

## **10. Supporting Social Skills Outside the Group Setting**

While a structured small group setting is the best environment for social skill development, once skills are mastered, students with AS/HFA need to learn to generalize their use beyond the social skills group setting. However, such practice needs to be programmed to occur in a supported environment.

Schools can be a great place to teach social skills because practice partners are readily available. Ideally, social skills programming at the elementary level should include typical peers as much as is practically possible. Selected typical peers can serve as role models and many can also benefit from direct teaching of social skills. At the high school and middle school levels, peer pressure and self esteem issues may interfere with attempts at positive programming with peers. Regardless of the age of the student, any practice in a natural setting should be carefully structured and supervised.

### **Programming with Mainstream Peers**

#### **Consent for Programming with Mainstream Peers**

Transferring learned social skills to the mainstream is a major hurdle for AS/HFA students. This can first be attempted through small, structured groups (i.e. Play Dates, Lunch Buddies, and Friendship Groups) with direct facilitation by special education staff. Groups can number anywhere from 1-4 peers depending on the progress and skill of the AS/HFA student. Mainstream and regular education teachers can recommend mainstream students who are open to suggestions of how to best support AS/HFA students. AS/HFA students who have an active IEP and goals to practice social skills in a small group setting already have parental permission. In order to complete this plan however, it is necessary to have the consent of the parent(s) of the selected regular education students. A letter that has been used for a Lunch Buddies group can be modified for any small group with mainstream peers. This modified letter is based on one shared from Kari Dunn-Buron. (see Appendix) The letter should contain information about the purpose of the group, training, what the responsibilities of the students will be, when the groups will occur, and a contact person for parents with questions.

### **Lunch Buddies**

A programming idea that can be very helpful for generalizing skills is a “Lunch Buddies” program. Our “lunch buddies” program involves selected, trained typical peer “buddies” who are paired with students with AS/HFA. Permission from mainstream and special education students’ parents is needed to participate. 2-3 times a week, a buddy and student with AS/HFA have lunch in the resource room, and practice using a particular social skill by doing some activity together (art, game, using sensory equipment). Buddies are rotated, giving the student with AS/HFA one-to-one interaction with a variety of typical peers. The facilitator supervises, but does not join in the activity, unless some redirection or direct teaching is needed.

### **Play Dates**

A similar programming idea is “Play Dates” with one peer at a time who volunteers from a mainstream class. The Play Date lasts for about 15- 20 minutes. The play activity incorporates social skills, although it may be a craft or game. “Lunch Buddy” and “Play Date” mainstream students are selected because they are strong positive role models and are open to adult direction.

### **Friendship Groups**

The purpose of the Friendship Group is to give students with AS/HFA an opportunity to participate in social interactions with mainstream classmates in a small, supervised setting by playing games and talking with each other. An adult facilitator assists the group. After participating in a Friendship Group many students with AS/HFA have felt more connected to their class because they’ve gotten to know three or four students better. Regular education students who participate have also become more interactive with the student with AS/HFA outside of group time.

The facilitator’s role is to assist the student with AS/HFA in case they have difficulties interacting with peers. The facilitator can act as a discrete coach / social interpreter who supports the student. For example, the student with AS/HFA might make a comment that hurts the feelings of a peer but be unaware of the impact. The facilitator can say something like “Dan, that comment might have hurt Julie’s feelings.” The facilitator can ask Julie if it hurt her feelings and then assist the student with AS/HFA in addressing the situation if needed. The facilitator helps to get the game set up and can help

facilitate conversation between the peers if they are not very talkative. The facilitator also joins the group for the games.

The facilitator of the group can be any of the special education staff (school psychologist, special education teacher, language therapist, etc.). The group includes the student with AS/HFA and three or four classmates. The facilitator talks to the classroom teacher and asks for recommendations of classmates who would enhance a friendship group. Characteristics that are helpful when selecting students include: friendly, positive attitude, accepting, patient, good role model. The facilitator asks the teacher to recommend a good time to come and invite the students to be in the group. At the appointed time, the facilitator arrives and asks the pre-selected classmates and the student with AS/HFA to come out of the classroom for a few minutes. We usually sit in the hallway by their classroom or go to the facilitator's room if its not too far away. The facilitator introduces him or herself and then has the kids introduce themselves.

The facilitator then describes the friendship group:

"We are organizing a friendship group that meets \_\_\_\_\_(frequency) during recess time. Your teacher thought you might be interested in being in this group. The \_\_\_ (#) of you will come to \_\_\_\_\_(room) and play games and do fun activities together. There are board games and card games and we could also plan other activities like art or crafts if you'd like to do those things. This group can make decisions about the activities. The group will be a chance to have fun and do something a little different during your recess time. We'll meet for \_\_\_\_\_(#) weeks and then you can decide if you'd like to continue with the Friendship Group. Does anyone have questions? Does this sound like a group you'd like to join? We do need to have your family's permission. Here is a form that needs to be signed and returned."

Have the permission forms ready in envelopes. Ask each student his/her parents' names and address the envelope to their parents. Ahead of time, put a little fold on the corner of the envelope that has the letter for the student with AS/HFA. Ask the students to bring the permission forms back to their teacher once they are signed. Inform the students of the starting date

and location the for Friendship Group. Two sample letters that have been used for Friendship Groups are included in the Appendix.

The content of the letter that goes home with the student with AS/HFA is determined by the IEP service time listed for a Friendship Group. The group concept has already been discussed with the student's family, so no permission form is actually necessary. But it is important for the student with AS/HFA to receive an envelope at the same time the other perspective group members have received theirs.

The student(s) with AS/HFA most likely will not know that the group has been created for them to practice social skills. However they should be informed in private that they will be observed to see how they do with the social skills they've been learning and how they are getting along in group. They should also be reassured that the facilitator will help them out if they have any problems during the group. If the student has a particularly hard time during group, consider a same day "debriefing" session. For example, the student could be discretely taken out of a class later in the day to draw a comic strip conversation of what went wrong during group and to brainstorm and evaluate solutions that they can try next time.

The first Friendship Group meeting is crucial for all members. During this initial meeting, the facilitator leads a brief discussion about group rules and guidelines; what rules do you have in your classroom or our school? The brainstormed list should be captured/posted and then referred to during group time if someone forgets the guidelines for respectful group relationships.

During the first group meeting it is also helpful to establish how the group will determine the activity for each week. It is recommended that the facilitator make a visual reminder of which students have been the chooser and which activities have been chosen, so individual preferences are honored and variety is maintained.

## Measuring Progress Outside Group: Monitoring IEP Goals

It is easy to monitor student progress during group, but measuring skill transfer to daily life is more challenging. Though challenging to obtain, it is crucial information. Gathering information about how well skills are generalized to mainstream and home settings requires collaboration with the mainstream teacher and parent(s).

The illustrations on the right model a method to measure skill transfer with two simple checklists that can be shared with mainstream teacher and parents.

- The first checklist, "Skill Spotlight Preview," is simply a preview to generate awareness of what is about to be taught. The preview checklist notes the skill being worked on and the steps involved in mastering the skill (see illustration at right - also in Appendix). The preview checklist is given to teacher and parent at the beginning of a skill unit.
- The second checklist, "Skill Spotlight Feedback," indicates whether or not the student is applying the skill (see illustration at right - also in Appendix). The feedback checklist is sent to mainstream teachers and parents when the formal teaching has been "completed." Teachers and parents are encouraged to "set up" situations for the student to apply the skills in "real life." Information gathered from the feedback checklists can be used to determine what, if any additional instruction is needed. Additionally, information can be used at the time of IEP reviews to monitor progress toward goals.

<b>Skill Spotlight Preview</b>	
Student: _____	Staff: _____
Week/Month of: _____	Case Manager: _____
Skill: _____	
Skill: <b>Responding to teasing/bullying</b>	
Steps Involved:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use your words "I don't like it when you tease me." "Please stop teasing me."</li> <li>• Ignore the person that is teasing you Don't talk to that person Don't look at that person Don't listen to that person</li> <li>• Walk away</li> <li>• Tell an adult</li> <li>• Stay away from people that tease you</li> <li>• Stay with friends</li> </ul>	

<b>Skill Spotlight Feedback</b>	
Student: _____	Staff: _____
Week/Month of: _____	Case Manager: _____
Skill: <b>Responding to teasing/bullying</b>	
Steps Involved:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use your words "I don't like it when you tease me." "Please stop teasing me."</li> <li>• Ignore the person that is teasing you Don't talk to that person Don't look at that person Don't listen to that person</li> <li>• Walk away</li> <li>• Tell an adult</li> <li>• Stay away from people that tease you</li> <li>• Stay with friends</li> </ul>	
1. Did he or she demonstrate this skill in your presence? ___ Yes ___ No	
2. How would you rate his or her skill demonstration? (check one) ___ Poor ___ Below Average ___ Average ___ Above Average ___ Excellent	
3. How sincere was he or she in performing the skill? (check one) ___ Not sincere ___ Somewhat sincere ___ Very sincere	
Comments:	
Please sign and return this form to _____ by _____.	
Staff Signature _____	Date _____

## Extending Communication with Parents and Teachers

Regular, informal communication with parents and teachers is an important component of supporting students' progress outside the group setting. The "Skill Spotlights" are a great way provide more frequent feedback with respect to designated skills. Keeping the lines of communication open allows for dynamic exchange between parents and teachers about day-to-day social challenges and progress.

At one of our schools that has several students with AS/HFA, we have found it useful to have teachers complete a checklist at the beginning of the year with topics on which they would like more information (see illustration at right – Also in Appendix.)

Then 15-20 minute informal meetings are scheduled with mainstream teachers once a month. In the meetings, we accomplish a variety of tasks: providing information about AS/HFA, sharing interventions that have worked the classroom, problem solving, interacting with guest speakers, etc.

Ongoing communication with teachers and parents is critical to obtaining a true picture of the student's social skills progress. It is especially important to consider a variety of methods in communicating with families, and to inquire and respect each family's preferred (available) method(s) of communicating.

**Teacher Feedback**  
(Regular Ed. Teacher with students with Asperger's Syndrome/Autism/PDD:NOS)

Would you find it helpful and be interested to take the time for a 20-minute presentation once a month (in the morning before school) on one of the following topics related to autism?

Yes, please!                       No, thank you!

Please check those that would interest you:

- How to explain autism to typical peers
- Peer tutoring for children with autism (and others!)
- How to deal with inappropriate behaviors
- Motivating children with autism
- How to deal with self-stimulatory behaviors
- IEP and the student with autism
- Teaching strategies for children with autism
- Academic modifications
- OTHER \_\_\_\_\_

In our school district we communicate with families in a variety of ways:

- Email
- Bi-monthly “newsletter” of general happenings in the special education program/resource room, announcements of workshops pertaining to parents as well as teachers.
- Daily or weekly Home-School Folder (with pockets) with printed articles pertaining to AS/HFA from periodicals
- Monthly parent’s support group. Parents decide on topics or just spend the evening sharing and supporting one another.
- Quarterly progress updates
- Attending parent-teacher conferences twice a year to share social skills progress and plans