

# Promoting Social Competence and Peer Relationships for Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Numerous avenues offer promise for strengthening the social competence and peer relationships of students on the autism spectrum.

The interactions and relationships students experience with their peers during secondary school can contribute to successes both during and after high school, influencing academic, vocational, and self-determination skills, as well as personal well-being.

The social world during adolescence is multi-faceted. Peer relationships grow in importance and complexity as adult support and presence fades. In addition, students encounter more peers and teachers throughout the day in secondary schools, and the expectations for social interactions are often nuanced across different environments.

While much attention has focused on addressing social competence of young children on the autism spectrum, less is known about promoting the social competence of adolescents with autism. Yet, the social-related challenges associated with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) become even more pronounced as the gap between existing social skills and social expectations widens.

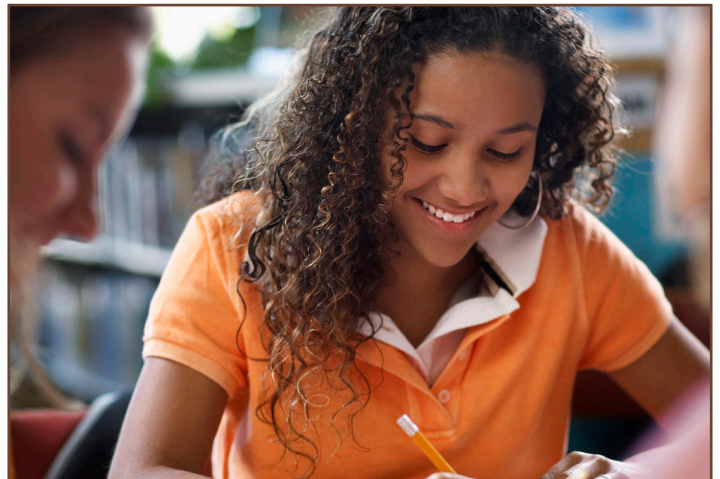
## Challenges for Adolescents on the Autism Spectrum

Adolescents with ASD can face particular challenges developing social competence and peer connections throughout middle and high school. Differences in social-communication skills define this disability, and such

behavioral differences can further challenge peer interactions. These challenges—along with bullying and mental health concerns—lead to increased challenges. The capacity of students with ASD to understand and adapt their behaviors to fit within the peer culture and match teacher expectations becomes critical to social and academic success. Researchers and practitioners have been working to determine how best to provide instruction and support for these students.

## Promising Points of Intervention

Despite many new challenges during middle and high school and a rather limited body of research, there are numerous potential avenues for intervention related to social competence and peer relationships of students on the autism spectrum. These promising avenues include interventions that directly address the social competence skills of students on the spectrum and/or that focus on changing the social environment by addressing the efforts of peers, educators, schools, and family members.



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Some promising direct interventions for students on the autism spectrum target social skills (e.g., initiating interactions and responding to others) or target social competence based on social cognitive skills (e.g., perspective taking and social problem solving). Students who have more significant communicative needs may benefit from interventions that support the use of alternative modes of communication (e.g., communication books and speech-generating devices). Also, students whose behaviors interfere with opportunities for social interaction may benefit from approaches that teach alternative behaviors that address important social functions.

Another approach with strong empirical support is peer-focused interventions. These interventions provide information, training, and/or support to peers without disabilities in order to bolster their confidence and skills when interacting with students on the autism spectrum. Interventions range from offering information about the strengths and needs of students with ASD to more targeted approaches that equip their peers with specific conversational strategies that may be beneficial when interacting with a student on the autism spectrum.

Another important area of focus is helping educators (e.g., teachers and paraprofessionals) to facilitate peer interactions and teacher social competence. Educators can choose instructional techniques that provide social opportunities, such as cooperative learning groups, and they also can strategically facilitate interactions as students work or spend time together (e.g., highlighting similarities among students). In addition, disability awareness efforts or peer partner programs can create supportive school-wide climates for fostering social relationships.

A less explored—but important—factor related to improved social outcomes is family support. Parental expectations, resources, and priorities play a role in how an intervention becomes generalized beyond the boundaries of the school. Accordingly, families can play an active role in teaching and/or reinforcing skills associated with greater social competence. Integrating these social-focused intervention strategies may be key to enhancing their relevance, impact, and sustainability.

## Future Research

More research on social-related interventions within secondary settings is necessary to document how intervention approaches impact students across the autism spectrum with varying skill levels. Because the high school curriculum is already crowded, integrating intervention strategies into a variety of settings is crucial. Additionally, peers are most insightful in how best to invite and involve other students; therefore, it is important that they play an active role in interventions, especially those focused on school-wide change. Finally, new technology is offering compelling new vehicles for teaching social-related skills, expanding communication modes, and facilitating social connections for students with a range of disabilities—and, in turn, it can support multiple pathways to intervention.

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<http://rse.sagepub.com/content/35/2/91.full.pdf+html>

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Snapshots 72-77 provide brief synopses of articles from the special issue on “Autism, Adolescence, and High School” for *Remedial and Special Education*. Kara Hume, the issue’s guest editor, serves as co-principal investigator of FPG’s Center on Secondary Education for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

### Access Snapshots 72-77

<http://fpg.unc.edu/resources/snapshots>

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