

Overview

Social situations can be difficult for some people on the autism spectrum. It can be hard to know what is appropriate in conversations. Defining the boundaries between personal and professional relationships can be problematic.

For children there are several successful social skill training programs that support the development of social reciprocal conversations^{1,2}. For adults on the spectrum, however, there are few avenues for supported programs that provide safe opportunities to practice mutual conversation and to learn about social boundaries.

The ability to understand social boundaries can provide the opportunity to start and maintain friendships, engage in ongoing romantic relationships and successfully obtain and sustain employment³. Being able to successfully engage in social activities can also improve self-esteem and reduce the risk of depression and anxiety⁴.

How to use this information sheet

This information sheet has been written for people on the spectrum, by those who are on the spectrum. The information sheet is designed as a brief guide to social boundaries and includes some ideas on how to manage them. Sometimes the suggestions will work, and other times they may not. Don't give up; sometimes we need to try again with a different approach.

Throughout this document there are tips on conversation topics and a list of suggested resources at the end of the document. Your thoughts and opinions are a valuable part of the conversation.



Joining a social group with people who are interested in things that you like can be a great way of socialising.

Relationships

There are many types of social relationships. For each there are social boundaries. What is acceptable in family, romantic or other social relationships may not be appropriate in professional relationships.

We have some relationships where we can see the person we are talking to, but we also conduct relationships through electronic communications, such as phone calls, where you can hear but not see the person you are speaking with.

Email and text messaging are other ways we can communicate with people. In emails and texts we don't get to see or hear the person in real time so negotiating what is appropriate to send also needs to be considered carefully.



If you are not sure how the conversation or relationship is going, it can be worth asking the other person to tell you how things are going.

Social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, are another way of socialising. These usually involve written communications and usually don't provide cues or feedback that we can get when we can see a person. It can be challenging to know what the person means from the text alone.

Diplomacy

In any social environment we generally try to avoid conflicts. This is where diplomacy comes in and where it is good to understand other people's opinions, beliefs, ideas and feelings.



Starting with an open mind is a great way to go about it. If you dislike the person you are talking to it can be better to put those feelings aside and work with the person so that you can both achieve the end goal. There is no use arguing with a person or group as it can stop you getting on with what you need to achieve.



To be diplomatic, it is best to negotiate with the person and come to a compromise. Having diplomacy skills can help you to improve a relationship. It can even lead to building and developing mutual respect for one another, which in turn can lead to more successful communications.

Below is an example of how difficult it can be to know the social boundaries of being honest and diplomatic in the workplace

I applied for a volunteer job at the local hospital, and on the day that I was supposed to start volunteering I had to go to a doctor's appointment.

I emailed the male doctor who was to be my supervisor to tell him that I could not volunteer on that day and I said that the issue was related to women's stuff.

After that email, they did not want me to work with them, because I was too honest.



Providing too much information about personal issues can make colleagues uncomfortable. It is usually best to just give the information that is necessary. In the example above, saying that she was unable to volunteer because she had a doctor's appointment would have been sufficient.

Examples of conversation starters

Choose topics that are relevant to the person you are talking to and where possible try to use open ended questions, rather than closed ended questions, so that the conversation is back and forth.

- How are things going for you at work?
- Congratulations on your recent promotion/achievement
- Are you planning any holidays soon?

Professional and workplace relationships

Professionals can include people who are not your family or friend. Professional relationships happen when two or more people need to interact for a specific purpose, such as in the workplace.

In all relationships and conversations your opinion is valuable. You have the right to be heard and included in the conversation. Understanding how to negotiate the social boundaries at the workplace and with professionals and your colleagues can be challenging.



The Australian Human Rights Commission website has important information on legal obligations in the Australian community. These laws apply to everyone in Australia. There are varying factors that constitute sexual discrimination and harassment. There is a link in the 'resources' section at the end of this fact sheet to the Australian Human Rights Commission website.

Professional relationships can involve people you work with or people you talk to at the shops or anyone who provides you with a service. Some examples of professional relationships are your boss, work colleagues, teachers, doctors, other professionals and shop assistants.

Professional relationships can have legal and ethical obligations. In professional relations, such as at work, certain topics are not usually discussed. It is usually best to keep away from discussions of sex, sexuality, race, religion or politics. While these topics are not taboo within society and casual settings, some people have very strong opinions and raising them can lead to arguments or people taking offence at the conversation.

Communicating in the workplace

In the workplace, being able to effectively communicate is important and difficulties in this area can present career challenges for a person on the autism spectrum.

The way you talk with your colleagues will be different to the way you report to your boss or help your client understand the key services you provide to their business. Communication in the office may be between colleagues and managers or with a client and may occur in the office space, a meeting room, over the phone or in email.

Much communication that occurs in the office is done by non-verbal communications through gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, posture, and tone of voice. This is an area that people on the spectrum often struggle with. Being able to read facial expressions and other cues can help in understanding what another person is thinking and feeling. Learning how to read body language is important and developing this skill will help in maintaining positive relationships with your colleagues and boss. There is a link in the Resources section to a Queensland Government website on managing non-verbal communication in business relationships.



The majority of conversations in the workplace are centred on work matters, such as tasks and work deliverables. However, casual small talk can also occur in the workplace.

Conversation Starters in the Workplace

- How is that project you are working on going?
- Did you do anything fun or interesting at the weekend?
- What are your weekend plans?
- Tell me more about what you do - are you working on anything new and exciting at the moment?

Other social relationships

In our day-to-day activities we meet people who are not providing a professional service, are not colleagues, yet they are not a personal relationship and are not friends or family. They are the people who you meet in your day-to-day activities. Some examples of other social relationships could be patients you meet in a waiting room who start up a conversation or the neighbour who says "hello".

Examples of conversation starters

- Talk about something that is happening in your region, such as a new highway in your area or local shop closure
- Any weather or climatic events such as floods, bushfires or heatwaves
- Have you seen a movie recently?
- What is your favourite computer game?

Personal relationships

Personal relationships are informal. These boundaries are normally more relaxed, and often involve an understanding of each other's social and emotional preferences. This emotional connection means that there can be a mutual trust and honesty between each other. Talking about your feelings and your shared interests is usual. You might like to share a story about something that is making you happy today or something that is concerning you.

Personal relationships with family and friends can offer the opportunity to discuss your thoughts and feelings. Friends and family relationships can be strengthened through sharing your opinions and listening to others points of view.

Aspect recently released the Launchpad website that is designed to help young people on the spectrum with practical strategies on independent living, including socialising and romantic partnerships. <http://www.autismlaunchpad.org.au/social/romance-and-dating/>

In the dating and relationship section of the Launchpad website you will find tips on:

- Meeting potential partners
- Preparing to meet someone new
- Tips for asking someone out
- How to read signs of interest and disinterest from others

Aspect also runs workshops for adults on relationships and dating. For more information on dates and venues please contact: aspectpractice@autismspectrum.org.au

Social media and email communication

Social media and email are more recent domains for social interactions, but the same guidelines as discussed previously about what is appropriate still apply, such as diplomacy and talking about topics that you are both interested in.

When communicating on social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, care needs to be taken with what is written because once something is said online it can be visible to more people than you realise and generally it is viewable forever.



With other social relationships you may not know what the person's interests are, so it is best to talk about something that is relevant to a larger group.

Facebook

In your personal Facebook account you can 'friend' whoever you want to keep in contact with most often.

Who to 'friend'?

Normally, it is not recommended that you 'friend' people that you have a professional relationship with. Remember that even if your boss cannot see your social media directly, it does not stop someone 'sharing' or 'quoting' what you say. So treat everything you say on social media as public. Be careful to maintain appropriate privacy settings.

If you have a Facebook account and a business Facebook account, it's best to leave them separated.

Allow business clients to message you on your business Facebook account so that all of your business transactions and business news are kept there.

If your business clients or associates ask you, "Why don't you friend me on your personal Facebook account?", tell them that you are on a professional level with them.

Engaging in small talk

Small talk is untargeted conversation. It is informal and does not have an agenda. Small talk happens in all social settings, professional, family and other social relationships. Small talk is usual in social gatherings such as parties.

Conversation starters

Examples of conversation starters

- Discuss the weather
- Ask someone about their weekend or what their weekend plans are
- Learn what sports they like and what teams they follow
- Find out what TV shows or movies they like



Sometimes, especially in Australia, the "how are you?" question is a courteous greeting.

Issue that can be difficult

"How are you?" - What does this mean? What do I say?

This is a question that can differ depending on who is involved.

When friends ask you about how you are feeling, it usually means that they are interested in you and they want an answer. Friends can give you support if you have a problem. The issue is how much information do you share?

Generally it is best to give a brief answer. If your friend asks you some questions it is ok to answer them truthfully.

How are you?

In a professional situation, when a colleague asks you, "how are you?" or "how is your day?" (especially, first thing in the morning), it is often a courtesy. Sometimes, they are interested to hear your answer, but often colleagues are simply acknowledging you.

Deciding on what information to offer is an ongoing problem for many people on the autism spectrum. Discussing information about your own, or someone else's, medical or personal problems in a professional situation can be inappropriate and could be considered 'over sharing'.

One example of when to give a brief answer to this question is when an employee has been away from work and has a medical certificate from a doctor. In this case the boss is not required to know the details of the condition.

A courteous answer to the question of "how are you" could be, "I am feeling better now, thank you".

Difficulties in keeping a conversation going

The difficulties with social boundaries for someone on the autism spectrum are that the situations can vary and there are no rule books that provide answers for every situation. It can be difficult to know what to talk about, or how to start a conversation.

Sometimes, the person listening to someone can become bored of hearing about a special interest. Try to talk about a range of topics.

Stopping a conversation

Sometimes it can be awkward to finish a conversation. Generally people need to know that everyone has said what they wanted to say and the conversation is over. If you don't let everyone know that the conversation is over and simply walk away, people can be confused and misinterpret why the person has walked off and it can come across as rude.

Personally, I find it hard to keep talking to someone who I class as a friend, let alone talking to someone for the first time.

I rely more on them asking me how my day has been or something else. This then gives me the chance to ask them back the same thing. I then wait for them to talk about something that I may know a bit about too.

I find the best conversations are when the other person and I talk about something I feel we can both talk about. I have made some friends this way.

For many people on the autism spectrum all topics are on the table as we like to speak our minds.

The advice is, however, in order to have a polite conversation one must refrain from the topics of sex, religion, and politics.

To maintain positive relations with friends, family and co-workers, it is best to put these topics aside and use with discretion.



Avoid boredom in other people by including everyone in the conversation.

- After you have spoken for a couple of minutes ask the other person a question about their opinion too
- If there are several people, ask each person one question
- Your thoughts are important, so make sure you get a chance to say something too

Summary

In closing

Each day most of us will engage with family, friends and colleagues and need to negotiate the social boundaries. Learning what works can take time and practice.

This information sheet was written to highlight the social issues that can be challenging and to provide some tips on how to manage them. Finding a social group where you feel comfortable can be great way of practicing your social skills. Look for adult social groups in your area that meet regularly. Check if there are any that share your passions as it is often easier to talk to someone who is interested in similar things.

Resources

Launchpad is a website developed for young people on the autism spectrum and their families. It has information about becoming independent and developing skills for study, work, social life and managing your health and legal matters. <http://www.autismlaunchpad.org.au/>

Aspect Adult Social Networks are local social groups that reflect the interests of the members. For more information on joining a social group or starting one in your area: <http://www.aspect.org.au/content/adult-social-networks>

Aspect Social Groups are a great way to form new friendships. The social groups offer a wide-range of leisure activities in Penrith, Central Coast and the inner west of Sydney. <https://www.aspect.org.au/adultsocialgroups>

The National Autistic Society website has valuable information on social skills for adolescents and adults <http://www.autism.org.uk/living-with-autism/communicating-and-interacting/social-skills.aspx>

PEERS® for Young Adults is an evidence -based social skills intervention program for adults. The website has downloadable research publications and resources for sale: <http://www.semel.ucla.edu/peers/young-adults>

I CAN Network is a social enterprise founded by people on the spectrum that mentors young people on the autism spectrum. <http://icannetwork.com.au/about/>

Gig Buddies Sydney is a registered not-for-profit organisation committed to promoting the rights of people with learning disabilities to live the lifestyle of their choosing. Gig Buddies Sydney believe that people with learning disabilities have the right to stay up late and have some fun. <http://www.gigbuddiessydney.org/#!aboutus/c2414>

Meetup Friendship Groups are located all over the world. Meetup is an online social networking portal that enables people with similar interests to organise meetings. The list of interest groups is almost endless and includes movies, astronomy, food, Adult Aspies Social Group Sydney, Eastern Suburbs (Sydney) Parents of Kids with ADHD & ASD. <http://www.meetup.com/find/?allMeetups=false&keywords=autism&radius=5&userFreeform=Sydney%2C+Australia&mcName=Sydney%2C+AU&lat=-33.860306&lon=151.2016&sort=default>

The Australian Human Rights Commission has information on what constitutes sex discrimination and sexual harassment: <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/sex-discrimination>

This website also has information on many other issues including racial discrimination: <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/complaints/complaint-guides/making-complaint/complaints-under-racial-discrimination-act#Heading36>

References

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² Koegel L, Park M, Koegel R. (2014) Using self-management to improve the reciprocal social conversation of children with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 44: 1055-63.

³ Gantman A, Kapp SK, Orenski K, Laugeson ES. (2012) Social skills training for young adults with high functioning autism spectrum disorders: A randomized controlled pilot study. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 42: 1094-103.

⁴ Mazurek MO. (2014) Loneliness, friendship, and well-being in adults with autism spectrum disorders. *Autism* 18: 223-32.