

An introduction to socialising for adults with autism

This information sheet is designed to give adults on the autism spectrum an introduction to socialising. It covers how to start a conversation, different conversation topics and some rules to keep in mind when socialising.

When we socialise, we use a set of rules that we usually learn by watching others and copying what we see when we are children. Some people with autism may not automatically learn these rules as children, so may find it more difficult to socialise. Some people may not know how to start or end a conversation, or they may talk continuously about one subject and not know when to stop. They may also have difficulty discussing things that they are not as interested in. Other people may stand too close to others or be unable to make eye contact. People with autism may not pick up on social cues that other people rely on when meeting and interacting with others. Unfortunately, most non-autistic people would not know that some people with autism find social interaction difficult, so they may be confused or put off by the difficulties listed above.

Different types of conversation

There are lots of types of conversations that you can have and these are usually related to the person you are speaking to. Some conversations are easier to prepare for as they tend to be similar every time, for example asking for help at an information desk or ordering food in a restaurant.

Other conversations are harder to prepare for, for example talking with friends, colleagues or people you are meeting for the first time. These are more difficult to prepare for because you cannot predict what the other person might say. However, you can learn some simple rules that will help you to know the sorts of topics you should discuss, when to stop a conversation, and using body language and eye contact.

How to start a conversation when you need information or help

If you are asking a stranger for information or help – like in a shop or at a train station – the best thing to do is look for someone who works at that place and simply start by saying 'Hello' or 'Excuse me'. You can then explain what it is you need and ask them to help. If you are out and about and there is no one specific you can ask for help from – like on the street when you need directions – then you can ask anyone. It is best to approach someone who is not walking very fast or who is not wearing headphones because these people may be in a rush to get somewhere or may not hear you!

How to start a conversation with someone you know

If you want to start a conversation with someone you know, you can also start by saying 'Hello'. This will help to get their attention and let them know you would like to talk to them. You might use a less formal greeting, such as 'hi' or 'hiya', if you know the person as a friend. You may also say something like 'How are you today?', to show that you are interested in them and how they are feeling. Usually people will reply to this and ask how you are as well, however sometimes people will answer but not ask you the question back. This is often a sign that they are too busy to talk – a lot of people would think it was rude to tell you this directly so they may try to be more subtle to be polite and not hurt your feelings. This can be confusing but you can learn these rules over time.

How to start a conversation with someone you are meeting for the first time

If you are meeting someone for the first time – for example, in a bar or at a work event – then starting a conversation will be very similar and you can still start with a 'Hello'. However, you should usually follow up with something specific about the place or event, preferably with a question. For example, if you are at a work event you might say 'This is a really nice venue/bar/etc., have you been to an event like this before?' or 'That last talk was really interesting, don't you think?'. These examples are good because they use the event or venue as a starting point and that is something you know you both share and can talk about. The question at the end encourages the person to respond and creates an opening for a conversation.

What to talk about

What you talk about will depend on who you are talking to and what situation you are in. If you are in a more formal conversation – like asking someone for help in a shop – then there may be a clear script.

An example of a conversation in a shop

You: Excuse me

Them: Yes? Can I help you?

You: Yes please. I am looking for [whatever item you are looking for].

Them: OK, no problem, please follow me and I'll show you where it is.

You: Thank you very much.

Them: You're welcome.

There are lots of conversations like this that are the same nearly every time you have them.

However, there are some situations where conversations can be much more complex. For example, if you are speaking to colleagues at your workplace. This can be difficult because you may be worried that if you make a mistake then it will reflect badly on you at work and this can make you less confident. Workplace conversations may seem very confusing because they are different all the time and depend on so many different things that you can't control or know in advance. But there are actually some common topics that people generally feel quite comfortable talking about:

- The weather
- TV shows
- Work
- What you did at the weekend.

These topics are sometimes known as 'small talk' because they are used to bond and communicate with other people, rather than to achieve a specific goal. Can you think of any other topics like this?

Once you know someone better, you can spend more time talking about your own interests. This is usually the basis of good friendship, as you share common interests and can talk about them together. However, if you talk too much just about your own interests when you do not know someone well, they may think you are not interested in them at all and this will put them off talking to you.

Ending a conversation

Some people with autism may struggle to know when a conversation has come to an end or when they should stop speaking. This is because the end of a conversation is not always predictable and knowing when to stop relies on lots of social rules which may not be obvious straight away.

People often use body language to show that they are done talking or need to leave. This may include looking at their watch or starting to move away from you in a different direction. They may feel that they are being very obvious that they need to leave and they are usually trying to be polite, but you may not realise that this is what they are doing. If people are bored or feel you have been talking for too long and not letting other people speak then they may stop making eye contact and start looking away from you. Of course, this is very hard to notice if you do not like making eye contact yourself.

If you want to end the conversation then you should say something like 'I'd better be going now' and then when they respond to this, say 'Goodbye' or 'See you later' before you leave. This is more polite than just leaving or just saying 'Goodbye', because you are telling them that you are leaving because you have somewhere to be, not because you are bored of them or upset in any way.

Important things to remember

Take turns

In a conversation, you must take turns. This means that you wait for the other person to reply before you speak again. If you are excited to discuss something, it may be tempting to say something before the other person has finished but this can appear to be quite rude and may make the person feel that they are not being listened to.

Pause for people to reply

If you ask a person a question or have finished what you were saying, pause to allow them to answer you. If you do not leave a pause then you may start talking again before the other person was ready. This will make them feel like you are not interested in a conversation but just want them to listen to you talk. If you are in a group conversation it is also good to pause to let quieter group members speak. They may be more shy to speak and be easily interrupted or overpowered if you speak too much or too quickly.

Listen

The key to a good conversation is to listen to the other person or people. Listening shows that you care and are interested in other people and what they have to say. People prefer to talk to someone who they think is paying attention to them and will avoid talking to someone who they do not think is a good listener. Listening will also make it easier to think of what to say next or questions you could ask, as well as things that you might have in common with the other person.

Ask questions (but not too many!)

Asking questions is a good way to show that you are interested in what someone has to say. These may be questions about them ('How are you today?' or 'I love your shoes, where did you get them?'), or about something they are interested in or are talking about ('Oh, you like horse riding? When did you start?' or 'I've heard of that TV show but haven't seen it, who are the main actors in it?').

However, you can ask too many questions and make the person feel like they are being interviewed! Try to keep questions light and not too personal and limit yourself to one or two questions to begin with, if the person is interested in a conversation then they will often ask you a question back and then you can take it in turns. Always make sure you listen to the other person's answers, rather than asking questions for the sake of it.

Don't be negative

Especially when talking to people you don't know really well, you should try to keep conversations as light as possible. This means being positive about yourself and keeping to topics that other people can also discuss. It is not a good idea, for example, to talk to colleagues about your flaws or how stressed you are. Most people will find this quite uncomfortable. These are conversations that you can have with friends and family but even then, if you talk about them too often then people will start to feel uncomfortable about it. People like to have conversations that are fun and nice so it is important to find a good balance.

Another kind of negativity to avoid is when talking about others. Sometimes it is OK to not tell the whole truth, for example not telling someone that they are fat, even if you think that they are and even if they ask you for your opinion. A lot of people would find it very hurtful to be told that you thought they were fat. It is also not usually necessary to point out negative things to other people because it is likely to upset them.

Not everyone has the same interests as you

You must remember that not everyone likes the same things as you. It is often nice to hear someone talk about something that they love. But it can be difficult for other people to stay engaged with the conversation if you only talk about something they are not interested in or that they don't know much about. Try to only talk about each topic a little bit, people will usually ask you questions to prompt you if they would like to hear more.

If you aren't sure - ask!

If someone tells you something and you are not sure how to react, ask them how they feel about it. For example, if someone says that they are moving house you may not know if they are happy, anxious, excited or any other emotion. It's possible that they are moving because they broke up with their partner or couldn't afford the rent and so they might not be happy about the move. Asking them how they feel is perfectly reasonable and will allow you to respond properly.

In the same way, if you are not sure how to read someone's body language then you can ask them, as long as you do so politely. For example, if someone is looking away a lot while you are speaking you might say 'Would you like me to tell you more or shall we talk about something else?'. They may think it is obvious that they would like to talk about something else but it's ok to ask if you are not sure.

How to Practice

Social groups

There are all sorts of social groups that you can join. Some of these are autism-specific and this can be good because people on the spectrum are more likely to understand any difficulties you have. They are also less likely to use subtle social cues and body language and be more upfront about what they are thinking and feeling. Other social groups are based around shared interests and this can also be good because you know you will have something in common with the other people there. This can give you lots of conversation starters and questions. It will also mean you can talk about your interests without worrying so much that people will not be interested or will not know anything about the subject.

Online

The internet is great for meeting new people. You can use chat rooms, forums and online gaming to talk to people, as well as social media and messaging apps. This is a good way to meet lots of new people and find people with shared interests. Make sure you stay safe online though, by reading our "Internet Safety and Autism" information resource. Visit www.autismwestmidlands.org.uk/helpadvice/downloads to download your own copy.

Disability charities

Disability charities may run specific social and support groups as well as events specifically aimed at meeting other people. They will also have lots of online support and resources. For example, the online social network for people with autism, Autism Connect. You can visit the site at www.autism-connect.org.uk