

6

Friendships, Social Relationships, and Belonging

How peaceful it is to withdraw from the complicated world of human relationships! I do however enjoy the presence of a friend and feel so content in the company of one who is willing to take me as I am. My friends have been willing to see me this way and I am so grateful to have been given the opportunities to discover life in the real world. (Lawson, 1998 p. 100)

In *Listening to the Experts* (Keefe, Moore, & Duff, 2006), an inspiring book featuring voices of students with and without disabilities, a young man, Chad Schrimpf, details one of the many ways friends enhance life at school. In his essay "This is Me," Chad writes about meeting a new friend:

I'm meeting new people all the time because of [my new peer collaboration class]. Now, meeting new people is easier for me. I met my friend Brittany this year. I went up to her and said, "Hi." We hang out a lot. Heather is also one of my friends. I met her at an art show. She came up to me and introduced me to all of her friends. That was cool. (p. 88)

Later in the essay, Chad shares how having friends can mean having support. He explains that music can make him very emotional ("the music got to the sensitive part of my heart") and that, at a certain concert, it all became too much to handle:

The most important thing to know about me is that I'm very sensitive. That's just the way I am. That is my true self. A lot of things hit me hard, and tears pour down my face. That's where my friends help me. They help me a lot. Once, at a school concert in the performing arts center, the music got too loud. Things got out of hand, I was sitting alone at the top of the stairs when Brittany saw that I was upset. She asked me to sit with her. I was glad. (pp. 88–89)

As Chad illustrates, the best part about coming to school for many learners is seeing and spending time with classmates. And he is not a singular voice. Many students with autism who are being educated alongside their peers without identified disabilities are indicating that they need more than an inclusive classroom to feel successful; stu-

dents with autism are increasingly asking teachers to facilitate the development of friendships and provide them with access to social opportunities (Burke, 2002; Keefe et al., 2006; Kluth, 1998). In this chapter, I outline ways in which teachers can build classroom communities that encourage relationships and connection. I also provide suggestions for facilitating social interaction in the diverse classroom. Finally, I provide ideas for supporting the social lives of individual students with autism.

Building Community in the Classroom

Although no teacher can create friendships among students, every educator can create conditions in the classroom that will give students opportunities to strengthen social relationships, learn about and from each other, and get and give support. The hope is, of course, that these opportunities will eventually lead to the development of friendships.

Developing and sustaining a school community requires that educators use strategies and practices that purposefully encourage and teach sharing, learning, interdependence, and respect. For example, teachers might encourage community through cooperative learning experiences (Frank, 2004), conflict resolution opportunities, games (Glover & Anderson, 2003), class meetings, service learning, social-justice education, cross-age and same-age tutoring and mentoring, and school and classroom celebrations (Houston, Blankstein, & Cole, 2008; Shapon-Shevin, 2007).

Teachers also can cultivate community by working for whole-school change. By lobbying for smaller classes, challenging competitive school structures, and developing ways to connect students across classrooms, for example, teachers can not only strengthen the classroom community but also help the school as a whole become more responsive to a wider range of learners. A sense of community also can be developed and sustained through curriculum and the use of community-building activities.

Community Through Curriculum

One of the most effective ways to create a classroom community is to offer curriculum and instruction that is responsive and respectful. (Several examples are shown in Table 6.1.) Many teachers have effectively built community by framing lessons around issues of democracy and social justice, for example. When Erin Gruwell, a high school English teacher in a struggling urban community, confiscated a racist drawing from one of her students, she decided to reshape her curriculum to respond to the incident:


I went ballistic. "This is the type of propaganda that the Nazis used during the Holocaust," I yelled. When a student timidly asked me, "What's the Holocaust?" I was shocked.

I asked, "How many of you have heard of the Holocaust?" Not a single person raised his hand. Then I asked, "How many of you have been shot at?" Nearly every hand went up.

I immediately decided to throw out my meticulously planned lessons and make tolerance the core of my curriculum. (Freedom Writers & Gruwell, 1999, pp. 2–3)

Gruwell built her entire curriculum around students, their experiences, their concerns, and their ideas. She supported their interrogation and critique of institutions and authorities in their communities. Gruwell's students thrived on the discourse of social justice that she cultivated in her classroom. Students in her classroom became involved in community service and political action as Gruwell helped them connect their own experiences to history. They raised money to bring Miep Gies, a friend of Anne Frank's, to visit their school; they held a peace demonstration; they co-taught a college class on diversity; they visited the Holocaust

Table 6.1. Ways to build community through curriculum

Ask students what they want to study, and integrate their ideas into standards-based lessons.	
Have different students serve as experts in different units; be sure to find opportunities for every learner to serve in this role.	
Integrate service learning projects into different subject areas.	
Assign joint projects that capitalize on individual student strengths.	
Have students write about themselves and share their writing formally or informally across the year.	
Have the class create a play, a piece of music, or a piece of art together.	
Have students learn about individual and group differences through the curriculum itself; talk about both Thomas Edison's and Temple Grandin's learning differences when you study inventions, for instance.	

Museum in Washington, D.C.; they conducted a candlelight vigil honoring friends and family lost to violence; they mentored local elementary students; and they collectively wrote a book about their experiences.

In another school, Yolanda, a student with autism, was frightened of a mural hanging in the gymnasium. The mural—a picture of children walking in the woods that included the image of a snake coiled on the ground—scared Yolanda because she was afraid of reptiles. The mural had been painted years ago and the principal had often thought of replacing it because at least one student each year had expressed the same fear. Furthermore, the principal and teachers had, at different times, expressed irritation because all of the children depicted in the mural were Caucasian. They did not feel it represented the student body, which was comprised of many different racial and ethnic groups.

When Yolanda came into the school, the principal volunteered to have the custodian paint over the mural. Yolanda's art teacher had a better idea, however; students in the class were charged with creating a new mural that would be both appealing to the students and representative of the multicultural population of the school. Students worked with an art teacher to learn about mural painting. They studied colors, designs, and styles of murals. Yolanda was on the committee to choose a new design, and although she could not speak, her peers paged through books to find images that interested her. Students decided on a beach scene with images of children from racially and ethnically diverse groups. The mural also included a picture of a mermaid because *The Little Mermaid* was Yolanda's favorite book.

Painting the gymnasium inspired further study of murals—the students explored content ranging from the murals painted during Roosevelt's New Deal to the connections between mural painting and social revolution in Mexico—but the painting also brought students together as a community. The art gave students a voice and a forum for expressing themselves and the art teacher found that painting the mural not only helped students to learn more about Yolanda but also brought the whole class together as a group. For example, Armando, a student who was often teased for being quiet, became a leader for the first time as soon as his classmates saw his artistic talents.

Community-Building Activities

Another way to bring learners together is to regularly incorporate community-building exercises. Not only will students with autism need such opportunities to improve social skills and learn in nonthreatening ways but teachers will often have new students in the class who want the chance to get to know classmates. Students who already know each other will benefit from the opportunity to connect with classmates in more meaningful ways.

A variety of community-building exercises such as those listed here can be implemented to enhance relationships in the classroom, encourage friendships, and foster student-to-student learning opportunities. Although all of these activities can be used at the beginning of the year

to help students become familiar with one another, they should not be abandoned thereafter. Community building and team building are not achieved by having students engage in a few games or icebreakers. True team building takes time and involves meaningful and continuous interaction over the course of the school year (and, it is hoped, over the course of the school career). Five community-building structures that K–12 teachers can use in diverse classrooms are *The Story of My Life*, *Compliment Chair*, *Enrolling Questions*, *A Truth or a Lie?*, and *Paper Bag Interviews*.

The Story of My Life

Although many celebrated figures have the unique (and probably transforming) opportunity to share their biography, ordinary folk typically do not have the chance to tell their story. The *Story of My Life* provides this opportunity and allows students to develop new connections with classmates.

One elementary school teacher used this structure as a getting-to-know-you exercise during a year when she was welcoming Beth, a student with multiple disabilities, into her classroom. When Beth's mother asked if she should come and explain her child's abilities, history, and special needs to the rest of the children, the teacher decided it would be nice for all students to learn this type of information about one another. Students spent a day collecting information for their books; this collection process involved interviewing family and friends, gathering artifacts from home, and filling in a questionnaire designed as a brainstorming tool. Then, students worked alone (or in pairs, if assistance was needed) to construct the books. The social worker visited the classroom to help students tell their stories and discuss their differences.

The speech-language therapist also visited during this time to teach Beth some new sign language vocabulary related to the book; she also helped Beth answer all the necessary questions by using both the new signs and some pictures other students tore from magazines. Students spent two mornings sharing their work. Their books were then displayed in the school library.

To use this structure, have students work individually at first. Ask each of them to take a piece of flipchart paper and fold it into quarters so it is shaped like a book.

Then, on the front cover, have students write a title. To add a bit of whimsy, you might instruct them to choose the title of a popular novel, song, movie, or television program to use as their title or part of their title (e.g., *Wendy's "Believe It or Not" Life Story*).

On the inside of the front cover (page 2), have them create an index of their lives, including the following:

- Date and place of birth
- Family information (number of siblings, names of pets)
- Favorite hobbies, sports, and/or interests
- Favorite quotes, phrases, and/or jokes
- Most exciting moment
- Thing that makes them unique

On page 3, ask students to draw a perfect day. Finally, on the back cover, students should draw a picture of their future (family, where they are living, their job).

When all of the books are complete, have each student tell their story using the book as a visual aid. Depending on the size of the class, you may want to have students share stories in small groups. If possible, leave the books in a central location for the day or for the week so classmates can learn more about one another.

Consider how well students know each other when designing prompts for the book; students who have worked together for years likely will be familiar with basic information about one another (e.g., name, family structure) and may be more interested in gathering information that is slightly more in depth, such as their most embarrassing moment, their family traditions, or their travel experiences.

Adaptations to this community builder include the following:

- *Sharing the story of your own life.* Show students a sample book featuring your own family, interests, and/or dreams. If you are working with younger children and you are using this structure to teach about diversity, individuality, or community, you may even want to invite other adults into the classroom to read their stories so that learners can see and hear about differences related to gender, sexual identity, family structure, and cultural and ethnic background.
- *Giving students a brainstorming worksheet before having them complete the activity.* Some learners will need time and some structure to generate answers to the prompts.
- *Using a wide range of materials to create books.* If there are learners in the classroom with fine motor problems, magazine pictures, rubber stamps, and clip-art images can be provided for students to use in the construction of their stories. Some students may even need to create their books using a writing software program such as Co:Writer or Write: OutLoud (both published by Don Johnston, Ltd.).

Compliment Chair

This easy-to-implement activity is appropriate for all ages and can be used throughout the year. First, arrange the classroom chairs in a semicircle with one chair at the front, facing the rest of the class. Then, one member of the group is selected to sit in the chair. As soon as this person is sitting, students take turns offering that individual compliments. You can give a set number of students time to share (e.g., five compliments per student), or you can have every student in the group offer a compliment before moving on to the next participant. When one student leaves the chair, have him or her pick another student to sit in the chair.

The Compliment Chair is ideal for use in classrooms where one or more students need to practice using augmentative or alternative communication. One reason some students with autism struggle socially is because they have limited ways to interact or connect with others. Giving students structured opportunities to communicate within the context of daily instruction, however, can help them hone skills such as staying on topic, expanding utterances, or spontaneously using a communication system.

Adaptations to this community builder include the following:

- *Allowing the student with autism to go first*—especially if he or she has worked hard on developing a comment, saying it, or using augmentative and alternative communication to express it.
- *Splitting students into two or three groups.* This way, more students can sit in the chair at one time and students get more opportunities to ask and answer questions.
- *Teaching students what a compliment is.* Some students on the spectrum and certainly some not on the spectrum will need assistance deciding on appropriate compliments.
- *Playing an express version.* Pick one or two students at the end or beginning of the day or week and have five classmates give those individuals compliments. Compliments can be general or specific to classroom content. For instance, a middle school teacher might show a student's science fair project and ask the class to provide five compliments related to it (e.g., "A unique idea," "You went above and beyond the requirements").

Enrolling Questions

"Raise your hand if you have blue eyes." "Stand up if you have ever been in a car accident." "Sit down if you have ever cried during a TV commercial." These are examples of what Jerry Evanski (2004), author of *Classroom Activators*, calls Enrolling Questions.

Enrolling Questions serve at least two purposes: They bring the group together as personal information is disclosed and connections are realized and they get students moving and interacting and can, therefore, help to punctuate or "shake up" a potentially dry lesson. Keep in mind that beyond community building, Enrolling Questions can serve as a quick introduction to content, too; a teacher kicking off a lesson on the U.S. Congress might use these Enrolling Questions: "Raise two hands if you have visited Washington, D.C." "Walk to the back of the room if you would like to run for Congress."

Adaptations to this community builder include the following:

- *Letting students create the prompts or questions and facilitate the game.* This is a less risky way to participate for some.
- *Adding in more movement.* This will be particularly helpful if students seem particularly restless (e.g., "Jump up and down if you like cheese pizza").
- *Show or write the questions as you speak.* Some students will be unable to process the commands quickly, especially in a noisy and somewhat chaotic environment.

A Truth or a Lie?

A Truth or a Lie? is fun and energizing and can be integrated into the classroom as a "get to know you" exercise or as a curriculum preview or review (Bennett, Rolheiser, & Stevahn, 1991). This may be an especially useful activity for some students with autism who need practice in understanding abstract concepts. For younger students, use of this activity will help them differentiate between the ideas of "truths" and "lies" and give them opportunities to engage in storytelling and verbal expression (Udvari-Solner & Kluth, 2008).

To begin, students simply write three statements about themselves. Two of them are truths, and one of them is a lie (see Figure 6.1 for an example of an A Truth or a Lie? worksheet that can be used for the game). Students then get into pairs or into small groups, read the statements aloud, and ask their classmates to guess which statements are lies and which are truths. Time is often provided for students to share short stories related to their truths and lies. Adaptations to this community builder include the following:

- *Asking students to focus on specific topics*—possibly even topics related to your curriculum—for the exercise; for instance, students can be asked to share two truths and a lie related to Africa, dinosaurs, or woodwind instruments
- *Asking students to share one truth, one lie, and one wish*
- *Having students perform.* Instead of writing ideas down, have students act them out.

Paper Bag Interviews

Paper Bag Interviews (Gibbs, 1995) are a great way to facilitate interactions between students and provide them with opportunities to ask and answer questions. Instead of one or two students having a chance to speak during a lesson, Paper Bag Interviews give all students time to share. This activity can be used to teach younger students turn taking or reading simple sentences. Older students can learn actual listening skills or ways to ask clarifying or follow-up questions.

To engineer the interviews, the teacher writes a series of questions related to classroom topics and places them in lunch bags. Students are then arranged into small groups of three

A TRUTH OR A LIE?



- Write down three statements.
- Two should be "truths" (things that are true) and one should be a lie (something that is not true). Try to fool other people into thinking that your "truth" statements are lies (in other words, choose "truths" that might surprise other people). You might also try to fool people into thinking your lie is a "truth" by choosing something that sounds true or sounds like it could be true.
- Examples of the types of statements you can use include the following:
 I am _____. (e.g., I am a vegetarian.)
 I like _____. (e.g., I like mayonnaise sandwiches.)
 I have _____. (e.g., I have 19 white tank tops.)
 I once _____. (e.g., I once ran a half marathon.)
 I believe _____. (e.g., I believe the school year should be 11 months long.)
 My mom or dad is _____. (e.g., My mom is 6 feet tall.)

#1 _____

#2 _____

#3 _____

Figure 6.1. A Truth or Lie? worksheet.

to five and each group is given one bag. Learners then take turns drawing questions from the bag and answering them. At any point, a student may decide to pass on a question and draw a new one.

Paper Bag Interviews can be used regularly throughout the year. Teachers can either use this activity to give students opportunities to learn about one another or to comment on different topics of study in the classroom, or questions can give students a chance to do both. For example, the question "How are you most like Crazy Horse?" prompts students to disclose something about themselves while they consider information they have about this historical figure. Adaptations to this community builder include the following:

- *Having students generate the questions for the bags*
- *Asking students to use different types of expression.* Have them use gestures, drawings, and facial expressions (e.g., "Draw how you think Jesse feels when Leslie falls into the water").
- *Putting questions in the bags that relate to student interests* (e.g., if a student in the group has just become an uncle, include a question about families; if a student is really interested in the Beatles, include a question about 1960s rock and roll).
- *Collaborating with the speech-language pathologist.* If a student receives help in this area, Paper Bag Interviews might be an ideal time for that professional to work in the classroom. He can help all students improve skills related to maintaining conversations and asking or answering questions.

Facilitating Social Interactions and Relationships in the Classroom

Once teachers establish a classroom community, they can focus on developing and using specific strategies that will encourage social interaction and relationship building. Specifically, educators should create spaces for sharing, respect different ways of socializing, rely on students to support each other, support relationships through activities, and provide opportunities for connection beyond the classroom.

Spaces for Sharing

Teachers who seek information about students' experiences, dreams, interests, and needs can use what they learn to better educate their students and to facilitate relationships between them. Too often (especially in secondary schools), students are educated in the same classrooms day after day without developing personal relationships. When I was observing one middle school classroom, I asked a young man to tell me the name of one of his classmates. "I don't know his name," the student replied. "I've never talked to him." I later found out that these two students had been in the same classroom for 2 months and had never had a conversation.

Students' voices must be central to classroom work, and time must be carved out for communication and idea sharing. Teachers interested in incorporating students' voices might begin by increasing forums for student participation and leadership. For instance, students might be asked to lead weekly class meetings. Or, as in Kim Rombach's first-grade classroom, students may be in charge of managing conflicts. Rombach facilitates this process by providing two "talking chairs" that are available to students who are engaged in a disagreement. In

the chairs, students discuss their issues and try to find a solution or explain their feelings. One boy explained the purpose of the chairs this way: "Sometimes it takes us a long time, but we try to get to be friends again" (Sapon-Shevin, 1999, p. 139).

Respect for Social Diversity

Some individuals with autism struggle to make friends and socialize in ways that are conventional and familiar to others. For example, some students with autism may be uncomfortable with touch and, therefore, unable to shake hands with others. Therefore, teachers must cultivate a classroom environment that encourages different types of social participation. As Wendy Lawson, a woman with autism, illustrates, asking a person with autism to socialize and behave like everyone else can be painstaking and frustrating:

Over the years, I tried to contain my excitement and joy over life's happenings and watched to see what makes other people happy or sad. If they laughed or were unmoved, then this was my signal that it was alright for me to do likewise. This process was hard work and although it helped me to be more observant of others, it robbed me of spontaneity and enjoyment of the richness of my own experience. (1998, p. 116)

Teachers of students with autism will want to clearly communicate to students that there are many ways to engage in conversations, play and socialize, and participate in class. For instance, in a second-grade classroom, Cindy, a student with autism, liked to watch some games and play activities before or instead of joining in; students in the classroom grew accustomed to Cindy's participation and on occasion, Greg, a peer without a disability, joined her in quietly watching the classroom commotion.

Dan, a student with the label of autism who was nonverbal, often introduced himself to others using a photo album he had created. Whereas other students started their days by chatting in the cafeteria as they waited for the first bell to ring, Dan began his day by circulating around the cafeteria tables showing students the newest pictures in his album. Because Dan and his mother changed the pictures every Sunday, he had new "stories" to share every week. In Dan's school, students became so interested in this mode of socializing that they began bringing pocket-size photo albums to share with Dan and with each other.

Classroom Connections

Several years ago, I met Jason, a young man who struggled when it came to social interaction. In particular, he seemed uninterested in rituals such as greeting people or saying goodbye. For more than 3 years, his IEP featured goals about these rituals. Then Jason began attending second grade. Instead of going into his general education classroom for only a small "visit" each day as he had in the past, he started, ended, and spent every hour in between in his general education classroom. In this classroom, all of Jason's peers were verbal and, therefore, his mornings began with several boys surrounding him, slapping him on the back and wishing him a "good morning." In only a few weeks, Jason was looking up at his friends, initiating handshakes, and sometimes even sharing a "Hello" or "Hi, there."

As Jason's story illustrates, peer support is an essential part of inclusive schooling. In some cases, students succeed in supporting other students or helping them achieve when teachers cannot. Often, peers will learn quite naturally how to support a friend with autism. They will know how to calm, teach, and encourage a classmate without any direction or

interference from adults. In addition, peers are valuable resources because they tend to understand each other in ways authority figures or adults do not. Students know each other's secrets and fears. They often recognize each other's needs and gifts in ways not seen by teachers. This type of help and mutual support is great preparation for adult life for both or all participants.

In the popular and important book *The Dreamkeepers* (2009), Ladson-Billings writes about a teacher, Pauline Dupree, who keeps community issues at the center of her classroom practice. Dupree fosters unity in her classroom and reports that she expects her classroom to be both a center of serious learning and a place of comfort and cooperation. Dupree teaches teamwork in her classroom and asks students to serve as resources for one another:

From the day that they walk into my room they know they have to select a buddy. This is their learning partner for the year. A lot of times when a student is having a hard time I'll call the buddy to my desk and really give him or her an earful. "Why are you letting your buddy struggle like this? What kind of partner are you? You're supposed to be the helper." Within a couple of months I begin to see them looking out for one another. One student will hesitate before he turns in his paper and will go check to make sure the buddy is doing okay. Eventually, they begin to check very carefully and they may discover some errors that they themselves have made. (pp. 77-78)

The beauty of this example provided is that the students are engaged in a reciprocal partnership instead of in a helper-helpee relationship. It is critical that teachers seek such opportunities to give all students the chance to both give and receive help and support (Bishop, Jubala, Stainback, & Stainback, 1996; Broderick, Mehta-Parekh, & Reid, 2005; Strully & Strully, 1996; Van der Klift & Kunc, 2002). As Bishop and colleagues pointed out, students with and without identified needs profit from reciprocal relationships:

In contemporary society, a healthy, well-rounded individual may be considered to be someone who is able to both give and receive help as necessary for continued growth and self-esteem. The ability to perceive oneself as both the helper and helpee in any friendship is valuable to the maintenance and growth of that relationship. Too often, people with disabilities are presumed to be able to participate in relationships only as the helpee, which is detrimental to the depth and longevity of the relationship. (Bishop et al., 1996, pp. 163-164)

Students with autism must, then, be given opportunities to offer support to classmates. Relationships in which some individuals are always helped while others are always helping are neither natural nor particularly helpful in building a classroom community. It is a teacher's job, therefore, to cultivate a classroom culture that allows all students to give and get support. As Eugene Marcus, a man with autism, pointed out, the best relationships can only emerge when peers serve as supporters of each other, not as "bosses or role models":

Peers are people who are in the same boat as we are, and who are our equals. That means people who must follow the same foul rules as we do. And who have ways of coping that we need to know about. Role models are expected to be perfect, but peers can fumble and make mistakes just like we do. Peers are fully human, and that welcomes us to be our fully human selves. Do not think you confuse us by telling us about your mistakes and failures. Those things are what make us feel close to you. Good peer support is always from people who are eager to learn and that means people who don't mind being wrong a lot of the time. (2002, p. 1)

Classroom activities can be specifically structured to encourage reciprocity. For example, in one seventh-grade classroom, the teacher asked each student without an identified disabil-

ity to serve as a "peer buddy" for Julie Ann, a young woman with Asperger syndrome. Within weeks of implementing the program, however, Julie Ann, who was a geography buff, was helping all of the students in the classroom with their social studies homework. When the students began asking to have Julie Ann serve as their "peer buddy," the teacher knew it was time to change the system. Instead of having class members sign up to be a helper for Julie Ann, every student had to develop an advertisement and a help-wanted poster to hang on a classroom bulletin board. On the advertisement, students had to list all of their strengths and specifically highlight the things they would be willing to teach others. On the "help wanted" poster, students had to list the things they needed or wanted to learn or things they needed help doing. With the new system in place, all students were able to see the gifts and abilities and the needs and struggles that they and their fellow students brought to the classroom.

Relationships Through Activities

Some students who find conversation and typical ways of socializing a challenge are amazingly adept at socializing when the interaction occurs in relation to a favorite activity or interest. Stephen Shore, a man with Asperger syndrome, has pointed out that one reason for this phenomenon is that basing relationships on a shared passion or task can reduce stress: "Having an activity as the focus of the interaction reduces the reliance on being able to detect, accurately encode, and respond appropriately to nonverbal social cues" (2003, p. 74).

For these reasons, perhaps, Dane Waites, a man with autism, created social connections through participation in sports. Waites, it seems, had few same-age friends until he took up weight lifting. After finding both athletic and social success in that sport, he began cycling and running for pleasure and again found he was able to develop relationships through these activities (Waites & Swinbourne, 2002). Jasmine Lee O' Neill, a woman with autism, has called activities such as those described by Waites "stepping stones" and suggests they be used to facilitate relationships:

Anything can be used as a stepping stone for forming a relationship. Art and music are superb for that. Use things the autistic individual enjoys to spark her interest. If she likes music and hums to herself, use music as an introduction to relating to other people. It is a falsehood that autistics do not relate. Rather, they relate in their own ways. (1999, p. 83)

A story from the work of Carol Tashie, Susan Shapiro-Barnard, and Zach Rossetti reinforces the idea of following a student's lead to create social opportunities. In their stirring book on friendship, *Seeing the Charade* (2006), these educators describe a young man named Samuel who loved fans. He often set them up to blow air across his face or to move things around in space. As teachers sought ways to get Samuel involved in extracurricular life, they were hard pressed to find a club of fan lovers. But as they searched for hobbies that might be related to fans in some way, they talked to a physics teacher who referred them to a few students who were building ultralight model planes. This group of youngsters was interested in having Samuel join them in their endeavor because he had some knowledge of and a lot of interest in wind currents; Samuel, for his part, had the opportunity to learn about aviation, engineering, and model building as a pastime and to form connections with students his own age who shared his passion.

Beyond the Classroom

To support the development of relationships in the classroom, teachers may need to scout for social opportunities outside of the classroom. Although schools often try to offer activities to

meet the needs of all students, some need to develop a wider array of activities so that every student can find an extracurricular activity in which they feel at home. Some schools, for instance, have moved beyond the traditional sports-based and arts-based extracurricular options to offer clubs and activities related to academic content (e.g., chess club), political issues (e.g., conservation groups), and social support (e.g., antidrug groups).

All schools must be conscientious about offering options that will interest, engage, and be available to a range of students in the school. This means examining whether all students can afford certain clubs or activities, whether meeting times are convenient for students who may have after-school responsibilities, and whether students can get the appropriate supports they need to participate in after-school activities (Sapon-Shevin & Kluth, 2003). In a middle school, a student with autism wanted to join the track team but needed to have some individualized support to be able to attend practices and games. As the student's educational team was trying to develop a solution to the problem, two high school students volunteered to serve as junior coaches and give extra support to all of the students. This type of creativity is key.

In elementary schools in which typically there are few school-sponsored extracurricular opportunities offered, teachers and school administrators might work with families and community members to offer a few clubs or activities open to any student. Or, schools might investigate after-school options available in the surrounding area and help families connect to these activities. For instance, if the local recreation center offers after-school arts classes, the school might offer to do some staff training for the facility around issues of supporting diverse learners.

Specific Strategies to Help Students with Autism

Students in the most welcoming, social, comfortable, and accepting classrooms may still need extra support and guidance when navigating social relationships. Having a strong classroom community and using a range of approaches to facilitate relationships are prerequisites for building and sustaining relationships and supporting students' social worlds, but students on the spectrum will very often need or want help understanding and negotiating social situations. A few strategies that may be helpful to learners to this end are social narratives, role play, introduction of social secrets, video modeling, friendship-focused IEP goals, and acceptance and belonging.

Social Narratives

Many teachers, families, and students with autism have found social narratives (Baker, 2001; Ganz, Kaylor, Bourgeois, & Hadden, 2008; Gray, 1994, 2000, 2010; Gray & Attwood, 2010) to be useful tools in learning about relationships and personal interactions, coping with difficulties, getting information about novel situations, and knowing how to respond or act in under various circumstances. Three kinds of narratives that teachers may find helpful include social scripts (Ganz, Kaylor, Bourgeois, & Hadden, 2008; McClannahan & Krantz, 2005), social skills picture stories (Baker, 2001; 2006), and Social Stories™ (Gray, 1994, 2000, 2010).

Social Scripts

Social scripts provide students with specific language that they can employ in certain situations. They help learners with communication challenges to express themselves more effectively and engage more fully in social situations (Ganz et al., 2008; McClannahan & Krantz, 2005; Sarokoff, Taylor, & Poulson, 2001; Stevensen, Krantz, & McClannahan, 2000). Scripts

may be written for any number of purposes and contexts, including helping students initiate a conversation, respond to common questions, or even to tell a joke.

To use this technique, the teacher typically creates a script and has the student practice reading it until they are fairly fluent in their delivery (making it more or less complex if necessary after a few readings). Then, the student should be given opportunities to use the script in an authentic context and to have several opportunities to practice and improve skills. Finally, when the student seems able to use the "script" without the paper copy, parts of it and eventually all of it can be faded out (Myles, Swanson, Holverstott, & Duncan, 2007). This is a social script example created for a student who was learning how to make small talk with peers on Monday mornings:

If someone asks, "How was your weekend?" I can say, "My weekend was great! I spent a lot of time playing Wii with my brothers, as usual. Mostly I just hang out with my family on weekends." Then I can ask my conversation partner, "How was your weekend?"

Social Skills Picture Stories

Social skills picture stories, popularized by Jed Baker (2001, 2006), are visual teaching tools that help students learn new skills, behaviors, and competencies:

Each skill is formatted sequentially, similar to a cartoon strip, with digital pictures of actual children combined with text and cartoon bubbles to denote what the children are saying—and sometimes thinking—as they engage in the skill. Included are the right (and sometimes the wrong) way to act with accompanying text that enhances the learning experience. (p. xvii)

Stories are taught in four stages: 1) teachers provide instruction, 2) students engage in role play, 3) the skill or competency is reviewed with corrective feedback provided, and 4) generalization is addressed, which involves opportunities to practice across environments (Baker, 2001). Once students are familiar with this teaching tool, they may enjoy creating their own stories by posing for pictures and writing captions.

Social Stories™

Social Stories™ give the student information about a situation and provide ideas or guidance on what to expect or how to respond to that situation. For instance, if a teacher was writing a story about going to the school play, he or she would want to include information about intermission and the clapping that is sure to occur at that time. The story would most likely also include information cueing the student to join in with the clapping when he or she hears it or—in the case of a student who is sensitive to loud noises—to plug and protect his or her ears as soon as the curtain goes down.

Dane Waites, a man with autism, uses the stories not only to learn about unfamiliar situations but also as a way to reduce anxiety. Dane's mother explains the process he uses to construct and use his stories:

Before I discovered the Social Story technique, I used newspaper clippings, magazine cuttings and photographs to try to explain issues to Dane. Social Stories, however, can be devised to suit Dane's specific needs. If necessary, they can be illustrated with computer-generated photographic images of real people. (Waites & Swinbourne, 2001, p. 196)

Dane now has a folder of prepared stories covering various contingencies. The following extract is from a story that helps Dane overcome his difficulty in changing from weekend ac-

tivities to work on Monday mornings, and it also helps him to follow his list. He has named it "A Time for Work and a Time for Interests."

I have an interesting life. Many people don't have a job. They don't get paid my wage each week. I don't get bored. I am paid to do all the work on my list. I am paid to finish my list and do a good job. When I finish work for the day I can do other things, like sport. Mum has to follow her list. If Mum did not follow her list, who would cook the meals, do the washing and keep the house nice for her family? When Mum finishes her list she can do other things, like reading. (Waites & Swinbourne, 2001, p. 196–197)

For Dane, social narratives convert his own words into reality. He creates and takes ownership of the narrative, and when he reads it again it gives him the motivation and reinforcement he needs. For months, Dane studied "A Time for Work and A Time for Interests" every Monday morning to remind him why he wanted to work and why he must follow his list. This story also reminds him that after work he can go the gym, go for a run, or ride his bike.

Although teachers and individuals on the spectrum like Dane Waites may create their stories without following specific guidelines, true Social Stories™ (Gray, 1995, 2000) involve the following steps:

1. *Think about and picture the goal of the Social Story.*™ The main goal of Social Stories™ is to teach social rules and cues directly. Therefore, accurate information and descriptions must be provided.
2. *Gather information about the topic.* Think carefully about the topic, including when and where it occurs, who is involved, what to do in the process or sequence, and so on.
3. *Tailor the text.* Write in three parts, introduction, body, and conclusion; provide accurate information about "wh" questions for the target behavior; write with a first-person perspective; use positive language; consider the Social Story™ ratio of two to five descriptive ("We have art class on Wednesdays"), perspective ("My brother loves video games"), and/or affirmative sentences ("This is important") for every directive or control sentence ("I will raise my hand when I have something to tell the teacher"); and use literally accurate words.
4. *Teach with the title.* A title addressing the main concept of the story should be included.

Stories should be reviewed often and can even be recorded with the student's teacher or the student him- or herself reading the story. If students can access audio and video on their cell phones, stories might be downloaded for easy access all day long.

Here is an example of a Social Story™ that can be used to teach sharing:

Sharing

I may try to share with people. Sometimes they will share with me.
Usually sharing is a good idea.
Sometimes if I share with someone, they may be my friend.
Sharing with others makes them feel welcome.
Sharing with others may make me feel good. (Gray, 2000, p.11)

See <http://www.CarolGraySocialStories.com> for the most current information.

Role Play

Role play is another strategy that many students find helpful when learning to socialize. Students may need only a quick verbal role play to get through a situation (e.g., rehearse steps involved in ordering lunch from the cafeteria), or a full dramatic role play can be used in which the teacher or other students take on different parts.

In a high school business class, the students engaged in role play to practice skills related to job interviews. William, a young man with Asperger syndrome, was taken with the exercise and asked his father to practice the role play with him several times at home. William's father even videotaped the role play so his son could watch it whenever he needed to be reminded of the language and behaviors associated with interviews. When William eventually landed an interview (with his teacher's help), he navigated the process with ease and was offered a job at a music store.

William found the role play so helpful and was so successful with it that his family and teachers began using it across environments and contexts. The business teacher, in the meantime, was so impressed with the effectiveness of the strategy for all students that he began using role play in other areas of his curriculum. Students in the business class engaged in role play to learn strategies for dealing with irate customers, for learning ways to share ideas in a business meeting, and for making small talk with new business contacts.

Role plays can be used to practice a specific situation (e.g., singing in a concert) or to improve certain skills (e.g., greeting people). One of my former students often asked his brother to role play "teenager conversations" with him. The student's brother would bring up a topic, and the young man with Asperger syndrome would practice entering and staying in the conversation.

Social Secrets

For many learners with autism, participating in a social interaction is like playing a game without knowing the rules or the objectives. Some individuals on the spectrum report that the social demands of making small talk or walking into a party can create stress, anxiety, and panic. Students report that they often feel as if everyone else knows the social secrets necessary for success and they do not (Grandin & Barron, 2005).

Jennifer McIlwee Myers (as quoted in Grandin & Barron, 2005) shares how confusing even "clear cut" rules can be:

One set of hidden rules that make me nuts was the rules for gym clothes. Each year we got a handout that said all female students had to wear a solid colored t-shirt with no writing or logos or zippers. Each year almost all of the other girls wore logoed shirts, shorts with pockets, etc. The *real* rule was: you can wear any t-shirt and shorts in gym as long as they provide modest coverage and don't interfere with physical activities. (p. 138)

Similarly, Wendy Lawson, a woman with autism spectrum disorder, related just how puzzling the requirements of even the most common of social situations can be:

"Can I buy dessert now?" I asked. We were at McDonald's, my favorite eating place, and my main meal was over.

"Wendy, you don't have to ask my permission to buy dessert," my friend said. "You are an adult, you can do what you want."

But that is how it is. Due to being constantly unsure of required behavior, I always ask my friends what needs to happen next. Some actions are routine and I understand what is required, but others are always changing. (1998, p. 100)

Clearly, it can be helpful, if not life-saving, to explicitly teach students social norms, unwritten rules, the hidden curriculum (Myles, 2004), or what I call "social secrets." Sharing secrets may involve systematically teaching social norms (see, for example, <http://www.asperger.net/bookstore.htm> for a "hidden curriculum" one-a-day calendar). Teachers can also give stu-

Table 6.2. Examples of social secrets for Howard, a middle-school student with Asperger syndrome

- "When a teacher says, 'How are you Howard?' in the hallway, she doesn't expect a long or detailed answer. She just wants you to say, 'Fine. How are you?'"
- "When you are in the hallways and on the way to the office to get your meds, do not stop and talk to other students who are inside classrooms. Teachers in those classrooms are conducting class and do not want you to interact with their students."
- "Raise your hand to talk in Ms. G's class."
- "You can stand or pace in the room if you need a break, but do not stand or pace in front of Ms. G—especially when she is talking to the class. Stand or pace in the back of the room."

dents information about social secrets as situations arise. For instance, if a student is at a school dance and seems confused about what to do, the teacher might approach her and suggest that she get a snack, approach some friends to talk, or join other students on the dance floor. Some students may even want these options in writing.

It is important to remember that sharing social secrets is important even for students who do not speak or have reliable communication. Just because a student cannot express confusion related to social situations does not mean he or she is not confused. To err on the side of caution, teachers should provide information about social situations to every student. A list of social secrets can be found in Table 6.2.

Video Modeling

Sadie, a first grader with autism, needed help getting through her morning routine in the classroom. Her teacher videotaped one of Sadie's peers walking to her cubby, taking her home folder out of her bag, putting the folder in the cubby, and sitting down on the carpet. The clip was shown to Sadie several times. After just 2 days of viewing, Sadie was able to complete the routine without any adult support.

Video modeling, in which a video demonstration of a person performing a desired behavior is used as a teaching aid, and video self-modeling, in which students are videotaped successfully performing behaviors and then watch those videos as models for behavior, have both been used as ways to teach new behaviors to students on the autism spectrum. This strategy can be used with any learner (those with and without disabilities) and can help students develop and strengthen communication abilities (Wert & Neisworth, 2003), academic performance (O'Brien & Dieker, 2008), and social skills (Bellini, Akullian, & Hopf, 2007; D'Ateno, Mangiapanello, & Taylor, 2003). According to a study by Corbett and Abdullah (2005), video modeling works so well for students with autism because watching a video on screen (versus watching a role play or actual event) restricts a learner's field of focus, is visual, and does not require face-to-face interaction or the ability to process visual information more readily than verbal information.

To create your own movie, decide on which routine activity or task you want to record. Get your equipment ready, and wait to catch the student in a successful moment. For some behaviors, you may need to wait several minutes, an hour, or even a few days to get what you need. For instance, if you want a video of a student cleaning up her station after a cooking lesson, it may take some time and coaching to get a video of it actually happening. If the behavior you are targeting seems too challenging to capture or you simply don't have the time to wait for the right moment, you may need to film familiar peers instead of the learner himself (as Sadie's teachers did with the morning routine). If students are willing and able,

you can teach them how to behave or interact and film after letting them practice the "scene" a few times. Finally, if you are not able to get what you need from either the student or from familiar peers, you may film either adults or unfamiliar peers. Commercial videos are also available for certain behaviors and skills and both TeacherTube (<http://www.TeacherTube.com>) and YouTube (<http://www.YouTube.com>) have examples of video modeling that educators can access and use with their students.

Once you do get a clip, you can move to sharing it with the student. Let him or her watch the activity, sequence, or scene several times. Have them view it, in particular, before they will be asked to engage in the target activity again. For instance, if you are teaching a child to play catch, show him or her the video right before recess. It also can be very helpful to send the video home so parents can review the content several times with the student.

Friendship-Focused IEP Goals

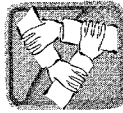
Along with targeting social skills for students who need such support, friendships and social connection also can be focal points of the IEP. As Tashie, Shapiro-Barnard, and Rossetti pointed out in their seminal book, *Seeing the Charade: What We Need to Do and Undo to Make Friendships Happen* (2006), we can't exactly write a goal such as "Luis will have three good friends on 4 consecutive days with 80% accuracy"! Instead, we must write goals that create the necessary conditions for friendships to flourish while also making sure that the supports and services are geared toward relationship building as well as academic growth (see Table 6.3). Not only can both be achieved without sacrificing the other, but most of us would agree that human connection, socialization, and feelings of belonging help us learn and feel motivated, so focusing on friendships should never be seen as something extraneous to the "real work" of schools.

Acceptance and Belonging

Too often, individuals with autism are asked to make accommodations, to use "typical behavior," and to learn "appropriate social skills." Instead of asking students with autism to make all of the adjustments, teachers and students without identified disabilities can rethink their ideas about concepts such as "typical" and "appropriate" and question whether conforming is always the best way to support students with autism. For instance, instead of asking the student with autism to study all of the social norms of attending a basketball game (e.g., sitting on the bleachers, cheering when the team scores), all students and teachers in the school might expand their notions of what appropriate participation looks like. This exact issue arose when one of my former students, Tawanna, attended her first varsity game. Even though the teachers had talked to her about appropriate social behavior for the game, Tawanna appeared unable or unwilling to follow the social rules that had been outlined for her. Instead, she paced rapidly up and down the court during the game (perhaps in imitation of the school's coach) and waved a colorful flyswatter (a favorite possession) when the home team had the ball. When a teacher tried to stop Tawanna from pacing, students intervened and pointed out how others were stomping on the bleachers; waving pompoms, foam fingers, and "rally" towels; and shouting at the players. A few students were even dressed as hornets (the school mascot), making the flyswatter a natural part of the scene! The teachers in Tawanna's school began to think more critically about what types of social supports they provided for her. Although Tawanna still wanted information about social situations and often did want to "fit in" to the life of the school, there were moments when she was relieved to be accepted with all of her differences and uniquenesses.

Table 6.3. Tips for writing friendship-focused IEP goals and objectives

- Create an entire IEP that focuses on inclusion, belonging, support, and school membership.
- Write friendship development into the services and supports section.
- Create person-centered goals that focus on the individual's strengths and learning style.
- Write objectives for participation in community-building activities.
- Write objectives that focus on cooperative learning, active and collaborative structures, student teams, small groups, and peer tutoring.
- Write objectives that start with phrases such as "working with a small group of classmates" or "working with a classmate of her choosing."
- Write objectives that focus on peer support as much as possible (especially as a supplement to or replacement for adult support that might be needed).



From Tashie, C., Shapiro-Barnard, S., & Rossetti, Z. (2006). *Seeing the charade: What we need to do and undo to make friendships happen*. Nottingham, UK: Inclusive Solutions; adapted by permission.

Likewise, Jim Sinclair reported that part of forming true friendship is finding individuals who believe that relationships require "adaptation" and understanding on the part of *both* individuals:

I had a friend—not a parent driven by love and obligation to want to reach me, not a professional who made a career of studying my condition, but just someone who thought I was interesting enough to want to get to know better—a friend who, with no formal background in psychology or special education, figured out for herself some guidelines for relating to me. She told me what they were: never to assume without asking that I thought, felt, or understood anything merely because she would have such thoughts, feelings, or understanding in connection with my circumstances or behavior; and never to assume without asking that I didn't think, feel, or understand anything merely because I was not acting the way [one] would act in connection with such thoughts, feelings, or understanding. In other words, she learned to ask instead of trying to guess. (1993, p. 296)

Summary

On my first day of teaching, one of my students with autism spent 6 hours running around the classroom. Every 30 minutes or so, he would get tired and collapse in my lap for a short rest. One of the paraprofessionals in the school walked in on this scene and remarked, "He can't be autistic. Kids with autism don't like to be near people." The paraprofessional was, of course, sharing one of the many myths related to the social lives of individuals with autism.

Certainly it is true that some people with autism need more time alone than others. Some even note that they are more comfortable alone or with animals than they are with people. Other individuals with autism crave social interaction and social situations, however. Of course this range of preferences parallels those of people without identified disabilities, so caution must be exercised when talking about a social preference or need as "autism-like."

What does seem true about learners with autism and socializing is that their needs and preferences are as varied and individual as the students themselves. For this reason, teachers will do well to support the student with autism and all other students by creating an inclusive and supportive classroom community and cultivating opportunities for connection and interaction within that classroom. It was within the social context of such an inclusive classroom that a young first-grade student, Ian Drummond, was inspired to write the first story of his

life by typing on an augmentative communication device. His words should help teachers consider the ways in which inclusion and social interaction are enmeshed and how student stories and voices must drive the work we do and the ideas we have about autism:

THERE WAS A SBOYH WHO HAD AUTISM. HE HADF A HAFTD TIME DOING THINGS THAT OTHER KIDS DID BUT JHE HAD F5RIENDS. HE LIKED EDDIE AN TRISTAN AND ALL THE MKIDS. THEY WERDE HAPPY TOGETHERY. (Martin, 1994, p. 241)

FOR MORE ANSWERS & INFORMATION

Books

- Baker, J. (2003). *The social skills picture book: Teaching play, emotion, and communication to children with autism*. Arlington, TX: Future Horizons, Inc.
- Grandin, T., & Barron, S. (2005). *The unwritten rules of social relationships: Decoding social mysteries through the unique perspectives of autism*. Arlington, TX: Future Horizons, Inc.
- Gray, C. (2010). *The new social story book: The 10th Anniversary Edition*. Arlington, TX: Future Horizons Inc.
- Hughes, C., & Carter, E.W. (2008). *Peer buddy programs for successful secondary school inclusion*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
- Sapon-Shevin, M. (2010). *Because we can change the world: A practical guide to building cooperative, inclusive classroom communities* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Tashie, C., Shapiro-Barnard, S., & Rossetti, Z. (2006). *Seeing the charade: What we need to do and undo to make friendships happen*. Nottingham, UK: Inclusive Solutions.

Web Sites

Dennis Debbaudt's Autism Risk & Safety Management

<http://autismriskmanagement.com/links.html>

This unique web site should be in the "favorites" folder of every teacher, police officer, and parent. It has publications, links, and safety products to review.

Mara Sapon-Shevin's web site

<http://www.marasaponshavin.org>

A scholar focused on community building in inclusive schools, Sapon-Shevin has filled her site with resources related to her own research and consulting including great music downloads and printable articles.

Pacer Center's Kids Against Bullying

<http://www.pacerkidsagainstabullying.org>

A unique site that empowers kids to support one another and create safer school environments.

(continued)

