



PLANNING FOR LIFE AFTER 16

Making and maintaining friendships

Friendships and speech and language difficulties

As young people reach their mid to late teens, the usual expectation is that most of them will have formed their own circle of friends and be starting to pursue a social life independently of their families. This can be more difficult for young people with speech and language impairments for a number of reasons:

- › They may lack the confidence to go out, meet and engage with other young people
- › They may have to travel some distance to school or college and so do not have a ready-made friendship group locally
- › They may have insufficient communication skills to form and maintain friendships

How to make friends

Young people with speech and language difficulties may need to learn and practise some basic techniques. Help to do this is available from a number of sources:

Social skills/social use of language groups

These provide systematic training and practice in all forms of social interaction skills, including how to form and maintain friendships. Young people with speech and language difficulties most commonly access social skills groups at school. Secondary language units and specialist schools for young people with speech and language impairments usually offer them routinely. Other special schools may do so, depending on the type(s) of needs they cater for, and some mainstream schools also provide them to young people who would benefit.

Difficulties can arise if your son or daughter attends a school that does not provide social skills groups. This is sometimes the case for young people in mainstream schools, particularly. Remember that if your son or daughter's statement specifies social skills groups in part 3, the local authority is legally obliged to ensure they are provided. If your son or daughter's statement does not specify social skills groups, try and get it amended at the next annual review. You can also request a reassessment of your son or daughter's needs and this might be the best option if their statement has hardly been updated since primary school, for example, or is otherwise inadequate in a number of important respects.

Statutory assessment is also likely to be the best way forward if your son or daughter does not currently have a statement. For more information about anything to do with statements or SEN (special educational needs) more generally, please contact the **Afasic Helpline**. You might also find it helpful to read the factsheet *Education – Making the School SEN System Work for You*.

Some other services for young people actively support the development of social communication skills, either through structured courses, and/or more informal activities. Examples include:

- › The various youth groups Afasic runs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. See the factsheet *Social and Leisure Activities* for more details.
- › Social skills courses and groups for young people with Asperger Syndrome and related conditions. See the link to the National Autistic Society below for more information.
- › Youth groups catering for young people with special needs specifically, or which offer a dedicated service for them alongside their mainstream peers. Your local parent/carers' forum, parent partnership service, family information service, Connexions advisor, or local authority website should have information about specialist youth groups in your area.
- › Conventional youth groups and organisations such as scouts and guides usually include games, outings and other activities which help young people to practise essential social skills within a supportive framework. If you are concerned that staff will struggle to understand and support your son or daughter's difficulties, you may find Afasic's *Watch Your Language* series helpful. See below for more details.

Finding tips online

A number of websites for young people contain useful guidance on how to make friends, and several are listed below. You might find it helpful to look through them with your son or daughter, or, if they are able, suggest they read them themselves. As the information is designed to appeal to young people, it is quite accessible and attractively presented.

Going out and meeting people

Having learned some basic techniques, the best way for young people to hone their skills is by practising them. Initially, it is often helpful to do this in the company of parents or brothers and sisters, especially slightly older ones. Many young people really benefit from informal outings to the pub for a drink with Dad, for example, or to the hairdresser's with their sister.

Others might prefer more organised activities which give them the opportunity to meet and chat to other young people while doing something they enjoy, such as playing football or painting murals. Social media and friendship websites are another way to keep up with existing friends or make new ones. For more information on what is available and how to use them safely see the factsheets on *Social and Leisure Activities and Personal and Internet Safety*.

Sources of further information

We would recommend exploring all the references listed below even those designed for people with a different diagnosis. Remember that what works well for people with autism and a learning disability usually constitutes sound advice for everyone else too.

Childline, a service provided by the NSPCC, has a section on *Friends*, which includes advice on what to do if you do not have any and are feeling lonely:

www.childline.org.uk/Explore/Friends/Pages/Friends.aspx

Kidscape, the charity that works to keep children safe from abuse, has an excellent guide to making friends, using the example of a sensitive 11 year-old boy:

www.kidscape.org.uk/childrenteens/makingfriends/1makingfriends.shtml

The Site, a website for students and other young people aged between 16 and 25, has a section entitled *Friendship* which contains lots of useful tips:

www.thesite.org/sexandrelationships/familyand-friends

BT have a range of free resources designed to help develop communication skills. **Talk Gym**, in particular, has a useful section on friendships:

<http://tinyurl.com/7pm47yg>

SPLD Transitions, a Welsh site aimed at young people with specific learning difficulties and their families, has a download entitled *Making Friends and Socialising* designed for students leaving secondary school and moving on to college or university:

www.spldtransitions.co.uk/e-downloads-b/Making-friends-and-socializing.pdf

The National Autistic Society has a lot of information on its website about developing social skills and avoiding social isolation. They can also provide some information sheets on social skills and supply details of social skills groups in your area:

<http://tinyurl.com/aj525ek>

The Den, a website for young people with autism, has lots of tips, mostly in the form of videos, on making friends, and developing the necessary social skills. There is also quite a helpful quiz and it is possible to submit questions to the expert panel:

www.autismeducationtrust/theden

WrongPlanet.net, an American online resource and community for adults with autism and Asperger's, includes a video guide entitled *How to Join a Social Circle and Make Friends in a Group*:

<http://cdn.wrongplanet.net/article438.html>

The **Leeds Animation Workshop** has produced a film for people with learning disabilities about making friends and starting relationships. It is called *Getting Together* and costs £40 to buy or £10 to hire:

www.leedsanimation.org.uk/films/index.html

Moving On Up is a website run by the Association for Real Change for young people from ethnic minorities with learning disabilities:

www.movingonup.info.

It has a section on *Making Friends* and also offers a helpline open Mondays and Wednesdays between 10.00 am and 12.00 noon: **01246 541675**

Afasic publications and other services

Young Person's Identity Card - £0.50 p&p

Watch Your Language - professionals' pack: £17.00

Afasic Helpline - Open 10.30 - 2.30, Monday - Friday, tel: **0300 666 9410 or 0207 490 9420**

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Helpline: 0300 666 9410 www.afasic.org.uk

