HOW TO USE FRIENDSHIP SPACE

The Purpose of Friendship Space

Friendship Space is an app created to help support students who have social communication and friendship-making skill deficits. Social communication is a hallmark deficit of students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). Students with ASD struggle with many skills needed to make and maintain friendships. Behaviours such as initiating a conversation or joining a group of peers, asking someone to join them in play, responding to initiations of other students and sharing interests are areas where these students may struggle. In addition, when students with ASD talk to others, they have a tendency to have very one-sided conversations that are more like monologues, often perseverating about their own area of restricted interest. A frequently observed conversation skill deficit is the failure to ask others questions (rather than just talk about their own interests and needs). Understanding that other people have different thoughts, feelings and interests is something that students with ASD often have to be taught. For example, on the playground, a student with ASD might not know that other kids like to talk about hockey or Minecraft. Learning this information, showing social interest and asking questions like, "What's your favourite movie or restaurant?", teaches important skills needed to build friendships and increase social awareness, and conversation skills.

The purpose of **Friendship Space** is to encourage students with ASD, under the mediation and guidance of a teacher or parent, to build social communication skills and potentially generate friendships with peers.

How to Use Friendship Space

This app is intended to be mediated by an educational professional or parent to utilize it to its fullest potential. It can be used by teachers at school or by parents at home.

Each category and question provides a foundation on which many social initiations, interactions, and conversation skills can be built. Consider targeting specific skills identified in the student's IEP and determine with whom, how often and where the app will be used.

At School, Friendship Space can be Used:

- To help students learn more about or connect with classmates and facilitate a positive classroom climate as a class-wide Tier I support (e.g., Sugai & Horner, 2009)

- With a small group of students (Friendship Group, Lunch Bunch, Peer Support Groups, Circle of Friends, etc.) as a Tier II support

- One-on-one with a peer buddy or mentor as a Tier III level intervention

Ready for Take OFFFF ... here are some suggested steps for using "Friend Ship Space"

Step One: Assess Baseline and Targeted Skills

Use a social skills assessment tool, such as the Social Skills Checklist in *"Social Skills Solutions"* by Kelly McKinnon and Janis Krempa (2002) or The Autism Social Skill Profile in *"Building Social Relationships"* by Scott Bellini (2006). Determine baseline and target skills before introducing Friendship Space. Possible areas of assessment include:

Assess Pre-Requisite Skills

- Making eye contact
- Joint attention
- Taking turns waiting
- Using appropriate voice level & tone
- Sharing and information exchange
- Social body language
- Understanding personal space
- Sustaining attention to task
- Ability to ask questions

Assess Perspective-Taking/Social Cognitive Skills

- Listening to others' interests
- Accepting others' interests/points of view
- Asking "Who?, What?, Where?, When?"
- Commenting, connecting & clarifying others' interests
- Acknowledging common interests
- Complimenting others

The above social-cognitive skills can become the learning goals and objectives in a student's Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) listed under the social communication and (expanding) restricted interests domains. **Friendship Space** is an innovative intervention strategy that can be used to address these needs. The assessment will help you decide how to plan over the short and long term, target instruction and monitor progress.

Step Two: Teach Basic Pre-requisite Skills

Teach basic pre-requisite skills and consider role play practice in the social interaction and conversation skills the students will need to feel successful in initial use of the app. Go over the steps and rules for asking for information (e.g., spacing arms-length, body facing the person, periodic eye-contact, asking the questions, smiling, showing interest, etc.). Using a visual self-monitoring checklist before or after the exchange (e.g., Did I look at my friends face? Did I turn toward my friend? Did I wait to hear their answer? Did I smile?) may help to promote pro-social behaviors while using the app.

Step Three: Scaffold Use of the App

It is important to gear instruction to the individual needs of the child. Scaffold use of the app as indicated by the student's level of skill. Some students will require more, while others will require little adult support. Ideally, with appropriate levels of initial adult guidance, coaching and prompting, adult scaffolding may be decreased over time, and the student may learn to use the app to ask his/her peers questions independently, or even with peer scaffolding. It may be appropriate for selected peers to be trained in advance on how to scaffold and facilitate the interaction, and then the adult can act more as a facilitator to the peer, allowing for more student to student interaction and less adult intervention.

When students are adding a friend, encourage peer interaction and collaboration. Place the iPad or iPhone in view of both students to facilitate joint attention. Set up the physical environment so that the chairs and iPad form a triangle. Have the teacher sit out of view behind the students. Facilitate

selecting of a picture/avatar or planet as an interactive process. As questions are asked, think about verbal, gestural, and visual prompts to cue facing, looking, waiting, turn-taking, etc. Provide subtle cueing to the student with ASD rather than being the focus of the interaction. Remember to let the students have fun. Too many rules and/or interruptions may take away the intuitive flow of the exchange between friends.

Step Four: Reinforce Use of the App

Remember the student's skill acquisition and performance will be reinforced while using the app by receiving tokens and earning friendships. For some students, working on social skills can be very difficult. They may even resist the activity. In this case, if necessary, you may decide that your particular student would benefit from additional reinforcement to be encouraged to engage in this skill building activity.

Step Five: Monitor Progress and Revise Instruction

Progress monitoring should occur throughout all stages of instruction, from the teaching of pre-requisite skills, to the scaffolding of the app, and the response to reinforcement. Checklists and observational data on specific target skills should be reviewed every week or two to determine response to this intervention and next steps needed (e.g., more direct teaching of turn taking, social questions, etc.). Measures of social validity (e.g., asking "Was this a fun or useful way to find out information about your classmates?") can also be informative.

Adjust instruction and either increase or decrease scaffolding depending on how the student responds to current levels of support. If the student appears to resist working on social skills and the app, and appropriate use of reinforcement has not seemed to work, consider that the student may need more instruction to be able to participate.

The data provided by the teacher/parent side of the app allows educators to track how many friends have been added and how many categories have been completed. Teachers, parents and paraprofessionals can collaboratively share this information using the share code. For instance, if a student creates a **Friendship Space** at home or at school with a paraprofessional, the teacher can view the number of friends and categories added across settings.

Extension Activities

These activities can be built around the use of the app within a social thinking group or program to help the students generalize these skills to other settings and maintain skills over time. The information gathered can be used as an ongoing reference for teaching lessons on social-communication skills.

1. "Stop & Comment" or "Stop & Compliment" cue cards. After the student has added one or two friends and is showing competence in asking questions, have them work on friendship building skills, such as commenting or complimenting ("I've heard of that"…"I do that"…"I've gone there", etc.) Use cue cards as visual supports to encourage performance of these skills.

2. Create a power point, story or paragraph using the information from a friend's planet. This might be used, for example, to work on pronoun use (e.g., he, she, his, her, etc.).

3. Access a category and brainstorm ideas for future conversations. Based on the information given, create a bank of responses for expanding conversation with friends. Use this bank to create a comic strip conversation (Carol Gray, 1994) with thought or speaking bubbles. Knowing someone's favourite restaurant is "_____" could begin a string of conversation.

4. Based on **Friendship Space** information topics, plan to have a timed conversation. . This purpose of this would be to work on more naturalistic reciprocal conversation skills, and fluency, using the information from the app as a cue.
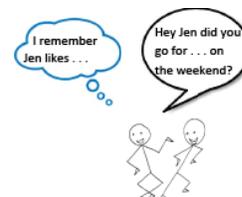
5. Play the two minute rule game . . . two minutes to gather your thoughts . . . two minutes to talk about your interests and two minutes to talk about your friend's interests, referencing their social planet. Sitting face to face, eye to eye, have "talk time" using **Friendship Space**.

6. Create "Guess Who" game cards with facts gathered from friends' planets. Open the app and have the student read and then write down (or you scribe for them) on an index card information from one or two categories, and then other members of the group try to guess who the student is. Students could also work on using pronouns, descriptive adjectives or adverbs, etc., (to include other IEP targets) when playing this game.

7. While a student with social difficulties views their own planet of interests have a peer/facilitator ask who, what, why, when, and how questions (e.g., Why was Hawaii your favourite vacation? Hawaii was my favorite vacation because . . . or Why don' t you like . . .?")

8. While looking at two planets in **Friendship Space**, describe how two friends are alike and different. Use a Venn diagram as a visual support and have the student find areas of common interest.

Through verbal rehearsal of **Friendship Space** questions, a student learns to generalize the skill of asking questions and maintaining conversation when meeting a new peer or talking on the telephone.

Have any Questions or Ideas?

If you have questions about any aspect of this app, getting started, functionality, sharing information, or teaching concerns, please go to http://www.autismoutreach.ca/friendship_space or email friendshipspace@autismoutreach.ca and someone will get back to you.

We'd appreciate hearing from you about your experience using the app, any suggestions you may have on how to use it, improve it, or ideas for teaching or expansion. Please share any comments at http://www.autismoutreach.ca/friendship_space

References

Bellini, S. (2006). *Building social relationships: A systematic approach to teaching social interaction skills to children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorders and other social difficulties.* Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Co.

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