

Autism Intervention Research  
Network – Behavioral Health  
(AIR-B)

# Remaking Recess

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# Treatment Overview:

The purpose of this intervention is to improve the social inclusion of elementary-aged children with autism spectrum disorder through facilitated interactions with their peers. We would like to teach school personnel to facilitate opportunities for their students with autism to sustain periods of engagement with their peers during unstructured times in hopes of improving the social quality and quantity of their interactions with peers at school.



## Philosophy

We believe the partnership between the school personnel and the professional is important. As all children and school personnel are unique individuals, we believe in an individualized intervention approach based upon an underlying general theory. We believe in providing school personnel with naturalistic strategies that they can use within their daily routine and interactions with their student with autism and his/her peers. Thus, we believe that these intervention strategies that target social engagement should complement the student's other programs and activities at school.

## Why?

Research shows that successful social interactions between children result in friendship development over time. This is critical for children with autism as socialization is one of their most challenging and least malleable core deficits. Many high-functioning children with autism experience loneliness and social anxiety, but often lack the social skills and opportunity to successfully engage with their peers at school. Thus, in this intervention, we are targeting social engagement.



## Strategies

We will go over specific strategies for you to use on the playground and in the cafeteria. Some will seem difficult, some will seem easy, some will even be strategies that you already use. Our previous research has shown these strategies are effective in improving children's social involvement.

# Playground Engagement States

In order to implement the strategies in this guide you will need to be able to identify the state of peer engagement for a particular child or group.

## Engagement States:

### Solitary/ Isolated (Alone)

The child appears uninvolved with peers and plays alone with no other children.



### Onlooker (Watching)

The child has a one-way awareness of another child or group of children who is farther away than 3 feet.



### Parallel

The child and peer are engaged in a similar activity but there is no social behavior.



### Parallel aware

The child and peer(s) are engaged in similar activity and mutually aware of each other.



### ★ Joint engagement

The child and peer(s) direct social behavior with one another (e.g. the child and peer(s) offer objects, have a conversation, exchange turns in an activity like reading a comic book, drawing, origami, etc.).



### ★ Games with rules

The child participates in an organized game with clear rules and/or engages in fantasy or pretend play with clearly defined roles set by the child or his/her peers. A game has to be with at least one other child.



# Transitioning to an Engaging Activity and Setting up

During transitions to play and lunch prime children to engage with peers: Clearly and repeatedly state that the children should be thinking about whom they will play with.

Play a game or create a scenario during the transition that will have children engaged with peers as they arrive on the playground.

Examples:

1. Transition the children in pairs with a conversation topic.
2. Play Follow the Leader or Simon says on the way to the playground.
3. Have the children pretend to be animals or characters as the group walks together.

Notice children who are slow to start to play and see if you can help them.

Recess is short and so we want to help children make the most of their precious time to socialize.



## Initial Steps to Support Peer Engagement during Recess Time:

1. Circulate the play area, observing children as they play.
2. Scan the playground
  - Actively seek out the target child on the yard especially if he/she may be experiencing some difficulty.
3. Facilitate an Activity/Game
  - Be prepared with materials you may need to start an activity/game that is interesting to the target child.
  - Allow the target child the opportunity to initiate his/her own activities/games with peers—it's okay to pause.



- If the target child has difficulty finding an activity/game, initiate a game with the target child and a group of children.
  - Provide support and structure for the target child and his/her peers.
4. Remember to model having fun!
    - Always demonstrate positive affect toward the children.
    - Pay close attention to your body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, language, etc.
    - Be energetic!



# Providing Popular, Developmentally Appropriate Games and Activities

## Following the Child's Choice of Activity

- This will ensure the target child will be motivated to interact.
- Be sure the activity/game is developmentally and age appropriate for children.
- Build off the child's strengths.
- Ensure that the activity/game will not be over-stimulating for the child.
- Show interest in the activity the target child selects.

## Facilitating Engagement

- Ensure all children understand the activity/game rules.
- Participate in the game until the game gets rolling (e.g. claim a role in the game).
- Model appropriate behavior (e.g. turn taking, waiting in line, good sportsmanship, etc.).
- Praise children's positive behaviors (e.g. great hit, you run so fast, awesome sharing the ball, etc.).

*Sometimes it is helpful to pretend you do not know the rules of the game.  
Nominate a child to explain the rules to you and the group.  
Remind children to pay attention and listen to the rules.*



# In Vivo Social Skills Instruction

## Direct Instruction of Social Skills in Vivo

- Be neutral in your tone when speaking to the target child and his/her peers.
- Use clear, simple cues to direct or redirect children along with nonverbal gestures.
- Stay near the target child as he/she is engaging with peers—participate as needed!
- Pay attention to the engagement to see whether “instructionally ripe moments” appear. Instructionally ripe moments are defined as inappropriate behaviors children engage in that occur from interacting/engaging with peers that may harm children’s social experiences/relationships with peers.

These include:

Physically aggressive behaviors towards others  
Verbally aggressive behaviors towards others  
Protesting when doesn’t get his/her way  
Laughing when someone gets hurt or out of a game  
Inappropriate nonverbal cues (e.g. rolling eyes, gasping, etc.)  
Incessant verbal behavior

Offer direct instruction on appropriate social skills.

- Use specific instruction that is limited to what is most useful to the children in the moment.
- Use visuals as needed (e.g. draw a picture, use pictures, etc.).
- Address the issue immediately and briefly.

Remember to address inappropriate/problematic behavior by ignoring those behaviors and reinforcing appropriate behaviors.

*Correct their behavior on the playground—be explicit—validate what they are doing and tell them what they should be doing instead (e.g. “I see that you are..., but I need you to...”)* and continue the interaction.

Remember, punishment teaches children what you don’t want them to do. Instead, focus on teaching the children what you do want them to do and provide reinforcement when they exhibit the appropriate behavior.



# Facilitating Peer Conversations

**Conversations with Peers** – Help children have conversations with each other (defined as four or more back and forth exchanges between children).

**Conversation Starters** – strategies that assist children in initiating and maintaining conversations and improving reciprocal interactions with peers.

If the target child has difficulty engaging in conversations with peers during lunch, provide fun topics to talk about.

There are many ways to stimulate conversations between children at school. Remaking Recess focuses on using Social Menus, but other methods can also stimulate conversation between children (i.e. a Topic Box, Picture Prompts, or Interesting Objects).

- During times when children have opportunities to converse give them direct instructions to talk to each other. Example: “Now is the time for you to talk to each other.”
- Offer social menus to all children in the area. Do not single out the target child by approaching them only. Instead target the cluster of peers they are closest to by offering the social menus to the group.
- Give the menus to the children with the instructions “Here are some fun things for you and your friends to talk about”
- Move away so that the children aren’t tempted to talk to you instead of each other.
- Observe the children from a distance. If needed, move back and prompt them to ask each other the questions on the menu. Praise children who are having good conversations.

## Initiating and Responding

Helping the Target Child Initiate and Respond to Peers	Helping Peers Initiate and Respond to the Target Child
Remind the Target Child To:	Remind Peers To:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pay attention to who he/she is talking to.</li> <li>• Listen before trying to join an existing conversation.</li> <li>• Stay near the person he/she is talking to—not too close and not too far. Be sure that the target child does NOT walk away.</li> <li>• Use an appropriate tone of voice—not too loud and not too soft.</li> <li>• Direct their initiations to the peer by grabbing their attention (e.g. use a name—(e.g., Hey John!)—or lightly tap the child on the shoulder if he is not facing them).</li> <li>• Use facial expressions that show how they are feeling—if you’re happy, smile!</li> <li>• Stay on the topic of conversation (even if it is something they may not be interested in).</li> <li>• Be sure to take conversational turns.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be patient—give the target child a few moments to respond. Sometimes it takes people a little bit longer.</li> <li>• Be persistent—politely try again if he/she does not respond.</li> <li>• Share a topic of mutual interest (talk about something they both like).</li> <li>• Be aware of the “right” time to approach the target child (e.g., when he/she is not already engaged).</li> <li>• Make sure to trade information —take turns in the conversation.</li> </ul>





# Playing Games

## Playing Games

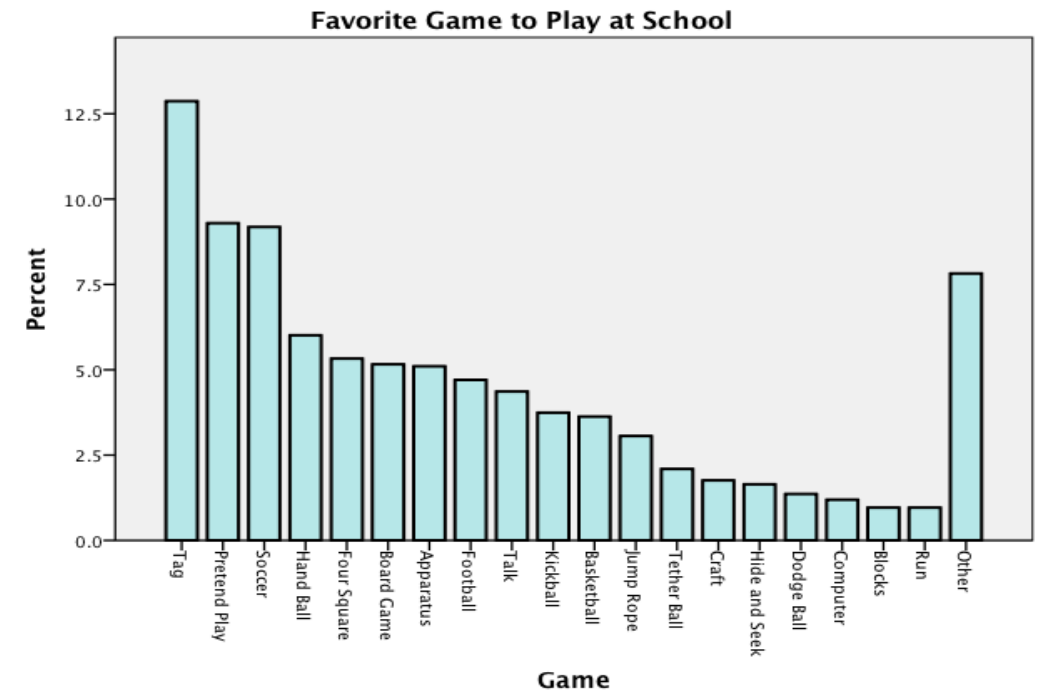
- Always go to recess prepared! Bring all necessary materials with you to facilitate a motivating game that the target child will enjoy.
- Play games that are “cool for school.” If a particular game is “in” at the school, teach the target child that game to increase his/her social power both in the classroom and on the playground.
- Clarify the rules of the game as a group.
- Practice good sportsmanship and prosocial skills.
- Practice participation with the target child and peers (e.g. entrance into games, actively taking a role, maintaining engagement, and exiting a game).
- Be consistent—practice the same game (if the children still want to play it) across several days.
- Build off children’s skills.
- Select games that are developmentally and age appropriate for the target child that are not too overwhelming or over-stimulating.

## Games

If you need help selecting and learning games refer to the internet or this book: Hopscotch, Hangman, Hot Potato, & Ha Ha Ha: A Rulebook of Children’s Games by Jack Macguire.

*It may help to give the target child and a peer model/buddy a “job” (e.g. ball monitor, sign maker, recruiter, etc.).*

*If needed, pre-teach the game privately with the target child so he/she can be successful with peers during play time.*



# Sustaining Engagement

## Supporting and Sustaining Engagement During an Interaction with Peers

Participate in the game as the facilitator to:

- Model appropriate social behavior (e.g. good sportsmanship, praise, being flexible, etc.).
- Once the game gets flowing and the children are independently playing, monitor the activity and step in as needed.
- Be the cheerleader: offer specific praise to the target child.
- If needed, use reinforcers that are motivating to the target child and peers to increase the amount of time spent engaged with peers.
- If needed, directly address a behavior with the target child by pulling him aside for a quick minute (but still near his peers). It is important to address “inappropriate” behavior immediately, so the target child knows what he/she should correct in order for the game to continue smoothly.

Be direct with peer models. If you see the target child losing attention or straying from the game, prompt a peer model to intervene and direct the target child’s social behavior. Some strategies may include asking the peer models to:

- Call out the target child’s name.
- Check in with the target child every now and then during the game.
- Pay attention to the target child during the game (e.g. it is important that we be good friends to everybody, so if we see a friend leave the game, we should...).
- Praise the target child.



# Fading Out of an Activity

## Knowing When to Fade Out

- We want the target child to rely on an adult as little as possible, so they become independent and socially successful during recess with their peers.
- Fading out may vary day to day pending how the child is doing in the activity and the type of activity. Sometimes it may take 10 minutes, and sometimes it may take 5 minutes.
- Some days you will have the opportunity to fade out of an activity, and some days you may not.

After the child is successfully engaged in a game/interaction, fade back to monitoring the interaction/activity/game.

Be mindful of the target child and his/her peers and continue to provide support if the children lose engagement or need assistance.

Continue to praise all children participating!

*Remember: use strategies to keep the child engaged in the interaction as needed.*

*Remember: this goal may not be achieved tomorrow, next week, or a month from now, but this is something we should always strive toward.*



# Quick Guide: Boosting Peer Engagement

Engagement State	Help Within The Current State	Boost To a Higher State	Strategies To Avoid
<b>Solitary</b>	Adult engage with child to assess reason for solitary state. Listen to the child then offer support.	Recruit a peer to ask child to play. Give friendly direct instruction telling the child to engage with peers. Provide an appealing and developmentally appropriate activity to draw the child to parallel position with peers.	Avoid benching or isolating a child during social times. Avoid pushing a child into an activity as opposed to inviting them and drawing them in.
<b>Onlooker</b>	Model being interested and focused on peers activities. Use language like “Look at Jimmy,” or “What are they going to do next?!”	Recruit a peer to invite the target child to join in play. Encourage the target child to play with peers or to ask a friend to play.	Avoid embarrassing the peers by making them feel that they must perform under scrutiny. Avoid reinforcing this state as a preferred state, i.e. don’t let the child only watch all the time.
<b>Parallel</b>	Support good social positioning, reinforce parallel play verbally or with other reward.	Join into play with the child. Cue child to notice peers.	Avoid being overly directive or positioning yourself in such a way that blocks children’s view of one another. Avoid helping too much.
<b>Parallel Aware</b>	With well-timed comments, verbally highlight to the children that they are playing next to each other. Praise their play skills. Add elements to the play to keep it exciting.	Ask peers if they can demonstrate play moves or games for each other. Verbally prompt target child to watch the peer. Model focusing on and being interested in the peer’s activities.	Avoid interjecting too many comments or adding information that might obscure the children’s awareness of each other. Don’t overly focus on the play objects.
★ <b>Joint Engagement</b>	Provide an environment that makes playing with peers easy. Clearly state that playing well with friends at school is the goal. Fade back and support from a distance as children maintain successful peer engagement.	Prompt the children to make a game out of what they are doing, i.e. taking turns setting goals. Teach children the rules and pragmatics of popular games. Provide equipment and scaffold efforts by children to advance engagement.	Avoid interrupting play and over-managing behavior that might be less-skilled or a bit rough. Instead, allow the children to set the tone for what is fair and fun as much as possible.
★ <b>Game With Rules</b>	Help the children get the game started or iron out any problems related to the game rules, turn taking, etc. Play with the children for a few minutes and model the appropriate behaviors. Make sure to fade out. Cheer them on.	Overlay a pretend play element onto the game. Add a component that draws out personal disclosures. Fade out of the activity to allow for maximum peer engagement and check back periodically.	Avoid dominating play as an adult. Don’t stop the flow of play between peers. Avoid implementing overly punitive measures when children exhibit rough behavior.

