How do you make friends when you’re busy studying insects?

Help your child on the autism spectrum build friendships by learning about non-verbal cues, writes Angelica Rose.

“I get by with a little help from my friends”

The Beatles had it right when they sang these words. We all need a little help from our friends from time to time. Friendship enriches our lives, helps us get through the tough times and celebrate the good times. It’s well established that children who have even one friend throughout their school years will handle transitions and stress better and are less susceptible to bullying. Children and adolescents with high-functioning autism spectrum disorders (the ‘spectrum’) can struggle to make friends, potentially making the social world more confusing and overwhelming for them.

Many children on the spectrum want to make and maintain friendships, but don’t know how to go about it in a socially appropriate way. I have spoken to many parents over the years who describe their own sadness and frustration as they watch their child make social attempts which are either ignored or openly rejected by other children. Or they observe their child not noticing or responding to offers of friendship.

Being on the spectrum affects a child’s ability to understand ‘theory of mind’ which, put simply, is a person’s ability to understand that someone else has different thoughts and feelings to you. This translates into the playground in the challenge a child can have with understanding that another boy wants to play with the trucks in the sandpit while he or she is completely consumed by his/her interest in insects.

Donna Williams, famous author, autism consultant and self described ‘autie’, likens being autistic to being on one track, whereas the rest of us ‘neurotypicals’ (those not on the spectrum) can multi-track. This means that she finds it challenging to talk with another person while noticing that person’s non-verbal cues simultaneously. In face-to-face communication, research has shown that non-verbal communication makes up a significant amount of all messages sent and received between people, with words making up the rest.

Do you remember learning how to recognise facial expressions? Many of these skills are learnt naturally through play at an early age. Most of us neurotypicals notice others’ cues while we are speaking and can respond to them appropriately, usually without much conscious effort. For people on the spectrum it is often not so easy.

The good news is that children on the spectrum can learn to recognise and respond to non-verbal cues. If they do, it becomes easier for them to notice and respond to an offer of play, even when they’ve been studying their favourite insect!

Non-verbal Communication Channels:

1. Facial Expression
2. Body Language
3. Tone of Voice
4. Personal Space
Greetings: a great place to start learning about non-verbal cues

Greetings are a natural and integral part of our social world and relationships, and while it may seem obvious to us neurotypicals, it may not be so for a child on the spectrum. Greetings are actually incredibly complex. There are many factors that affect the way a greeting is made: your relationship with the person, any age difference, the situation, the length of time since you’ve seen that person. For example, do I have to say hello again to my friend who I walked past in the classroom two hours ago? How much eye contact should I make? All this is a lot to take in and make a decision on in an instant!

One of my students once asked me, “Why should I say hello to someone when they say hello to me?” This is a really good question. It’s helpful to explain to a child why it’s important to respond to a greeting. A simple, logical answer is that one day you might want to play with that child, or have to do a project together, so it’s good to say hello back to them. It’s part of positive relationship building. Sometimes a child might not respond to a greeting because they haven’t processed the words and situation quickly enough to respond, but with practice it becomes easier.

Here are some tips on helping a child on the spectrum become more aware of non-verbal cues:

▶ Notice how the child communicates when greeting people: If you notice a difference between the child’s expression and the message they are intending to send, then have a chat with him/her about their messages.

Tip: Once a week have a chat about a social situation that recently occurred. For example, “I noticed you didn’t respond to the other kid when he said hello. What happened there?”

▶ Notice how you communicate when greeting others: A parent is the most important person in a child’s life and modelling good communication yourself will go a long way towards helping a child.

Tip: Once a week ask the child to see if they can guess how you are feeling when you greet them after school. For example, you may have smiled and made eye contact even though you were feeling tired after a long day.

▶ Have a chat about other people’s communication: Noticing how other people communicate is an effective and powerful way to help a child become more aware of the non-verbal cues that occur between people.

Tip: A fun activity could be to watch 10 minutes of a TV show together and then discuss how the characters greeted each other and why.

Angelica Rose

Founder and principal of Voice and Movement, an organisation dedicated to helping children make and maintain friendships. For the past 11 years, her unique Drama for Everyday Life Program has been delivering social skills in a practical and fun way to children and adolescents with Asperger’s Syndrome and high functioning autism, with outstanding results. For your invitation to a free information evening and other events email

▶ info@voiceandmovement.com.au
▶ www.voiceandmovement.com.au
▶ 03 9890 0728