

Role Playing Guide

*Improve Your Autistic Child's
Social Understanding*

autismadhdconnection.com



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Introduction

One of the most common traits of autistic people is the lack of social skills. Social skills are generally the rules and customs we use to interact with others in our societies. These skills do not come naturally to those with autism, so they have to work at developing them. Yet, to do well in the neurotypical world, being socially adept is important to be able to have good relationships, excel in school and succeed in the workplace. We as parents, caregivers, teachers and others who care for autistic children must help them develop these essential skills. One way to do this is through role play.

So what is role play? The Cambridge Dictionary defines role play as “pretending to be someone else, especially as part of learning a new skill.” The Britannica Dictionary defines it as “an activity in which people do and say things while pretending to be someone else or while pretending to be in a particular situation.”

In other words, you help your child practice what to do and what to say in different situations. Not only will this help them be prepared for a variety of situations, but it will also grow their social skills overall.

Why do autistic children have difficulty with social skills?

Autistic children have difficulty in social situations for many different reasons.

- First, social situations can be so unpredictable. For those with autism, predictability and routine is important to them and their functioning. We know that social circumstances can be difficult because the unexpected can happen.
- Second, many autistic people lack good communication skills. Not only do they have a hard time communicating what they want to convey, they don't always understand what others are trying to tell them through verbal and non-verbal communication. They may not comprehend facial expressions, or they may take what someone says literally.
- Third, many people with autism have a hard time with perspective taking and Theory of Mind. Perspective taking is a person's ability to understand someone else's emotions, thoughts, needs and wants. The American Psychological Association defines Theory of Mind as “the understanding that others have intentions, desires, beliefs, perceptions, and emotions different from one's own and that such intentions, desires, and so forth affect people's actions and behaviors. Children show the rudiments of theory of mind as toddlers, have a

limited understanding of the relation between belief and action by age 3, and can begin to infer false beliefs in others by around age 4.”

- Fourth, those with autism may have context blindness that interferes with social abilities. Context blindness is a cognitive theory that was developed by Peter Vermeulen, MSc, Ph.D., who is a researcher and senior lecturer/consultant at the Autisme Centrale in Belgium. He defines it as “the lack of spontaneous use of context when giving meaning, especially to vague and ambiguous stimuli.” When responding to a situation or someone’s emotions, we use clues about what is happening around the situation to give it context.
- Fifth, autistic children can lack emotional control. Being able to control our emotions helps our relationships in our families, at school, in the workplace and out in public in general. When someone doesn’t have control of their negative emotions, it disrupts life, damages relationships and causes or exacerbates health problems.
- Sixth, it is common for autistic children to have sensory issues. We know that we have five senses: sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell. Many children with autism have sensory issues related to these senses. However, there are more “senses” linked to body awareness and balance that also can be impacted. While these issues can disrupt life for the autistic child themselves, they also can get in the way of them being able to interact effectively with others.

How role play helps autistic children

So how does role play help our autistic children improve their social skills? By acting out and practicing how to behave and what to say in certain situations in a safe, comfortable environment, your child will increase their social skills.

Role play also:

- Helps your child’s overall development. You’ll notice kids use role play a lot in their play when they are young. This isn’t just about having fun – it’s about their development.
- Answers questions that your child may have about how to act in certain circumstances. It will help clarify what they are supposed to do when a particular situation occurs. Showing them through role play instead of just talking about it helps them internalize it better.
- Allows your child to better understand emotions and how to gain control of them. By playing out a situation, they can see how different emotions will bring different results. This can be eye opening for your child and assist them with better understanding the outcomes if they react with emotion in both positive and negative ways. It also helps them comprehend which emotions are socially acceptable in particular circumstances.
- Teaches them problem-solving skills. Social situations can be tricky sometimes, and your child needs to be prepared for those times. By role playing, they can

improve their problem-solving skills as situations arise where they need to think about how their response can improve or worsen a situation.

- Enhances empathy as they can better understand how a person in a situation may feel through role play.
- Reduces stress of being concerned or fearful about certain situations that may occur at school or another place. Your child will feel more prepared with how to handle particular conversations or events that may occur.
- Educate them about how to start conversations or interactions with others. Many times, autistic children aren't sure how to approach others to play or talk to them. Role playing can help them improve that capability.

How to role play

Role playing is quite easy. You and your child will each act out a role in a certain situation. For example:

- You each can play yourselves in a situation that involves child and parent.
- Your child can play themselves while you take on the role of the other person in the circumstance.
- You can play the part of your child, and your child plays the other role. This is helpful when you need them to understand the other person or want to specifically show your child behaviors or dialogue to help them prepare for certain situations.

You can draft a quick script if that is beneficial for your child for the role play, but you also can play out a situation and discuss what to do differently. Then try it a few more times until you think your child would be comfortable in that situation.

If your child is more comfortable role playing with puppets or plushies, that is an option too.

In addition, role play can involve more than two people, so enlist the help of other family members or friends to make it more effective. You can even have your child and sibling(s) do the role play, with you being the “director” of the play. Be creative – there is no one way to do role playing right. Make it fun, and your child will be more likely to role play and practice more often.

Helpful tips for role play

How can you make the most of role playing? Try these helpful tips:

- If your child needs to see what not to do, as the adult you should play that role. This helps them feel safer socially.
- Don't be afraid to try different ways of role playing. For example, songs can be a great way to role play. Your child can watch a social skills instructional video, and then the two (or more) of you can practice what your child learned.
- Keep the script visible during the role play if your child needs to rely on it, especially if you are helping them understand some specific language to use.

- Sometimes it's good for you to play the part of a flawed interaction and have your child point out what you did wrong. Have your child explain to you what you should have done instead.
- Be sure to coach your child after the role play (or during if you feel like you really need to take a break, coach and then start again). You also can talk through the scenario beforehand and what your child should do in the situation.
- Use spoken or written prompts to help your child know what to do next if they get stuck. If you have pictures to use as image prompts, those can be very helpful too since autistic children are generally very visual in how they learn.

Role play activities

Now for the fun – here are some role play activities that you can try with your child.

- **Jar Method** – brainstorm scenario ideas and write them on slips of paper. Then fold them and put them into a jar (or box or another container). When you want to role play, simply have your child pick a slip of paper out of the jar and use that as your scenario to practice.
- **Pick a costume** – create a bin that has various costumes and props. Have your child choose a costume from it and then create a scenario with roles to play. Even if you are pirates, your child can still learn about social skills 😊
- **Greetings** – have your child practice greeting different people (with you and even your family playing multiple roles) in different situations such as at school, the grocery store, a family gathering, the library, the playground or other places you frequent.
- **The Compliment** – give your child a compliment and have them practice how to graciously receive it, and then have your child practice giving others a compliment.
- **Join the group** – help your child better understand how to approach and join a group of people in a social setting by acting out this scenario.
- **On the fly** – if your child is nervous about a situation, practice how to handle it right before. On the way to a party or school event? Do a quick role play in the car. Waiting for an appointment? Do a quick role play. It doesn't always have to be done with a lot of time available. Role play can take a few minutes when needed.
- **The Playdate** – act out how to behave at a playdate, including the greeting, taking turns, sharing, etc. to help your child prepare for a fun time with a friend.
- **The Restaurant** – if your child has difficulties with behavior at a restaurant, then focus on role playing those. It could be table manners, eating behavior or how to

converse with others at the table. Eating out has a lot of social skills involved, so it's a good scenario to practice.

- **Conversation Starter** – practice starting conversations with your child in different circumstances or places. This can be an awkward and difficult situation for many children and can take practice to learn how to be sufficient in this skill.
- **What Didn't Go Well** – did your child have a recent social situation that didn't go so well? Role play a different way to manage it so that your child will be prepared the next time and have a more successful interaction.

There is no one right way to role play so be creative and try different ideas! The important thing is to make sure your child is practicing, learning and improving their social skills so they can build their self-confidence and advocate for themselves.

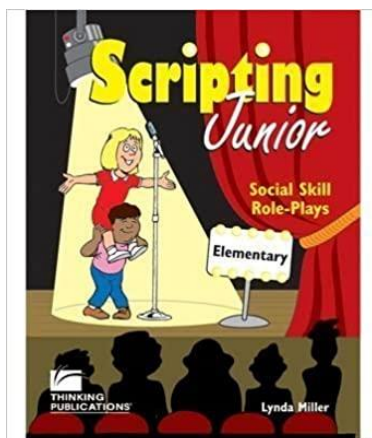
Additional resources

Still need additional ideas for role playing with your child? Look at these recommendations.

[Acting Out: 60 Role Play Cards That Explore Critical Teen Issues by Youthlight](#) (affiliate link)



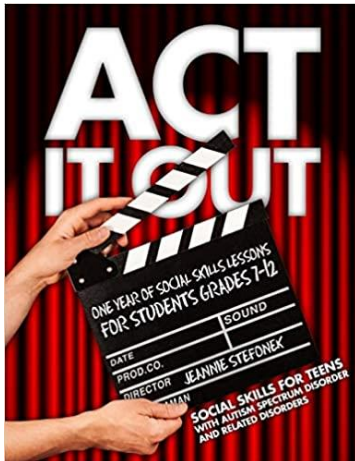
[Scripting Junior: Social Skills Role-plays](#) (affiliate link)



[Social Skills Role Play Cards: Social Situations for Teens](#) (affiliate link)



[ACT It Out: One Year of Social Skills Lessons for Students Grades 7-12](#) (affiliate link)



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