



Supporting social and emotional competence for autistic children



ECE resources

Many neurodivergent children have difficulties with social, emotional, and behavioural skills which may impact on their learning achievement and relationships¹ both in early childhood education and at school. Skills for effective learning in school, including skills for positive peer interactions and cooperative and independent learning, are crucial to ensure successful transitions into school, and to the development of positive attitudes and dispositions towards school which are found to persist over time and impact on later learning².

How much research exists about neurodivergent social and emotional competence?

A large proportion of the research on neurodivergence and social emotional competence is focused on autistic children, and the research base remains limited. Further, many research findings are conflicting. For example, research has found both specific delays in emotion knowledge for autistic children and evidence of relatively less difficulty with understanding emotions³. Similarly, higher levels of negativity in autistic children have been reported, whereas other studies have found no difference in negativity⁴.

In addition, there is much individual variation between autistic individuals, and thus it is difficult to make generalisations. Much of the research assumes neurotypical norms and expectations for social behaviour, and presents differences in neurodivergent behaviour as a deficit⁵. Further difficulties are present in evaluating the literature because 'emotional regulation' is not a common term: more common is reference to specific behaviours and actions stemming from poor emotional regulation, such as tantrums, meltdowns, and aggression⁶.

What do we know about autistic children's social and emotional development?

Autistic children may have increased difficulty in many areas of social and emotional competence, including executive function, emotion knowledge, emotional regulation, and social skills. Differences between autistic and allistic (non-autistic) children can be less apparent at younger ages, but may increase as children grow⁷.

Executive function

Autistic children often have difficulty in [executive function](#) skills, particularly with focusing their attention, changing focus, and inhibiting responses⁸. They can also be challenged by joint attention or shared engagement with others⁹, which requires them to regulate their focus and interest. Instead, autistic children often demonstrate intense focus on topics that are of interest to them, and this can lead to advanced knowledge or skill in a particular area. While this certainly should be seen as a strength, when combined with cognitive flexibility challenges, particularly changing focus or adapting plans, this can contribute to autistic children's challenges with peer engagement and engagement in learning that is outside of their personal interests.

Emotion knowledge

[Knowledge of emotions](#) is found to be linked to children's social competence¹⁰. Research evidence suggests that autistic children¹¹ and many other neurodivergent children¹² have difficulties and delays in their development of emotion knowledge. For example, autistic children are often challenged by

attending to and interpreting facial expressions¹³, although some evidence suggests that autistic children can have particular strengths in recognising and understanding simple emotions, such as happiness. They are more challenged by the recognition and understanding of negative emotions, including anger or fear, as well as ambiguous or complex emotions¹⁴.

Some research provides support for an explanation of autistic people's challenges with emotion as being caused by a heightened sense of emotional empathy, although this may be out of balance with their sense of cognitive empathy. This means autistic children may pick up on and share the emotions of others in an intense way, and instead of being able to acknowledge and understand another person's perspective and context, they may take on that perspective and see things through it. Studies demonstrating autistic children's greater ability to show facial affect than neurotypical children, and their ability to show appropriate responses to images of distressed people (often refusing to look at these), as well as practitioners' and caregivers' perceptions of a high sensitivity to the emotions of others, lend support for this view¹⁵.

Emotional regulation

Research shows that from an early age, autistic children commonly have difficulty with emotional regulation, which is related to higher levels of negative emotions and poor repertoires of strategies for emotional regulation in later childhood and adolescence¹⁶. Parents report their autistic children as having more negative emotions such as sadness, anger, shame, fear, and guilt. When children have higher levels of negative emotions, they may not be as able to take in important information from their social environment or develop effective strategies for solving social problems¹⁷.

Autistic children are found to experience more emotional dysregulation, and be difficult to soothe¹⁸, as well as having significant difficulties with self-regulation¹⁹. Young children need to develop coping strategies for emotionally challenging situations. These may be relatively basic strategies, such as distracting themselves, avoiding the situation, or finding a way to vent their emotions (perhaps by crying). More advanced strategies include seeking support, problem-solving, and positively reframing difficult situations. Autistic children are found to be less likely to use advanced strategies, relying on avoidance and venting strategies rather than more constructive strategies²⁰, and are less likely to seek support from adults²¹. Strategies such as venting and aggression are not found to be particularly effective at regulating children when frustrated²², and in addition may predict conflict with peers²³.

Research shows that poorer emotional regulation leads over time to worsening behaviour, declining social skills²⁴, and fewer friendships, so that children with the lowest levels of emotional regulation skill fall further behind in their social and emotional competence²⁵ and, as a result, their ability to learn in ECE and in school is increasingly compromised. Higher levels of emotional regulation, on the other hand, are linked to more positive engagements with peers²⁶ and increased measures of social skills²⁷.

Despite some children's disinclination to turn to adults when dysregulated, adults are an important source of regulation for children. Some research points to a link between early skills in engaging in joint attention with an adult and the subsequent development of regulation strategies, with children who spend more time in joint attention with a parent being more likely to use self-distraction when distressed²⁸. Episodes of joint attention may help children learn to control their attention in order to regulate distress.

Social skills

Autistic children can often experience challenges with **social interactions and peer engagement**²⁹. They may be less likely to effectively initiate interactions or respond to peers, and may experience more disrupted interactions³⁰. They may not be accepted by peers³¹, have fewer friends, and be less popular³².

This means that they are less likely to benefit from the support, assistance, and security that peers can provide³³. Peer rejection and low social status amongst peers in early childhood is found to be likely to continue into adolescence and adulthood³⁴. Peer rejection reduces opportunities for children to practise social skills and, in cases of aggressive behaviour, can exacerbate aggression, while being accepted by peers can act as a buffer for children's difficult behaviours³⁵.

Children's needs and strengths in relation to social skills will vary. Most neurodivergent children, including autistic children, may need more time than their peers to interpret and respond to social information³⁶. While some children may be disinterested in social engagements, many autistic children are keen to engage in social interactions and friendships, even if they have initial difficulties engaging³⁷. Some of the challenges children may experience include social-emotional reciprocity, examples of which include initiating interactions or approaching others in an appropriate way, engaging in back-and-forth conversation, adapting their behaviour for other people and contexts³⁸, or sharing interests, feelings, and emotions. Children also may have difficulties with non-verbal communication, meaning that they may not be able to integrate non-verbal gestures and gaze with their verbal communication.

It is important to note that, while much of the discourse on neurodiverse social competence focuses on deficits and difficulties, these same difficulties can be **interpreted more positively as a form of competency**. For example, research into autistic interactions (interactions between autistic people) found that some rather different parameters for social competence hold in these contexts. Although there are ignored contributions, parallel speech, and misinterpretations, these are not always seen as problematic because the expectations about co-ordinating conversations amongst neurodivergent individuals are different. Disconnected and disrupted conversational turns are somewhat mitigated by the way that autistic individuals generously assume common ground, which is found to spark productive and creative dialogue³⁹. This research highlights the way in which neurodivergent patterns of interaction, although unconventional, can be potentially rich and enabling of social relation and connection.

Strategies to support autistic children's social and emotional development

Strategies need to be individualised to suit each child and their characteristics, existing skills, and needs, as well as the particular contexts in which they are living and learning. Not all children will respond the same way to planned supports, and there will be **no one-size-fits-all approach to support**⁴⁰. One general principle is to treat all children with respect and to offer highly responsive care⁴¹. In addition, it is important to integrate the teaching and reinforcement of social and emotional skills into daily interactions with children, using consistent language to talk about the specific behaviours being taught, and seeking varied opportunities to reinforce them⁴².

Engaging, one-to-one interactions with adults which offer **opportunities for joint attention** are very important in building social and emotional skills, and responsive interactive strategies have a significant influence on the social emotional development of autistic children. Responsive interactions are thought to promote the development of key social behaviours such as attachment, self-regulation, empathy, and cooperation⁴³. Increased responsive interactions are associated with improvements in children's social and emotional competence, as shown by decreasing rates of behaviours such as detachment and dysregulation, as well as increasing levels of social interaction and improvement in skills such as empathy, cooperation, and higher communicative abilities⁴⁴. However, responsive interaction strategies are not found to be useful for teaching specific social or self-management skills⁴⁵ and additional strategies may need to be put in place for this (see below).

It is also important to ensure that autistic children experience **encouraging, positive and constructive interactions with peers** and are supported to form friendships⁴⁶. In addition, autistic children may also

need support to identify and implement effective strategies when they are frustrated⁴⁷, and benefit from **co-regulation with an adult**. In supporting children through co-regulation, teachers will need to draw heavily on their own emotional competence⁴⁸, and may even need to work on their own emotional development. Team members will also need to support and care for each other's wellbeing.

Specific supports for social and emotional learning

Autistic children will not necessarily pick up social skills through implicit learning, and instead will need **direct and specific instruction**⁴⁹. Teachers might, for example, choose to focus on teaching specific social skills through stories, puppets, and role plays, discussing the behaviours, emotions, and consequences in particular social situations⁵⁰. It is also important to offer children opportunities to practise new skills with peers so that they learn to apply and adapt strategies in different contexts⁵¹.

Research suggests that **strengthening the emotion knowledge** of autistic children and linking their emotion knowledge to different social situations is likely to be helpful⁵². Recognition of different emotions is linked to children's capacity to regulate their own emotions, and may support children in self-regulation⁵³. In particular, some research has shown that autistic children's knowledge about negative emotions such as anger is associated with more positive social interactions with peers⁵⁴. Autistic children have been shown to benefit from games and activities about understanding faces and matching facial expressions with emotions⁵⁵.

Endnotes

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