

## IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL SKILLS FOR CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

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**Abstract:** Children with Autism are those with a neurodevelopmental disorder which is characterized by impairments in social communication disorder and restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, and activities. India is home to more than 10 million people with Autism and the disability has shown an increase over the last few years. Children with Autism have social skills deficit, and this is one of the most difficult areas for children with Autism. Social skills are “a set of skills that facilitate the successful interaction/s of children between their peers, parents, teachers, and other adults”. Children with Autism have problems using social skills to connect with other people. They also have difficulties to share a common focus with other children about the same object or event-known as joint attention; play with others and share toys; to make eye contact with others; difficulties to make friendships and to talk with others; they also have poor understanding and use of gestures; failure of back and forth conversation and lack of facial expressions. Because of the deficit in the above mentioned areas, children with Autism find it difficult to be independent in most of their activities, poor social identity which in turn can decrease their employment opportunity in the future. This can lead to social isolation and psychosocial problems.

Therefore, there is a need to train children with Autism on social skills, in order to encourage them to communicate with others effectively, to make them become independent to some extent, self-reliant, feel competent as individuals, to mainstream them into the society. Further it will help them to sustain social relationships.

**Keywords:** Children with Autism, Social Skills.

**Introduction:** Children with Autism are those with a neurodevelopmental disorder which is characterized by impairments in social communication disorder and restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, and activities [1]. Symptoms are present during early developmental period but it typically manifests when social demands exceed limited capacities. Symptoms together limit and impair everyday functioning.

India is home to more than 10 million people with Autism and the disability has shown an increase over the last few years [2]. The prevalence of Autism in the United States is 1 in 68 children (1 in 42 boys and 1 in 189 girls) as having Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) [3].

The common characteristics of children with Autism are failure of back and forth conversation; reduced sharing of interest or affect; failure to initiate or respond; poorly integrated verbal and non-verbal behaviour; abnormal eye contact and body language; poor understanding and use of gestures; lack of facial expressions; difficulties in adjusting to social context, sharing, imaginative play, making friends; absence of interest in peers; stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech, etc. However, no two children with Autism display the characteristics in the same way but having difficulty in any or all of these areas may lead to problems in the daily life activities of the child with Autism.

Because of their disability, children with Autism have social skills deficit, and one of the defining characteristics of Autism is impairment in social interactions and social skills [4]. According to LeCroy

(2009) defines social skills as “a complex set of skills that facilitate the successful interactions between peers, parents, teachers, and other adults” [5]. Social skills are verbal and nonverbal behaviours an individual uses to interact with others so that the communication is mutually beneficial and reinforcing and; the child with Autism also has to communicate either verbally or non-verbally based. Thus social skills play a significant role in helping a child with Autism to develop a social identity. Helping them to refine their social skills will enable them to overcome their socially inappropriate behaviour from early years of life.

**Need For Social Skills:** Children with Autism have inappropriate social behaviour- they often unable to recognise and differentiate the most important persons in their lives such as parents, siblings, and teachers but sometimes they may not react when they are left with a stranger. Poor eye contact is common among autistic children. Children with Autism have difficulty to understand feelings of others around them. They have difficulty in connecting with their peers, to play with their peers and to make friends [6]; and lose the opportunity to develop social competence. Children with Autism tend to get isolated from others and they prefer activities that they can do alone such as playing alone, watching television, playing computer games or concentrating on a narrow area of interest [7]. Due to social rejection they tend to get isolated [8]. Further children with Autism find it difficult to be independent in most of their activities; poor social identity can also decrease their employment

opportunity in the future. This in turn can lead to social isolation and psychosocial problems. Therefore, it is important to teach social skills in order to encourage them to communicate with others effectively or express through body language, to make them become independent to some extent, self-reliant, feel competent as individuals, to mainstream them into the society. Social skills training will also help children with Autism to make friends, establish relationships, and have appropriate social interactions and it will also help to reduce some of the maladaptive behaviours (for example, self-injury, and aggression). But social skills must be age appropriate and goal oriented.

**Methods to Teach Social Skills:** Children with Autism do not learn social skills incidentally by observation and participation. It needs to target specific skills for explicit instruction and to provide support for using the skills in social situations [4]. Some of the methods for teaching social skills are-

**1. Visual aids:** The most strongly recommended method for teaching social skills for children with Autism is to use visual aids. Students often demonstrate relative strengths in concrete thinking, rote memory, and understanding of visual-spatial relationships, and difficulties in abstract thinking, social cognition, communication, and attention [4]. Pictographic and written cues can often help them to learn, communicate, and develop self-control. Autistic children can use visual aids for as long as they need to process the information. Visual aids and symbols range in complexity from simple and concrete to abstract. It can be real object or situation, to facsimile, colour photograph, colour picture, black and white picture, line drawing, and finally to graphic symbol and written language [9].

**2. Using social stories:** Social stories, especially when accompanied by photographs or pictures, are effective in preparing some children for change, and particularly for preparing students for new situations and unfamiliar activities. Visual cues used in combination with verbal instructions can help the student to understand what is expected [4].

**3. Use discrete trial methods:** Prompt as one of the important cues can be used to teach social skills for autistic children as long as they are needed, as children can become dependent on prompts. It may be physical, gestural, or verbal. When using the discrete trial strategy, the instructor presents the stimulus for the desired behaviour by giving directions or instructions, and prompts the child; the child responds, and then the instructor provides consequences based on behavioural principles. The

prompt is often designed to assist the child in performing tasks [4].

**4. Comic strip conversations:** According to Gray (2010), Comic strip conversations are visual expressions of communication that show words that express feelings, actions with facial expressions in the story and explain “why” someone feels the way they do. It includes inferences that carry over from one comic square to the next [10].

**5. Modelling:** It is a form of prompting. It gives a visual example of what is expected in an activity by having children see the sequence of steps in the task being performed. For example, the student learns the actions to a song by first watching a demonstration by an adult [11].

**6. Using peer support:** Peers can assist children with Autism in developing social skills. It may be helpful to educate the peers first, so that they better understand the behaviour of the autistic child and can be trained them on how to use specific prompts to initiate and maintain interaction with a classmate/child with Autism. Pivotal Response Training (PRT) is one technique that has been used during recess breaks and has been successful in increasing interactions, initiation, varied toy play, and language use. Pivotal Response Training involves teaching typical peers to use strategies to gain attention, give choices to maintain motivation, vary toys, model social behaviour, reinforce attempts, encourage conversation, extend conversation, take turns, narrate play etc. Parents should involve in making decision to discuss Autism with their child’s peers [12].

Thus the above mentioned methods are highlighted through the review of literature which indicates that to teach and to train children with Autism the use of visual aids, praise, prompts, stories and peer support is of utmost importance. Such strategies when used in long run helps the children develop a sense of social identity and enable them to be integrate into the mainstream of the society.

**Conclusion:** Children with Autism have social skills impairments such as a lack of shared enjoyment, trouble with perspective taking, poor understanding, difficulty to interact with others, difficulties to make friendships. After reviewing the above literatures it is understood that children with Autism needs to be taught social skills training in order to encourage them to communicate with others effectively, to make them become independent to some extent, self-reliant, feel competent as individuals, to mainstream them into the society. Further it will help them to improve on their socially appropriate behaviours, social interactions and it will also help to reduce some of the self-behaviours.

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