woman's Handbook for Super Safe Living on the Autistic Spectrum* has a chapter on helping people understand what a friend is, explaining what a true friend is, different levels of friendships, who is a friend and who is not, and introducing a *ladder of trust* to help with understanding how much information you should share with other people.



Mark Segar's book *Coping: A survival guide for people with Asperger syndrome* has a useful section on finding the right friends, including a list of what makes a true friend, a hoax friend and an enemy.

*Inviting other teenagers over* - in a similar way to arranging 'play-dates' when children were younger, some parents have found that they still need to be on hand to help their autistic teenager with knowing what to do when a friend comes over.

It can be helpful to explain or remind autistic teenagers of the need to plan what they are going to do (some may benefit from quite a detailed structure), how long the other person will be there, the need to stay with them and to be friendly. These are social rules that might not always be obvious to the autistic teenager, even if they already spend quite a bit of time with that person.

Some autistic teenagers may have little or no verbal communication with friends who come over, but this does not mean they are not interacting.

### **Navigating some of the 'secret rules'**

There are lots of unwritten social rules around spending time with other people and friendships. Many autistic people may have limited knowledge and

understanding of these rules and can unwittingly 'break' these rules and potentially confuse, upset or offend people. There may be others who will analyse these social rules in detail and find it hard to cope with any changes or flexibility demanded.

### **Prepare for meeting new people**

It can be helpful to prepare beforehand for meeting new people. This could involve writing down a list of things the child can ask or role-playing scenarios. Many autistic children may need someone familiar with them when they are meeting someone new for the first time.

Questions it may be useful to prepare for might include;



*Topics of conversations* - it can be helpful to have a list of topics that are good to start a conversation with. For example, some autistic adults will look at the 'most read' stories on a news website and try starting a conversation about these the next day. Many teenagers use social media to know what other people are talking about.

*Ending conversations* - it can be helpful to watch out for signals that someone wants to end a conversation with you; these might include when the other person isn't asking questions back to you, is looking around the room, yawning or saying they have something else to do. Saying a phrase such as "Well I'd better be going now" before saying "Goodbye" can be better than just walking off.

## **Create situations where meeting new people is possible**

There may be many autistic children who find it difficult to meet people that they enjoy spending time with. Encouraging an autistic child to join local social skills groups, interest groups (e.g. drama, sports, and martial arts, computers or Minecraft) or arranging friendship-dates at home.

Some parents have asked their school to put them in touch with other families who have autistic children - so they can arrange to meet up.

## **Exit strategies**

It is vital to help autistic children have an exit strategy for when they are with other people, including how to leave an environment they don't feel comfortable in, and emphasising that they shouldn't comply with things they don't want to or shouldn't be doing just to fit in.

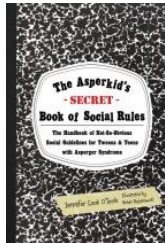
## **Explaining the secret rules**

Many autistic children find the unwritten rules of social communication and interaction confusing, particularly as they can change in different contexts or when with different people.

These are just a few examples of the secret rules that an autistic child may need a bit of help with learning. It may be worth making a list, and asking school to do the same, of social/secret rules for different environments. This can be something that siblings or peers can help with.

- Smile and be friendly
- Show interest in other people's interests
- Don't talk for longer than xx minutes about xxxxxx
- Some social rules change dependent on what situation you are in
- People don't like to be corrected by one another
- Mistakes can be OK
- Making honesty tactful - to be honest you don't need to speak every thought in your head

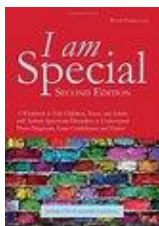
There is a more detailed resource list at the end of the booklet, but these are a few resources that people have found particularly useful in planning discussions;



*The Asperkid's (Secret) Book of Social Rules: The Handbook of Not-So-Obvious Social Guidelines for Tweens and Teens with Asperger Syndrome (2012)*

Jennifer Cook O'Toole

Written by an autistic Mum for her daughter, this is widely recommended as a great book for explaining all about the unwritten social rules that are potentially so confusing for autistic people.



*I am Special (2013)*

Peter Vermeulen

A Workbook to Help Children, Teens and Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders to Understand Their Diagnosis, Gain Confidence and Thrive.

There are also a variety of books to help explain autism to children, teenagers and adults that might also be helpful, along with video clips and blogs.

## Social isolation

There can be a variety of underlying reasons why an autistic teenager can experience social isolation. It is important to strike the balance between enabling them to have the time on their own that they may need and helping them understand that being completely socially isolated is not good for mental health.

Here are some additional strategies that might help when building up their confidence to join in socially again.

## Back chaining

The process of back chaining refers to breaking down the steps of a task and teaching them in reverse order. This gives the child an experience of success and completion with every attempt.

Instead of the child starting at the beginning and getting lost somewhere through, with the adult having to complete the task, the adult does all but the last step and lets the child complete the work. Then the adult fades back, doing less and less while the child does more and more, always ending with the child performing the final step.

Here are some examples of using back chaining.

This is an example of how we might use it to build daily living skills such as washing, dressing, making food etc



This is an example of how we might use it in older children and adults to help build independence skills

## Back chaining - using public transport

Something that might be daunting for the autistic teenager or their parent

- Choose one specific journey.
- Went on that journey with him a few times.
- Took him to the bus in the car and spoke to driver about what stop he should get off at; walked onto bus with him, when he was settled in seat, I got off (did this couple of times).
- Person at other side - to either go onto bus and get him off or meet him off bus and walk to destination.

- Took him to bus stop, let him get on bus himself, waiting away from bus until it left, but still there for visual support.
- Same arrangements at other end.
- Meanwhile, practice talking to bus driver and giving money to drive (back up with visuals in wallet or pocket).
- Then parked car next to bus stop, let him walk to bus and get on himself.
- Gran was meeting him further down the road so had to walk towards her house on his own.

## Support with managing expectations

Whilst we consider strategies for understanding and building emotional resilience, part of that is also being able to manage expectations. I've found that regardless of having an autism diagnosis many autistic people can and do have similar expectations, dreams and ambitions as individuals who are not autistic.

This is an example of a strategy I used to support my son to manage his expectations which are often very complex and seem on the surface difficult to achieve.

If using this strategy, you would find a big sheet of paper and on one end draw a picture that represents where the person is at the moment in their life. So, for example you can see in this example he wanted to be a pilot but was still at school. Then on the other end draw a picture that represents the expectation or ambition.

Next you would do some research together and have a think about the steps involved in achieving that end goal. For this example, it was to finish school with an English higher, learn to drive and pass your test, earn lots of money for flight lessons and then if all goes well you can become a pilot. (It's a bit more complicated than that lol!)

Tanya Tennant Autism Training and Consultancy March 2022

The idea then that when the conversation comes up you support the person to check in on their journey using the visual. This has been a great tool for us as when my son gets stuck at a stage, he is better able to understand and process why and there's always the opportunity to move on to the next stage and look at how to achieve that in more detail. Currently where he is at is, he hasn't passed higher english yet or sat his driving test and so we are on earn lots of money. We have looked at how could you do that. He decided work in IT and so now we have another addition to the visual breaking down the process for being able to work in IT. He is currently studying with the Open University by way of achieving this next step. I hope that during his years at Uni he will become more mature and emotionally resilient, his attention will improve and understanding of the world and when we look back on the visual later, he'll be ready to sit his english higher or move onto siting driving lessons and we'll move on but if not he'll be big in the world of IT lol!



#### 4. Support with managing expectations

"I want to be a Pilot"

- Acknowledged their right to have dreams and ambitions
- Gave any information visually
- Looked at the steps involved in reaching the goal
- Involved them in the research
- Created a visual programme of the steps involved



#### Support to get involved in social activities

Many autistic teenagers need support if they are to get involved in social activities. It can also be helpful to introduce them to the idea of new activities gradually; some people might need lots of pictures of where they will be going or just to have short visits to start with.



Encouraging an autistic teenager to get involved in any local social groups or special interest groups can help them with spending time with other people and may also give them the opportunity to meet other autistic people.



Some local organisations might run activity sessions that are specifically aimed at teenagers with disabilities, including autism. Local parent support groups are often a good source of information about this, as is the NAS Autism Services Directory;

Autism Services Directory - [www.autism.org.uk/directory](http://www.autism.org.uk/directory)

The National Autistic Society run some very successful online which can help an autistic child to gradually build up their confidence in social interaction and make friends in a less socially demanding environment. Here is the link to more information [online social groups \(under 26\) \(autism.org.uk\)](http://autism.org.uk/online-social-groups-under-26)

It can be an idea to look at activities that are linked to something your autistic teenager enjoys, such as computing, Minecraft, art and craft, drama or different sports. Talking beforehand to the activity leader can be helpful. The NAS has a good information sheet for sports and activity leaders - [Sport - a guide for sports coaches and clubs \(autism.org.uk\)](http://autism.org.uk/sport-a-guide-for-sports-coaches-and-clubs)

### **Requesting support from statutory agencies**

If an autistic teenager does not have a support network or needs additional support, it is a good idea to request a community care assessment from your local social services department.

In some areas, local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) may run social skills sessions for autistic teenagers.

## Useful references

There are a variety of resources for thinking about keeping safe for autistic teenagers. Some can be used with the teenagers themselves, others might be useful for parents to use to give them inspiration.

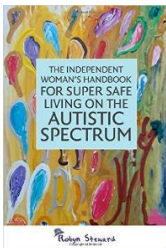
These books are particularly useful:



*Aspects of Asperger's - success in the teens and twenties* (2004)  
Alex Miller & Maud Brown

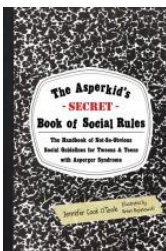
safe.

Put together by Alex and her grandmother Maud, this book has lots of practical ideas about preparing for adulthood and keeping



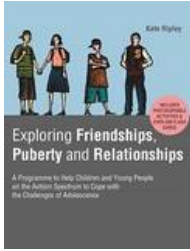
*The Independent Woman's Handbook for Super Safe Living on the Autistic Spectrum* (2014)  
Robyn Steward

Robyn's book is a great resource for teaching girls and women about keeping safe, and may be just in useful in terms of information for boys and men.



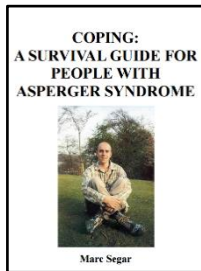
*The Asperkid's (Secret) Book of Social Rules: The Handbook of Not-So- Obvious Social Guidelines for Tweens and Teens With Asperger Syndrome* (2012)  
Jennifer Cook O'Toole

Written by an autistic Mum for her daughter, this is widely recommended as a great book for explaining all about the unwritten social rules that are potentially so confusing for autistic people.



*Exploring Friendships, Puberty and Relationships (2014)*  
Kate Ripley

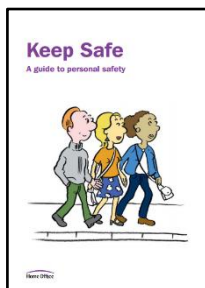
A workbook with useful chapters including who do I trust, making friends, what the law says and building a relationship.



*Coping: A Survival Guide for People with Asperger Syndrome (1997)*

Marc Segar

Available to download free from [www-users.cs.york.ac.uk/alistair/survival/](http://www-users.cs.york.ac.uk/alistair/survival/) Contains lots of information about keeping safe, probably one to choose relevant bits out of that are useful for your teenager.



*Keep Safe - A Guide to Personal Safety*

Published by The Home Office, this is an easy to use guide to personal safety. It covers being safe at home, out and about, at the cash machine and more.

## Books

*Autism: supporting your teenager (2014)*  
Caroline Hattersley

*The Asperkid's (Secret) Book of Social Rules: The Handbook of Not-So-Obvious Social Guidelines for Tweens and Teens with Asperger Syndrome (2012)*  
Jennifer Cook O'Toole

*Been There, Done That, TRY THIS! (2014)*  
Tony Attwood

*Coming Out Asperger: Diagnosis, Disclosure and Self-Confidence (2005)*  
Dinah Murray

*Exploring Friendships, Puberty and Relationships - A programme to help children and young people on the autism spectrum to cope with the challenges of adolescence (2014)*

Kate Ripley

*I am Special (2013)*

Peter Vermeulen

*The Independent Woman's Handbook for Super Safe Living on the Autistic Spectrum (2013)*

Robyn Steward

*Women and Girls with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Understanding Life Experiences from Early Childhood to Old Age (2015)*

Sarah Hendrickx

*Autism: supporting your teenager (2014)*

Caroline Hattersley

*Can I Tell You About Autism? (2014)*

Jude Welton

*Can I Tell You About Asperger Syndrome? (2003)*

Jude Welton

*Can I tell you about Pathological Demand Avoidance syndrome? (2015)*

Ruth Fidler

*Asperger's Syndrome in 13-16 Year Olds (2015)*

Alis Rowe

*Sisterhood of the Spectrum: An Asperger Chick's Guide to Life (2015)*

Jennifer Cook O'Toole

*The Reason I Jump: one boy's voice from the silence of autism (2014)*

Naoki Higashida

## Web links

*The Spectrum Magazine*

[The Spectrum magazine \(autism.org.uk\)](http://autism.org.uk)

*My Autism and me* - BBC Newsround Special with Rosie King (2012)

[www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/15655232](http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/15655232)

*Making friends* - Guides for parents and carers

[Making friends \(autism.org.uk\)](http://autism.org.uk)

The Den (part of the Autism Education Trust) - interactive online space for autistic young people

[www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/the-den](http://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/the-den)

Wrong Planet

[www.wrongplanet.net](http://www.wrongplanet.net)

The National Autistic Society YouTube Clips - [you tube national autistic society](#)  
- [Bing video](#)

# Who are Tanya Tennant Autism Training and Consultancy?



Tanya Tennant Autism Training and Consultancy was founded in April 2016.

We are specialists in Autistic Spectrum Disorders and associated conditions. We provide training and consultancy for individuals living with and supporting people with Autism.

Tanya has over 21 years of experience working in the field of Autism in both residential and educational settings and more recently specialising in supporting parents, carers and professionals working in the field of autism. Tanya also brings her personal experience of the last 24 years of living with and supporting autistic people through supporting her 24yr old son who was diagnosed at age two. Tanya also has a diagnosis of Autism and Sensory Processing Disorder which she received in December 2013.

For more information about us and the work we do please visit:

Website: [www.tanyatennant.co.uk](http://www.tanyatennant.co.uk)

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/tanyatennantatc](https://www.facebook.com/tanyatennantatc)