



Navigating Adolescent Social Challenges with Autism

People with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) share a few core features: difficulty with communication and social skills and restricted or repetitive behaviors. As children with ASD transition into adolescence, navigating the social world becomes much more complicated.

Children with milder forms of autism may have been able to maintain friendships with or without the help of adults. However, this often becomes increasingly difficult during adolescence. This period is also when neurotypical teens start to develop their sense of identity through their peers. For many teens with ASD, their specific and strong interests, which were once accepted, may now become sources of rejection as peers no longer tolerate them. These changes in social dynamics can lead to difficulties, anxiety and even depression.

Neurotypical teens spend these years trying out different ideas, emulating role models and experimenting socially. For teens with ASD, traits like inflexibility and a preference for sameness can make it hard to fit in, leading to feelings of isolation. Some teens with ASD may also be highly suggestible. If they are influenced by peers who encourage behaviors or interests that aren't in their best interest, it can lead to further distress, anxiety or depression.

Parents and caregivers need to be aware of some important signs during this time:

Changing Peer Relationships: Teens with ASD may become isolated and form friendships with groups that, while socially more advanced, may not be a good fit for them. These relationships can be unbalanced and risky for teens with ASD.

Isolation Due to Loss of Friendships: Some teens with ASD may lose their old friends but struggle to make new ones. This could be because they can't adjust to change, or because they don't find suitable peers.

Interest in Risky Behaviors: Parents may notice new, unexpected behaviors that were previously not part of their child's personality. These could include behaviors influenced by peer pressure or online exposure.

Development of Behavioral Health Symptoms: Some teens who seemed stable in the past might develop anxiety or depression as they struggle to fit in with their peers.

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Given all of this, there is no one-size-fits-all solution for every teen with ASD. However, parents and guardians should remain vigilant and look for signs that their teen may need additional support.

Below are some ideas for how to offer the best care:

Check in with Your Teen: If you're concerned, start by talking to your teen. Remember, you know how your child communicates best. If something doesn't feel right about their answer, stay close and try to gather more information.

Offer Suggestions: What works for one teen might not work for another. You know your teen best. Would they respond to certain activities or spending time with peers? Offer structured opportunities for them to interact and be around other people.

Consider Professional Help: If you're worried about anxiety or depression, it might be time for your teen to see a therapist. Don't be afraid to ask if your child is thinking about self-harm or engaging in self-destructive behaviors.

Get Support for Yourself: Parenting is tough, and the teenage years can be especially challenging when raising a child with autism. It's okay to seek your own support and talk to someone about your struggles. Peer support groups can help, as well as an individual therapist..

Consider Family Therapy: When one family member is struggling, it can affect the entire family. Family therapy can help everyone understand each other better and work through difficulties together.

Use Natural Community Support: Don't forget about the support that exists in your community. Trusted individuals like extended family, neighbors or coaches can be great mentors to your teen, helping them develop skills and build a stronger sense of self.

By seeking support from professionals, friends and family, parents can ensure their teen with ASD gets the care and attention they need during these important years of growth and change.

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