

Exploring Friendships

One huge misconception that still exists in many textbooks and training courses is that autistic people prefer to be alone and do not want friends. This is not true. While for some autistic people making and maintaining friendships can be difficult, many of us can and do have meaningful friendships - they can just look different to what society leads us to believe is a "nice, normal friendship."

NB - Don't presume that just because someone is non-verbal or only selectively uses verbal language that they can't or don't want meaningful relationships. Start from the basis that all humans have a deep need for connection - but that connection can come in all different shapes and sizes.

First, and most importantly, make sure the person you are supporting actually wants friends. Having friends is often a social expectation but some people actually don't want friends and that is okay. The last thing we need is you trying to push them into a friendship that they don't want. This could cause a high degree of stress.

If the person does want friends, there are some things you can do to support this:

- Explore what's important to them in developing a friendship, again putting aside preconceived ideas of what you think a friendship looks like. Some autistic people say their best friendships have been through a computer.
- If they want them, offer support to seek out opportunities with other autistic people. Research tells us that when autistic people get together, they will have less difficulty in communicating and potentially feel more at ease.
- Help them to understand and identify what a friend is. This will help in situations where people are not being genuine.
- Find people with common interests. Sharing communication about a preferred interest may increase a sense of feeling comfortable. Think about yourself when you meet new people. I would imagine you start talking about a safe topic like the weather.