

Supporting Affirming Friendships and Social Connections

The importance of friendships

Friendships do more than just provide company, they help children feel connected, accepted, and supported as they grow.

Friendships help children (and adults!):

- Feel a sense of belonging and connection
- Develop socially and emotionally
- Boost confidence and feel understood
- Consider new and different perspectives
- Practice managing their emotions and recognising the feelings of others
- Learn to get along with others
- Build life skills like negotiating, cooperating and problem solving
- Reduce feelings of loneliness and stress
- Feel good about themselves
- Discover who they are, their values and who they want to be
- Perform better at school
- Reduce social and emotional difficulties later in life



Friendships and neurodiversity

Most neurodivergent children desire meaningful connections with friends in similar ways to their peers, however developing and sustaining friendships can pose challenges. It is vital to support neurodivergent children to build affirming friendships rather than teaching them to “fit in” or “mask” to meet neurotypical social expectations.

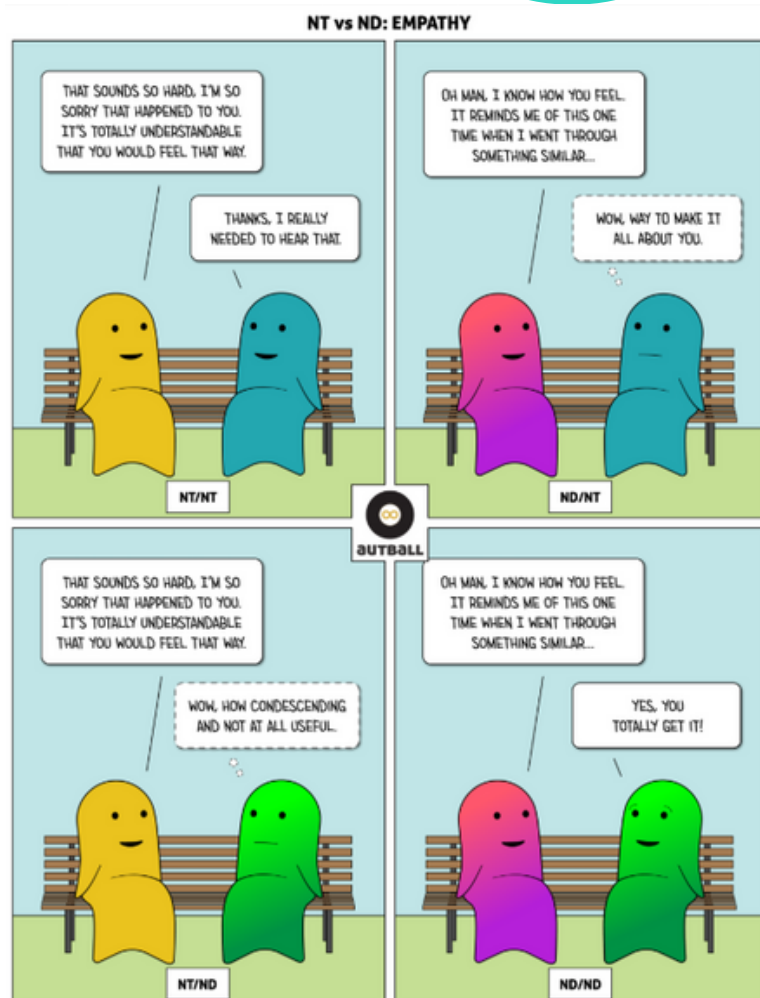
Positive friendships for neurodivergent children will:

- respect different ways of communicating
- allow open expression of needs and boundaries without judgement
- be supportive of each person’s strengths and support needs
- be based on mutual respect and understanding, rather than neurotypical social expectations or norms
- be authentic and not require masking or performing to “fit in”
- respect sensory, emotional and cognitive differences
- use collaborative problem-solving to navigate and overcome challenges or differences
- often be linked to a shared common interest.



The Double Empathy Problem

- Neurodivergent children are often thought to have social difficulties or lack empathy. However, research shows that communication and social challenges actually arise because of a *mismatch* in understanding between neurotypical and neurodivergent people.
- Coined by researcher Damien Milton, The Double Empathy Problem explains that social misunderstandings happen both ways. It's not that neurodivergent kids lack empathy, it's that they and non-neurodivergent children can struggle to understand each other because they see and interpret the world differently.
- This means social challenges are often due to *differences* in social communication styles, *not deficits* in the neurodivergent child (or adult). Research has shown that when two autistic people interact, social misunderstandings happen no more often than when two neurotypical people interact. Challenges are more common when neurotypical and neurodivergent people interact.
- For example, a neurodivergent child might express themselves in a way that's honest and direct, but others might misread this as rude or unusual. They may avoid eye contact which may be misread as disinterest. Neurodivergent children often feel misunderstood or judged for not meeting social expectations they haven't been taught or don't find natural.
- Research shows that neurodivergent kids (and adults) often connect more easily with others who share similar ways of thinking. These friendships tend to feel safer, more equal, genuine and accepting.
- Understanding the double empathy problem helps shift the focus from "fixing" the neurodivergent child to creating mutual understanding between different kinds of minds, and building friendships based on mutual respect and honouring different ways of connecting.



How to talk about social challenges and friendship qualities

Understanding what makes a good friend isn't always obvious – especially for neurodivergent children, who might interpret social interactions differently. Talking openly and regularly about friendships can help your child build stronger, more meaningful relationships. This includes modelling your own experiences and challenges with friendships. These strategies can help guide conversations at home:

- **Start with a clear definition of friendship**
 - e.g. "A friend is someone who is kind, helps you feel better when you're sad, and enjoys spending time with you."
- **Ask reflective, open-ended questions**
 - e.g. "What do you think makes someone a good friend?"
 - "How do you show someone you care?"
- **Talk about mutual effort and respect in friendships**
 - e.g. "What do you do for your friend, and what do they do for you?"
 - "Do you think your friend wants to play with you too?"
 - "Do you feel like you can be yourself around them?"
- **Support your child to recognise healthy vs. unhelpful dynamics**
 - e.g. "Does this person make you feel happy and safe, or upset and left out?"
 - "Do these people tell you to do things you don't want to do?"
- **Use feedback to build social insight**
 - e.g. "You waited for your turn today, that was kind"
 - "Maybe next time you can ask your friend what they'd like to do too."
- **Help them separate acquaintances from real friends**
 - e.g. help them develop a friendship map of those they feel safe with, can be themselves around, share common interests with etc versus those who may feel tricky, or just share a space in a social setting.



Connecting with like-minded peers

Building friendships can be more comfortable and meaningful when children share interests or similar ways of thinking. Supporting your child to find these connections can boost their confidence and reduce feelings of isolation:

- **Encourage participation in interest-based groups**
 - e.g. joining clubs focused on art, science, or gaming where children can meet peers with shared passions
- **Seek out autism-friendly or neurodivergent-inclusive activities**
 - e.g. programs designed to be welcoming and accommodating to neurodivergent children
- **Facilitate structured playdates or social gatherings**
- **Support involvement in community or school-based social groups**





Supporting kids to understand different perspectives

Understanding that others may think or feel differently is a crucial social skill. Neurodivergent children might need explicit guidance to develop this awareness as it may not come intuitively to them. It can be further complicated by difficulties reading social cues, literal thinking, and difficulties with cognitive flexibility.

- **Discuss how different people may have different thoughts or feelings and that this is ok.** Build examples into daily conversations.

- **Use stories or role-play to explore various viewpoints** (e.g. reading a story and discussing how each character might feel in a situation)
- **Encourage empathy by relating to personal experiences** (e.g. asking, "How would you feel if someone did that to you?")
- **Highlight the importance of considering others' perspectives in friendships** (e.g. discussing how taking turns and listening can make playtime more enjoyable for everyone)

Navigating miscommunication and building self-advocacy skills

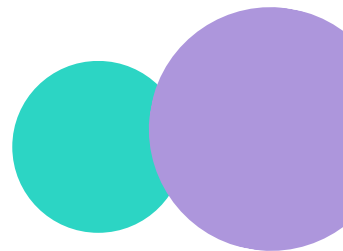
Neurodivergent children may experience social misunderstandings – often because they interpret things differently or may find it hard to explain their point of view. Teaching self-advocacy skills helps them speak up for themselves, express feelings clearly, and navigate tricky moments with increasing confidence.

Self-advocacy means being able to:

- Express your thoughts, feelings, and needs clearly
- Ask for help when something feels confusing or unfair
- Explain your perspective in a respectful way
- Set boundaries or let others know what works best for you

Here are some ways you can help your child build these skills:

- **Teach and model "I" statements** (e.g. "I feel left out when no one listens to my ideas" instead of "You never listen!")
- **Give them words to explain their behaviour or needs** (e.g. "Sometimes I need to walk away to calm down – I'm not being rude.")
- **Practice gentle repair phrases to use after a misunderstanding** (e.g. "I didn't mean to upset you," or "Can we try that again?")
- **Use visuals or scripts for tricky conversations** (e.g. preparing talking points together before a group playdate or class discussion)
- **Encourage them to check in during confusion** (e.g. "Can you tell me what you meant?" or "I didn't understand – could you say it a different way?")
- **Validate that misunderstandings are normal and can be fixed**
- **Let your child know it's okay to make mistakes in conversations – what matters is learning how to talk through them.**



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