

# Social skills

Session 2: A neurodiversity-affirming approach to supporting social skills development

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Hampshire County Council

Education

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# Social skills

In this session we will be covering:

- The Double Empathy Problem
- Social skills training –Why can it be problematic?
- Links to masking
- If not social skills training, then what?

Inspired by hat.talks  
If Not Social Skills  
Training, Then What?  
- hat.talks  
(December, 2022)



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# Activity 1

How did you get here today?

1 minute each

Following the communication need or style listed on your card



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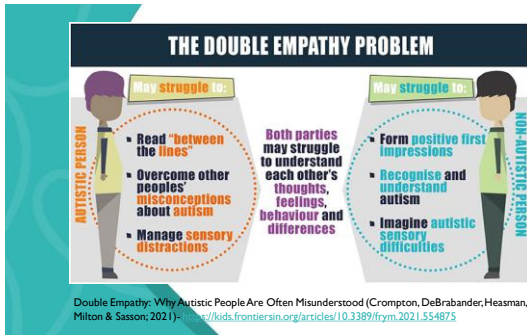
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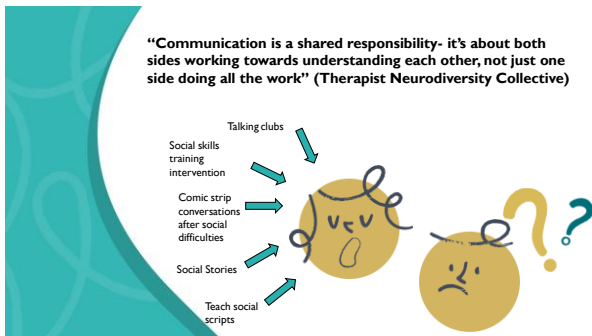
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## Why can social skills training be problematic?

- Deficit-based and ableist?
- Enforces neurotypical social skills alone?
- Might be seeking to teach neurodivergent children to behave in a neurotypical way?
- Promotes masking?
- Enforces discomfort and distress tolerance?
- Reduces autonomy → reduces self-advocacy?

**"The onus should not be placed solely on Autistic people to repair communication differences"**  
Therapist Neurodiversity Collective (2013)

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## Masking

### Linked to:

- Meltdowns and shutdowns
- Anxiety
- Poor mental health outcomes (longer term)
- Exhaustion
- Loss of sense of identity
- Not true friendships and relationships?

Hull et al., (2017; 2020)

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## Masking, camouflaging, 'Adaptive Morphing'

- An everyday self-protective social survival strategy...
- Autistic people describe feeling pressured to camouflage so they can stay safe (Pearson, Rose & Rees; 2022; Chapman, Rose, Hull & Mandy, 2022)
- A trauma response to Autistic lived experiences of autism stigma (Perry et al., 2022; Han, Scior, Avramides & Crane, 2021)

"We all have different personas for different environments – that is very different to an adaptive response for emotional and physical safety." (Wenn Lawson, 2020)

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## Social skills training - What's the evidence?

- School-based social skills interventions have been minimally effective for Autistic children (meta-analysis of 55 studies) (Bellini et al., 2007)
- "The majority of studies indicated that there is low quality of evidence and low clinical significance to support the effectiveness of social cognitive interventions to improve social participation in Autistic children." (Book et al., 2020)
- "The majority of interventions targeted social-emotional reciprocity and were of relatively low quality. There was insufficient evidence to determine whether effects were generalisable, sustained, or important to autistic people." (Roberts et al., 2022).

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## Autistic voices...

**SWAN Focus Groups**

*"There is a difference between my idea of having friends and school staff's idea of having friends" (Y7)*


*"I don't like people who are mean to me and make fun of what I like" (Y5)*

*"I like being on my own at playtime" (Y1)*

*School colouring club- "sometimes it helps you make friends" (Y1)*

*"I feel like the training can be harmful because, like, it can make autistic people feel like they have to like hide their autistic traits and that kind of changed their autistic traits.... It can feel a bit like it's conversion therapy, like it's trying to change who you are." (Daniel)*

**"Just Ask What Support We Need": Autistic Adults' Feedback on Social Skills Training (Hull et al., 2024)**



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## If not social skills training- then what?

- Target skills development and understanding for **all children**
- Talk about differences in communication preferences, experiences, friendships, masking (what is it, what impact does it have?)
- Focus on collaborative goals
- Interest groups
- Self-advocacy work (session 4)



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## Social skills for all children

Teach **all** children about differences in communication styles.

**When social interaction difficulties arise:**

- Support both sides to understand
- Promote acceptance of difference
- Double Empathy Problem
- What could you both do differently?
- Comic strip conversations
- Celebrate successes



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## Talk about different social experiences and preferences



"The aim is not to teach [young people] to stop masking completely, but instead to teach them about masking, how it affects them, how to advocate for themselves, how to find spaces where they don't need to mask, to keep doing the things they love and to build a strong sense of identity" (Ailbhe McKinney- X, formerly "Twitter").

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## "What skills do you want to learn?"

Learning and practicing some social skills can still be useful for young people:

Collaborative goals:

- "I want to know how to ask if I can play too"
- "I'd like to practice asking for help"
- "I'd like to have some ideas for what to say in a job interview"

Safety skills:

- Recognising when something feels uncomfortable
- How to say "no" or "stop"; ask for help; to seek consent
- Self-advocacy
- Understanding how people might interpret and respond to certain forms of communication (social understanding and informed choices)

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## Interest Groups



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## Activity 2: Reflect and discuss

What social skills interventions are happening in your RPs (and schools):

- Are they neurodiversity-affirming?
- Do they feel comfortable?
- What skills are they teaching?
- Are the goals collaborative?
- Do they consider/explain masking?
- Do they create a safe space?
- Do they support understanding of differences in communication on both sides?
- Is there anything else you might like to do more of, or differently?



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