



Social Competence and Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) Overview

Social competence is the ability to interact successfully with peers and adults. It requires more than social skills like saying hello, good-bye or thank you. There are many discrete social skills such as asking for help, using good manners, following directions, showing empathy, and knowing how to share.

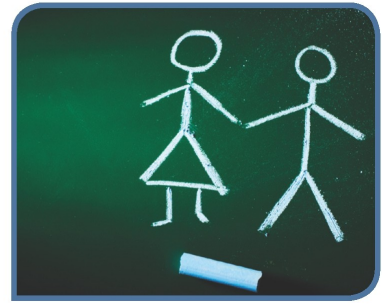
Social competence is much broader and more complex; it refers to the capacity for an individual to use social skills in the way they should be used, with whom they should be used, and when they should be used. It requires knowing the rules of conversation, reading facial expressional and body language, reacting consistently to your own and others' emotions, and communicating appropriately with different groups of people (peers, adults, sales people, doctors, etc.).

Acquiring social competence is important to successfully navigating our daily lives in a number of ways. When 8,000 teachers were asked what all students needed to be successful, they identified skills relating to social competence. Research shows that being able to behave and interact appropriately with others increases academic success—while it doesn't make one smarter, it supports the ability to learn. Acquiring social competence prepares children and youth for their roles as adults and, of course, friendship is an important benefit of social competence.

The characteristics of autism can significantly impact the development of social competence of individuals on the autism spectrum. The characteristics, as identified by Ruth Aspy and Barry Grossman in their book *The Ziggurat Model*, provide a good way to explain the impact these characteristics can have on the development of social competence.

Some of the typical social characteristics that can impact the development of social competence in individuals with autism include difficulty with reading body language, beginning and ending conversations, and understanding emotion. Another important barrier is not knowing the hidden curriculum—those things everyone is supposed to know, but are never taught. For individuals on the spectrum, this knowledge and skill must be taught through direct instruction, that is, in the same way that math and reading are taught. Even restricted behaviors and interests can override the typical give and take of conversation because of the inability for the person on the spectrum to understand the need to appreciate others' interests along with their own.

The basis of our ability to socialize with others is communication. When communication with others is disrupted by difficulty expressing one's self or understanding the language of others, characteristics of autism, the very ability to connect with others is limited. Even sensory differences, which are common with individuals with autism, can affect the development of social competence. This can result because the response of individuals on the spectrum to typical sensory experiences will differ from the responses of their peers. When the sensory system is overwhelmed, the individual with autism is uncomfortable which increases their anxiety. On turn, anxiety interferes with our ability to develop and employ social competence so we can relate to others. Cognitive differences can affect the ability to generalize skills learned in one environment to another environment, inhibiting the use of social skills across settings and



situations. Even motor difficulties will interfere with social development because they can restrict opportunities to participate in games with peers, or make the individual appear odd and invite bullying.

The emotional vulnerability experienced by individuals on the spectrum often results in anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. Medical and biological issues can isolate an individual simply because no one feels like interacting or learning new skills when they are uncomfortable or in pain.

Although it may seem that individuals on the spectrum are not interested in social interactions, or in making friends, that is likely not the case. The many barriers they face interfere with their learning and practicing the skills needed to connect and to fit in. On the part of parents and teachers, it is important to understand that both accommodation and special instruction in the development of social competence are necessary. They will provide critical support both for the development of friendships and the ability for individuals on the spectrum to succeed in employment.