

Fun, games and social skills

WHAT THEY'LL LEARN

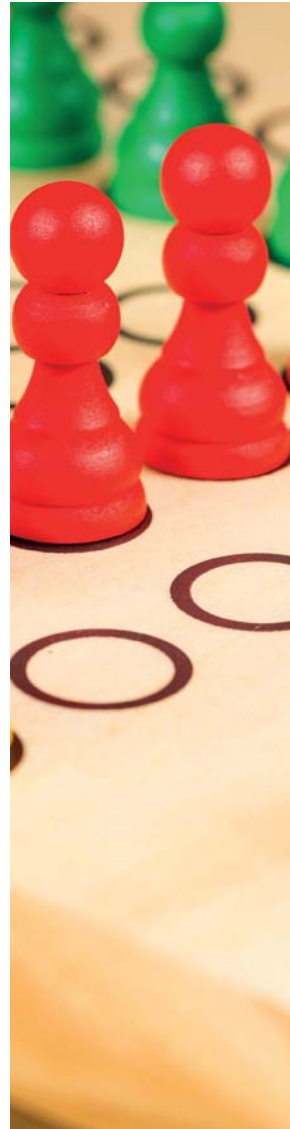
- Being flexible when responding to others' actions
- Communicating for a purpose
- How to deal with differences of opinion and arguments
- How to self-regulate their emotions and deal with losing



A regular board game group can be highly effective for helping autistic pupils develop their social skills, says **Lynn McCann**...

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It's important that we don't try and make an autistic child 'conform' or socialise in situations that they clearly find overwhelming and uncomfortable. What we can do, however, is bring children together in a structured and interesting task where they can all learn about getting along together, discover the skills they possess and pick up new ones in a way that's suitable for everyone in the group. We can teach knowledge, skills and understanding to all children, so that every child can feel more confident and comfortable in social situations.



START HERE

I usually help the children perform a self assessment activity at the start of each group session. Scales work well – if a child scores '2/10' on their ability to cope with losing a game, then scores a '4/10' when they're next assessed, that's progress. It's always good for the children to be involved in the assessment themselves, but you might want to run a more detailed teacher assessment alongside it – an example can be found on the CD accompanying my book *How to Support Children with ASC in Primary School* (see tinyurl.com/lm-asc-primary).



MAIN LESSON

1 | CHOOSE A GAME

I've previously organised weekly social skills groups at both primary and secondary, often using board and card games, and sometimes Lego or other practical cooperative activities.

Board and card games play to the strengths of many autistic pupils because they have rules, they have a point and are visual, featuring patterns and structure. They can depend on skill as well as chance, and the participants don't necessarily need to look at each other while playing them. And while they're repetitive, they also

introduce different events within the rules.

The sessions follow a predictable pattern. First, we discuss a specific social skill and allow the children to contribute to what they know about that skill. Alongside the children I then assemble the resulting information as a social story or other visual format. After this we choose a game to play and do so whilst commenting on using the skill we've just been learning about and any other skills they might be using.

2 | INVITE EVERYONE

Games are a great way to develop connection and interaction naturally. Because they're not 'work',



“Children can find themselves using communication and interaction skills more naturally”

and because there’s something inherently motivating about them, many autistic children can find themselves using communication and interaction skills more naturally, with the result that they learn about the need for flexibility when interacting with others, how to be observant of their surroundings and how to follow instructions. They’re also being asked to follow a set of instructions (which they can see an immediate point to) and called upon to communicate purposefully, while at the same time having conversations about other topics during play.

They will further learn how to handle disagreements with others, and ways of self-regulating their emotions when dealing with losing. It’s important to stress here that this type of activity shouldn’t just be for autistic children, but for all children.

3 | BE CONSISTENT

That said, it’s also important to remember that it can take some children a long time to develop the confidence and skills they need to play board games successfully. Regularity and consistency are vital – social skills groups and games shouldn’t be the first thing to come off the timetable when a teacher

is off sick or other events intervene. It really needs to be a weekly event, in which the children are made aware of the skills they’re learning and are supported in trying them out in other daily situations so that they become generalised.

An autistic child may need more support than others in doing this, but it should never become a huge pressure for them. Learn to notice when they’re interacting well with others and praise them for it, which will in turn will support all the children in the group.

4 | CHANGE IT UP

I’ve been establishing, teaching and monitoring such groups for many years. On numerous occasions they’ve led to the development of real friendships and autistic children finding that they’re no longer left out, but have a group they can belong to.

It’s a model I’ve used with pupils at KS1, KS2 and KS3 – changing the games and sometimes the skills we’re focussing on, depending on the group’s particular needs. They can work particularly well for new Y7s starting secondary or high school, for example.

A social skills group won’t suit every child with autism, but for those who want to join in and make friends, or just find social interaction confusing and difficult, it can be one of the ways in which we support them and their peers to develop good relationships and skills that stay with them for life.

Lynn McCann is an ASC specialist teacher and author.

SAMPLE SESSION

AIMS:

- To learn to take turns and accept being in a different order each turn.
- To join in games with a different person starting each time.

1. Discuss with the group what ‘taking turns’ means and what skills they need to be able to do it. Show them a turn taking board and ask how it could help the group take turns.
2. Play a simple and quick game (Uno and Connect 4 are good examples) a number of times. Each time, write down the names of whose turn will be first, second, third, fourth and so on. For the next game, change the order.
3. Give points to the pupils for good ‘looking’ or noticing, listening, turn taking and waiting on skills cards.
4. Total the points; everyone says ‘well done’ to each other.
5. Finish.

USEFUL QUESTIONS

- Can you notice what others are doing?
- Can you listen and understand what they are saying?
- Do you know what to say?