PUPILS WITH AUTISM
UNIT 15
SUPPORTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF FRIENDSHIP SKILLS

LEARNING OUTCOMES:

Trainees will:

- Understand some of the issues effecting the development of friendships for some pupils on the autism spectrum
- Link this understanding to their own setting and the relevance for pupils on the autism spectrum
- Create a portfolio of information on different awareness raising and training programmes in order to support or guide staff within the school
- Be able to give advice on how peer support can be effective for pupils on the autism spectrum

ONLINE RESOURCES

The content and tasks throughout these PDFs are supported by online resources that are designed to facilitate and supplement your training experience.

Links to these are signposted where appropriate. The resources use graphics and interactive elements to:

- Highlight salient points
- Provide at-a-glance content summaries
- Introduce further points of interest
- Offer visual context
- Break down and clearly present the different stages and elements of processes, tasks, practices, and theories

The online resources offer great benefits, both for concurrent use alongside the PDFs, or as post-reading revision and planning aids.

Please note that the resources cannot be used in isolation without referencing the PDFs. Their purpose is to complement and support your training process, rather than lead it.

You should complete any learning or teaching tasks and additional reading detailed in this PDF to make full use of the Advanced training materials for autism; dyslexia; speech, language and communication; emotional, social and behavioural difficulties; moderate learning difficulties.

To find out more about the resources, how they work, and how they can enhance your training, visit the homepage at: www.education.gov.uk/lamb

The first resource for this unit can be found here:
www.education.gov.uk/lamb/autism/friendship/intro

BREIFING 1: FRIENDSHIP FOR THE PUPIL ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

> *I just did not seem to fit in anywhere, as though I had been born into the wrong world…I was gradually becoming more and more aware of my loneliness and began to long for a friend…. I would spend hours at night awake in bed looking up at the ceiling and imagining what it might be like to be friends with somebody.*[1]

Daniel Tammett, an adult with autism, reminds us that there are individuals on the spectrum who want friendship but who find it very difficult to establish friendly contact with others, particularly their peers. Some may find it easier to have social contact with younger children, while others prefer the company of adults. Other pupils may appear not to be seeking social interaction, although this may arise from uncertainty about how to go about it, or stem from negative past experiences with peers. For others again, this may be a developmental process, with readiness for friendship occurring at a later point than for the typically developing population. Sigman and Capps [2] suggest that even the most socially advanced autistic children, who maintain warm relationships with family members and other adults, have few friendships with peers during middle childhood. A study of friendship asked 22 high-functioning children with autism, 'Who are your friends?'

> *The children named two friends on average (although 10% were not able to name a single friend).* [3]

See online resource:
www.education.gov.uk/lamb/autism/friendship/data

The comparison group of children of a similar age named, on average, 18 other children as friends. Sigman and Capps go on to point out that adolescents on the autism spectrum tend to remain in close proximity to their family and develop few and restricted friendships outside of the family. Both younger children and adolescents reported feelings of loneliness. This finding has been supported in other research which report higher levels of loneliness and social dissatisfaction than is

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[1] Tammett, D., (2006) Born on an Blue Day, London: Jessica Kingsley
[2] Sigman, M., and Capps, L. (1997) Children with autism: a developmental perspective. Harvard: Harvard University Press
[3] Sigman, M., and Capps, L. (1997) Children with autism: a developmental perspective. Harvard: Harvard University Press

reported by typically developing peers (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000[4]; Bauminger, Shulman, and Agam[5]; Huang & Wheeler[6]).

There are many possible reasons for this, but when we consider the successful relationship skills of a typically developing pupil, the following characteristics seem to be important:

- emotional impulse control

- conforming and friendly behaviours

- cooperative play (playing well with others)

- assertive leadership skills

- helping

- sharing, and

- comforting behaviour.[7]

These contrast somewhat with the characteristics which tend to be a feature of the social interactional style of individuals with autism have been suggested to be:

- Reduced initiation of social interaction

- Social isolation in less structured environments

- Difficulty linking emotions to different social situations

- Difficulty understanding the causes of emotions

- Difficulty with considering the perspective of others, and

- Lack of reciprocity.[8]

This suggests that it will be necessary to teach the pupil on the autism spectrum some of those qualities, which may develop more naturally for others. Pupils on the autism spectrum may find unstructured, socially focused times (such as break times and across lunch) particularly stressful. Often, pupils on the autism spectrum will:

> *Spend break and lunch times inside in quieter, more closely supervised areas of school*

and

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[4] Bauminger, N., and Kasari C. (2000) Loneliness and friendship in high-functioning children with autism. *Child Development* 71(2)

[5] Bauminger, N., Shulman C., and Agasm, G. (2003) The links between perceptions of self and social relationships with children with high-functioning autism. *Journal of Developmental and Physical Difficulties,* 16

[6] Huang, A., Wheeler, J. (2007). Promoting the development of educational programs for children with autism in southeast Asian Countries. *International Journal of Special Education*, 22(3), 78-88.

[7] Hart, K., Fujiki, M., Brinton, B., Hart, C. (2004). The relationship between social behaviour and severity of language impairment. Journal of speech, language, and hearing research, 47, 647-662.

[8] Bauminger, N., Shulman C., and Agasm, G. (2003) The links between perceptions of self and social relationships with children with high-functioning autism. *Journal of Developmental and Physical Difficulties,* 16

engaged in fewer social interactions during the school day, both in and out of lessons, and reported having far fewer friends[9]

TASK 1

Spend some time observing pupils in the playground during break times. How do typically developing pupils enter into social engagement with others? How is this contact maintained and how do they disengage?

Now observe one or more pupils with autism. Note their social approaches and how they maintain and end social contact.

List the similarities and differences you notice between the typical pupils and those with autism

Now watch the video clip "ASD-Peer Support".

See this clip:
www.education.gov.uk/lamb/autism/friendship/peer-support

In your learning log, note to what extent peer support might have an effect on the break time behaviours you observed in both groups of pupils.

BRIEFING 2 - Peer awareness and support

If we focus only on the social information they need and the adaptations that have to be made by pupils with autism, then we miss an important opportunity to support the development of a mutually meaningful dialogue between pupils with autism and their peers. For some pupils, this may occur naturally with little external assistance. Just under a quarter of individuals with autism spectrum manage to establish friendships independently of help[10].

Although it is important not to impose friendship on those individuals who are not seeking it, those individuals who do manage to establish close friendships with others show an acceleration in social development and a reduction in some negative

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[9] Wainscot, J., Naylor, P., Sutcliffe, P., Tantam, D., & Williams, J. (2008). Relationships with peers and use of the school environment of mainstream secondary school pupils with Asperger Syndrome (High-Functioning Autism): A case-control study. *International Journal of Psychology and Psychological Therapy*, 8, 1, 25.38.)

[10]. Orsmond, G.I., Krauss, M.W., & Seltzer, M.N. (2004). Peer relationships and social and recreational activities among adolescents and adults with autism. Journal of autism and developmental disorders, 34, 245- 256. Sterponi, L., & Fasulo, A. How to go on: Intersubjectivity and progressivity in a child with autism. Ethos, 38, 116-142

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behaviours[11] This suggests that it is worthwhile investing in interventions to support the development of friendships.

For a young child with autism making friends may mean learning to tolerate the potentially overwhelming demands of the playground. The provision of quiet, low arousal zones with a choice of structured activities can be helpful.

For some pupils with autism, the proximity of others in their play space is challenging. Adults can take the lead by modelling sensitive ways to share the space and demonstrate to the other children how to play alongside a child with autism. Adults can, perhaps, emulate some of the activities which engage the child. If, for example, the child enjoys pouring sand through their fingers, the adult can model doing something similar as a way of making contact. If the child enjoys spinning the wheels on a toy car, the adult can introduce some similar spinning activities. The impact of the adult demonstrating such responsive and sensitive approaches to a child with autism cannot be overestimated, as young children will be influenced strongly by the behaviour of the adults around them.

Through the primary school years these early opportunities can be built on. Formal and informal buddy systems can provide a shared context for interaction. The introduction of any of the below can all sow the seeds of potential friendship, as a child with autism will potentially learn through the experience that other children can be a source of support and assistance.

- Work buddy - someone to be a partner in a particular lesson
- Transition partner - someone to be an accompanying guide to support movement around the school
- Special event buddy, to support for unusual events
- Playground buddy, to be a guide for playtime games, activities and protocols, such as lining up
- Lunch-time buddy to support with queuing up, making food choices and providing an eating partner

See online resource:
www.education.gov.uk/lamb/autism/friendship/buddy-systems

Using some formal approaches that are available for all may also be of interest. For example, in 'Checking Chums', the class decide on personalised targets and are then paired by the teacher with a partner. Together they support each other in

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[11] Tantam, D. (2000) Adolescence and Adulthood of Individuals with Asperger Syndrome, In A. Klin, F. Volkmar, and S. Sparrow, (Eds.) Asperger Syndrome, New York: Guildford Press

relation to their declared target and can give each other stickers, house points or credits when they see their partner achieving in relation to their target[12].

It has been suggested that those individuals on the spectrum who have managed to establish friendships have often achieved this through a shared interest or hobby[13]. The provision of activity groups or lunchtime clubs which focus on a particular area of interest for a child with autism but which is also of appeal to others can prove a fertile meeting ground where potential friendships can be fostered. Examples of some successes include clubs centred on computer games, photography, board games, card-based games, stamp collecting, Sudoku, art, playing instruments, Lego/Meccano or kit building, robotics and many more. An aspect that is probably influential here is the clear structure that such focused activities can offer. In the playground, without such a clear framework, some pupils with autism can struggle to participate alongside the other pupils. The following case study illustrates this.

CASE STUDY 1 – HARRY

At 8 years of age, Harry was achieving well in the classroom He had a diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome and was academically able. He did not have a statement of SEN or any allocated additional support in the classroom.

The class was relatively small with only 23 pupils. Although Harry was able to complete most of the classroom tasks by himself, he did need some support in starting an activity. His teacher had devised a visual prompt sheet for Harry reminding him of routine elements, such as, writing the date, the title, and following the steps written on the board. This helped Harry to start his work and he was able to ask for help if he needed further clarification.

Although he was doing very well in the classroom, Harry found playtime very difficult. The school had very pleasant facilities with a large playing field, a playground marked up for a number of playground games, e.g. hopscotch, and an attractive adventure play area with climbing frames and nets, slides, monkey bars and large cylindrical posts which provided high level stepping stones.

Harry's mother had expressed concern that Harry was specially isolated and had no friends. He was observed in the playground over a few playtimes and was seen either to spend his time on the periphery of the playground or he would go to the

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[12] Brown, C., Topping, K., Henington, C. and Skinner, C. (1999) Peer Monitoring of Learning Behaviour: The Case for 'Checking Chums', Educational Psychology in Practice 15, 3, 174-181
[13] Boucher, J. (2009) The Autistic Spectrum, London: Sage

adventure area and lie across the stepping stones, much to the annoyance of the other children. When not engaged in this way, Harry would either spend his time at the water fountain or in the toilets.

His teacher had not been aware of his playground behaviour up to this point. She felt that he needed help in understanding how to use the playground facilities. She decided to teach him how to use the adventure area equipment as the starting point.

She planned for the next three PE lessons to be based around using the adventure equipment. For most of the class, already familiar with the apparatus, she planned a number of different challenges. For Harry, the focus was on observing how the other children used the equipment and then following their lead. Harry quickly learned how to use the equipment, including the stepping-stones.

The teacher followed this up by working with the class on using the markings in the playground to play organised games, as well as exploring a range of activities for the playing field. Photographic information books were made by the class for the three play areas.

Importantly, the teacher also decided to introduce another element of support for Harry. She introduced 'new buddy day' for the whole class. One day a week was designated new buddy day and the class were all paired up with someone that did not usually play with, for one playtime. Their instructions were to play with that new person for the morning break. If they wanted to play together again that was fine but the focus was one playtime. The teacher also told the class that she would want to hear about the new play partners and how the session had gone, for example, what they did together. This proved to be a very effective strategy. Harry started to be included in play activities beyond the buddy day and the teacher felt that the other children also benefited from the chance to play with different children.

The playground can be problematic for many pupils with autism. This has attracted the attention of some workers in the field. Philip Whitaker, an Educational Psychologist, trained a group of KS 2 peer tutors to support the inclusion at playtime of a group of ten pupils with autism who were based in a resourced provision in their primary school. The peer tutors taught some interaction techniques with the focus on communication and shared play. Over the 20 weeks of the programme, the peer tutors were successful in engaging their peers with autism in sustained periods of shared play, and the frequency of requesting attention from the pupils with autism increased substantially. An element that needed to be added to support the interaction between the two groups was interesting. Once the peer tutors had been coached to use strategies similar to those used by teachers in the classroom, e.g.

using predictable sequences and structure, they found it easier to engage their peers with autism.[14]

There are a number of other ways to build some structured peer support around a pupil with autism. These can range from intentionally focused interventions which build on the notion of friendship, acceptance and celebration of individuality through to interventions which acknowledge and explore the autism spectrum.

Circle time, for example, provides an established context for the exploration of Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL)[15], which can include reflection on friendships, helping one another and reflection on difference.

One widely adopted model of circle time is Mosley's Quality Circle Time[16] approach. Mosley has described the approach as having many benefits in addressing key aspects of social and emotional development:

> *It lends itself efficiently to practising skills such as speaking, listening, turn-taking, problem-solving, and enjoying and appreciating each other's company. Some of these skills are key elements of socio-emotional effectiveness. By planning structured and appropriate circle time sessions within a safe and supportive setting, children can participate in stage-appropriate tasks, games and discussions to help develop their self-esteem, self-confidence, emotional literacy and social skills, thereby impacting upon their overall level of socio-emotional competence.[17]*

It may be felt that an ongoing network of support may be a more helpful starting point. A widely established intervention, which provides this kind of support, is Circle of Friends. The approach originated in North America and can be an effective way of providing peer support for pupils who are socially isolated. It involves bringing together a group of volunteers who agree to meet on a regular basis (usually once a week) to explore with a pupil with autism key areas where the group may be able to offer guidance and support. The group is facilitated by an adult, but the group members decide on targets and means of supporting the 'focus' pupil. It is possible to have a Circle of Friends where the diagnosis is not discussed and the attention of the group is on areas of strength for the focus pupil and areas where the group feel they can offer support, guidance or a friendly contact. There are necessary protocols involved in setting up a Circle, including a hierarchy of permissions that need to be sought. A very useful document has been provided online by a former autism

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[14] Whitaker, P. (2004) Fostering communication and shared play between mainstream peers and children with autism: approaches, outcomes and experiences
[15] Add links to the primary and secondary SEAL materials
[16] http://www.circle-time.co.uk
[17] ibid

outreach team for Leicester Council and describes their experience with a number of mainstream pupils with autism. [18]

These are comments from some of the young people who have participated in training as peer supporters:

We saw him getting angry with the dinner lady...we went and started talking to him.... told him it was not worth it.... he walked away.

I explained that if you swear in class you get into trouble. We talked about when it was ok to swear.

We take it in turns to wait for him by the drinks machine at break for five minutes

I leant out of the window and shouted, 'Do you want to come swimming Craig?' He said he couldn't, but now he comes every week with us.

It may take a bit of time to learn how to help but it's really worth it in the end – they're happy and you're happy as well.

BRIEFING 3 – RAISING AWARENESS ABOUT AUTISM

There are times when it may be felt that it is necessary to address the issues arising from autism or Asperger syndrome more directly. This could mean a general provision of information about the subject, for example, in an assembly or a whole class approach. As with Circle of Friends, it is important to have the agreement of pupils with autism and their parents before the pupil's condition is discussed openly.

Schools may develop their own systems for doing this but there are a number of programmes that can offer some assistance with this, all of which can be adapted to suit pupils' particular profiles, the school and the adults delivering the information:

They include:
- 'The Sixth Sense' by Carol Gray[19]– this book provides a prepared session for discussing autism or Asperger Syndrome with a class. The session can take one to two hours to deliver. The session looks at how an untypical social sense may lead to difficulties in the classroom. Pupils identify ways they could support someone who may need help with their social understanding

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[18]http://www.leics.gov.uk/index/education/going_to_school/special_education_needs/specialist_teaching_service/service_teams/autism_outreach_team/autism_team_resources/circle_of_friends.htm
[19] Gray, C (2002) The Sixth Sense II. Texas; Future Horizons

- The 'Big A' Peer Support Pack This is a free online PowerPoint presentation aimed at KS2 classes but could be adapted to use with younger or older students.[20]
- Resources from the National Autistic Society[21], including a number of free, downloadable resources for teaching classes about autism and Asperger syndrome. These include factual worksheets, lesson plans with accompanying resources and cover both primary and secondary age groups, and
- Personalised approaches - There have been some reports of successful awareness raising sessions by pupils with autism to their peers. For example, one year 6 girl created her own PowerPoint presentation based largely on her achievements, using a series of photographs as a means of illustrating this. Key information about the impact of her autism on her ability to relate to others was embedded throughout the presentation. She chose to deliver this to a whole school assembly and it was very well received. She went on to deliver a similar presentation to the staff in her new secondary school before she transferred into year 7. On another occasion, a pupil about to enter the sixth form made a presentation about his experience of Asperger Syndrome, which he delivered to his newly formed peer support group. He conducted a filmed interview with his mother, discussing with her the presentation of his Asperger's as a young child. In both these cases, the young people were supported in the process of creating their presentations but took the lead in terms of content and style of delivery.

For schools interested in developing their own programme for peer awareness, a possible template which can be applied flexibly or used in full is the six week training programme developed by Etherington[22]. So far this programme has been used in secondary settings but it could be used for pupils in Year 6.

Whichever intervention is used to develop peer awareness and support it is important to realise that this is only the starting point for an ongoing process. In order to maintain any progress achieved through peer awareness training sessions, the on-going support from the adults facilitating the training, or early gains are likely to be lost over time.

The impact of peer support can be seen clearly from these comments from pupils with autism who have been supported by their trained peers:

> *Now I've got my peer supporters I don't feel alone anymore. I don't keep thinking I'm going to get into trouble or do the wrong thing. I'm not frightened or anxious about coming to school anymore.*

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[20] www.tes.co.uk/teaching /Autism-Awareness-Peer-Support-Pack or on http://www.tes.co.uk/ResourceDetail.aspx?storyCode=6003187
[21] http://www.autism.org.uk/teacherpack
[22] Etherington, A (2007) Teasing and bullying and helping children with ASC: What can we do*? Good Autism Practice 8(2)*

My peer supporters have really helped me. I can talk to them and they will help me to know if what I'm trying to do is appropriate. Sometimes I don't know if people are trying to be unkind to me but I can ask one of my support group and they can tell me. Once this girl asked me to stand on a bench and sing a song. I did it but I think she was trying to humiliate me. I asked one of my supporters. He said I shouldn't do what people tell me to do if it makes me feel bad inside. I should just say no and walk away. I think he is right. I think I can trust him.

It makes me feel good knowing that I'm helping someone else.

I learned it's easier to help people than you thought. Say, if you have a friend with a problem and you think you don't really know what to do, just being there is actually going to help them, knowing that they have someone to turn to if they have a problem.

TASK 3

Using the online resources and other references suggested, start to compile a portfolio of peer awareness raising literature, which you could use as a specialist teacher for autism to provide advice for teachers in your school. . Add to this through your own reading and further research.