

Helping your child make friends with a child with autism

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Kids are very likely to make the acquaintance of a child diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder at some point, whether they know it or not. An estimated 95% of children with disabilities enroll in regular schools,

experts say.

"Given the rates of autism diagnosis and our ability to identify it, most kids will meet an [autistic child](#) at some point during their school-aged years," Dr. Taryn Liu, a pediatric neurologist at Children's Hospital Los Angeles, said in a news release.

Given that, [parents](#) should be prepared to help their kids connect with children with autism, who often exhibit a range of differences that might leave their son or daughter feeling uncomfortable and confused.

"Sometimes those differences will be obvious, and sometimes they will not," Liu said. "But when non-autistic children make friends with someone with autism, it can help them understand that we all have different ways of existing in the world. Parents can help them navigate those differences and foster meaningful relationships."

Parents can start by explaining autism to their kids, Liu said. Some basic info to share includes:

- Autism is a condition that affects how the brain works.
- It causes differences in the ways a person communicates or interacts with others.
- It's not the same in everyone, and no two people with autism will behave precisely the same way.
- Autism is something that people are born with—it's not an infectious disease or illness.

"Someone with autism may struggle to understand others' emotions, [facial expressions](#) and jokes," Liu said. "Autism may make it hard for a child to create and maintain [friendships](#), but kids with autism love to make friends. They just might do it in different ways."

To prepare a child for a potential friendship with a youngster who has autism, parents can take some of the following steps before they're school-age.

- Normalize differences. Reinforce the idea that everyone is different, with their own unique strengths, weaknesses, behaviors and habits.
- Teach about all forms of communication. Words are just one way people communicate. People also use gestures, eye contact, facial expressions and physical actions to demonstrate feelings. People with autism sometimes struggle with these forms of communication.

If your child has a classmate with autism, you can share further tips to help them offer friendship and understand their friend's reactions:

- Be friendly. Approach kids with autism as with any other child, by talking with them or inviting them to play. Not all will respond, but being friendly can help them feel welcome.
- Limit expectations. People with autism communicate differently, and in ways that might cause hurt feelings. They might walk away, say something rude, act extremely shy or look away. Don't take these actions personally, because they probably don't understand how these actions make others feel.
- Tell your friend how you feel. Children with autism do care about friends, and you should calmly and gently let them know if they've inadvertently hurt your feelings. If they continue to upset you, it's OK to walk away and play somewhere else or talk to your teacher about it.

- Look for things in common. Even though a child might only see the differences at first, if they look closer they probably will find something they have in common with their classmate.
- Consider playing next to your friend, instead of with them. Some kids with autism find it easier to play near others rather than directly with others. They might not want to engage in activities that require back-and-forth interactions.

"Every friendship your child has is unique and brings something to the table," Liu said. The best thing a child can do is be kind and try to understand their friend without expecting how they will respond in return.

An ongoing friendship could include playdates, birthday parties, sleepovers and other get-togethers outside school. Parents can help these go well by:

- Planning ahead based on what makes the friend comfortable and what they like.
- Preparing your child, by letting them know their friend might need some space or time alone.
- Asking the friend what they want to do or what they like to eat. If the child is non-verbal, ask their parents in advance.

"Parents of children with autism typically enjoy being able to talk about their child, including what makes them great and what they find challenging," Liu said. "It's always better to ask questions than assume you understand their child."

More information: Autism Speaks has more about [friendship with an person with autism](#).

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