SOCIAL SAFETY ISSUES ON THE SPECTRUM: WHY SOCIAL SKILLS TRAINING ALONE ISN'T ENOUGH

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We all know this rule: Don't go anywhere with a stranger.

But let's say you meet a cute guy at the movies. The two of you chat for a few minutes while you're waiting to buy popcorn. Then he asks you if you want to walk around before the movie starts. How would you react?

Most adults recognize the potential danger and generalize from the macro rule to the micro situation: *Don't talk to strangers* also includes this unique situation because *even though you've talked for a few minutes, you still don't know this guy*. But for those of us on the spectrum, this protective cognitive process is neither easy nor automatic. After all, if you've talked to someone, then he's no longer a stranger, right?

A group of researchers based at the University of Indiana just published a meta-analysis of research studies on the efficacy rates of social skills classes. The data indicate that social skills training programs are fairly ineffective. Why?

While the study suggests that intensity and implementation of the classes plus identification of deficits are factors, the answer is also at least partially because autism is neurological. We can usually remember the lessons, rules, facts, and values we are taught. But the cognitive, social, and linguistic challenges just do not go away, making it difficult to distill social information, manage and complete social decisions, make social judgments, and protect ourselves during the myriad moment-by-moment fluctuations that are an inherent aspect of human interaction.

Specifically, it is hard for us to generalize rules to situations that in our mind are unique or specific. We also have a strong tendency to miss nonverbal clues like tone of voice or body posture that could forewarn of trouble.

We understand language so concretely that the subtle meaning of social information may escape us. One young woman on the spectrum told me she didn't need to use birth control because her sexual education teacher, her mother, and her priest all had told her, "You can't have children until you're married."

Additionally, social situations are fairly open-ended. If we can't see specific reasons for picking one course of action over another, we may lack the ability to make adept choices. In the social world, it is impossible to predict outcomes, come to sure conclusions, or chart a fixed course. Many of us have trouble enough picking what to eat from a menu.

Furthermore, we often have only a vague idea of how we feel. We do not know how to use this self-knowledge in decision making. A lack of emotional facility results in slow or out-of-proportion responses and inadvertent advertising of our vulnerabilities.

Lastly, many of us experience face blindness. We can't recognize someone who teased, bullied, or attacked us in the past.

Professionals, parents, and teachers need to keep in mind that while it is not impossible for those of us on the spectrum to improve our social skills over time, each social moment is still new, singular, and met with our unique autistic profile. This point is paramount when designing and delivering

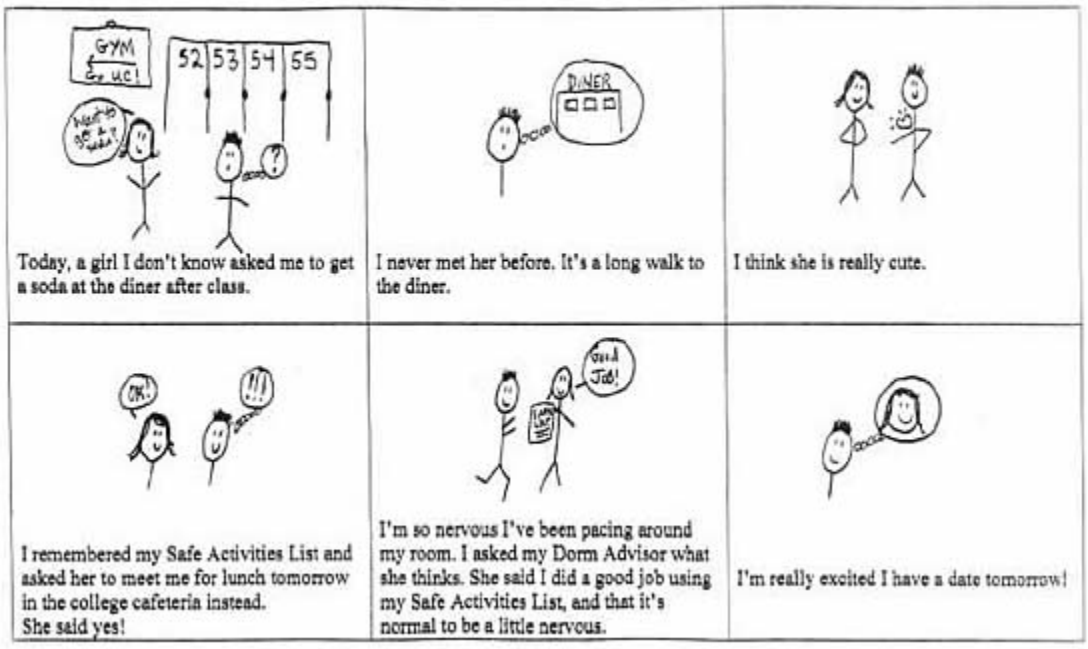
social, sexual, and relationship education for those on the spectrum. Besides providing a standard curriculum, I always tell professionals, advocates, and loved ones to add another lesson: getting help.

No matter how many social skills we have practiced, no matter how confident we are in factual knowledge, and no matter how many discussions we have had about what is socially healthy and appropriate, we must learn to identify at least one trustworthy person and then learn how to turn to this designated person for guidance each and every time we are at a social crossroad.

When I conduct workshops on dating, relationships, and sexuality at autism conferences, I ask attendees, "What is the first thing you do if you like someone romantically?" They inevitably supply me with decent answers: start a conversation, find out his name, ask him to do an activity together, see if a friend or sibling knows her. These answers are not wrong *per se*. But I teach them that actually the very first thing we must do is go talk to someone trustworthy, not because we are stupid or immature, but because we have autistic challenges that make it difficult for us to pick up social nuances, contextual details, and hidden innuendo.

We must teach everyone on the spectrum that consulting with a trustworthy confidant is always the first step in any social move. This is just a fact of autistic life and nothing to be ashamed about. Lisa Lieberman, author of *A "Stranger" Among Us: Hiring In-Home Support for a Child with Autism Spectrum Disorders or Other Neurological Differences* (AAPC 2005) and mother of an autistic son, emphasizes the need for our community to shift our focus from independence to interdependence. "All of us, whether neurotypical or ASD, have been erroneously taught to value and strive for independence…Learning to reach out for help is just as essential a life skill to master." Accepting the fact that even neurotypicals do not get through life alone is part of making interdependence a vital and expected aspect living in the world.
I also teach specific safety strategies that can be used to reduce the risk of social danger. No single strategy can prevent all danger, but we must be proactive. My most popular strategy is the Safe Activities List, a list of activities predetermined to be totally safe. Youth and adults are taught to steer social invitations away from the unknown possibilities and subtle peculiarities of the moment toward those on the list.

Chapter 10: Using Comic Strips to Understand Safe Social Behavior
Example 2: Safe Activities List in Action



Today, a girl I don't know asked me to get a soda at the diner after class.

I never met her before. It's a long walk to the diner.

I think she is really cute.

I remembered my Safe Activities List and asked her to meet me for lunch tomorrow in the college cafeteria instead. She said yes!

I'm so nervous I've been pacing around my room. I asked my Dorm Advisor what she thinks. She said I did a good job using my Safe Activities List, and that it's normal to be a little nervous.

I'm really excited I have a date tomorrow!

Next, I teach strategies to increase emotional facility. Many of us on the autism spectrum do not intrinsically recognize our emotions or know how to use our feelings to make wise social discriminations. This may seem unusual to neurotypicals (those not on the spectrum) because non-autistic people appear born wired to understand their feelings and how to skillfully use emotional indicators to steer themselves through life.

But those of us on the spectrum must learn step-by-step that if your heart is racing and your stomach "drops" when somebody you just met asks you to walk around the movie theater, these are nervous signals and this feeling is a useful clue or tool for picking a course of appropriate and potentially life-saving action. If you are nervous, it may be time to leave the situation, use your Safe Activities List, or in a worst-case scenario, summon emergency assistance. When we do learn through effort and practice how to notice our emotional signals, how to identify our feelings, and how to accurately scale the "amount" of emotion we are experiencing, we can more confidently know what to do.

In her book *Asperger Syndrome and Adolescence: Helping Preteens and Teens Get Ready for the Real World*, Dr. Teresa Bolick explains how to make and use a feelings chart, an important visual aid and tool. Though some of her books are geared toward children, all of Kari Dunn-Buron's books are useful for teaching autistic adults how to scale emotions and tailor reactions adeptly, thereby improving communication and engagement success.

Is my emphasis on safety strategies and help systems overbearing? After all, we are talking about adults. Shouldn't autistic adults be free to do whatever they want, with whomever they choose? Shouldn't adults make their own decisions without interference?

We do not have to violate the rights of adults to make their own way in life, disabled or not, but we must face the truth: Even articulate and educated autistic adults can experience difficulty protecting ourselves and making appropriate social choices. What we are realizing is that straight social skills training just isn't enough.

We have a responsibility as a community to provide autistic teens and adults with the tools and cognitive flexibility to navigate social life with less danger and more confidence. Needing rules about asking for help, visual aids, and safety strategies is a simple fact of autistic reality. We can't just say, "You are adults. Do whatever you want." We must endeavor to teach ways of dealing with autistic challenges and augmenting autistic strengths. Autism organizations have a particular responsibility to make judgments about what is safe, what is healthy, and what choices and activities are in line with "best practices" for those loving, feeling, thinking, and living with an autistic brain.

In summary, when preparing our sons and daughters, loved ones, students, and clients for the social world, we must consider how autistic people hear and process information, deal with emotion and choice, and struggle to communicate and socialize. We must take issues of social safety and social health seriously. It is imperative that we provide support and direct guidance, beyond basic skills training and factual knowledge, in order to promote the healthiest and least risky paths to friendship, outreach, and love.

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