

Summer Friendships & Social Opportunities

Shared with permission: This article is by **Linda Hodgdon, M.Ed., CCC-SLP**

*Linda Hodgdon is the author of the best seller, **Visual Strategies for Improving Communication**. To learn more or to sign up for her **FREE E-newsletter**, visit www.UseVisualStrategies.com*

Summer is traditionally a time of opportunities for fun, play and activities that take advantage of good weather and school breaks. Although there are great variations in school calendars, summer frequently provides more time away from the standard school routine.

The good and the bad

Time away from school is a welcome break for lots of families. The days become easily filled with play and pools and fun activities that don't fit in easily during the school year.

But our students on the Autism Spectrum may not enjoy that freedom in the same way other students do. Instead, vacation brings isolation.

Here's what parents say

In a survey of parents who had children with ASD, 53% reported that their children played with no one outside of school.

In addition, when those parents were asked what kind of services they wanted for their children, social skills groups was the most requested service.

Here's the problem

If the children don't have anyone to interact with, it's difficult to learn social skills. Participating with a group of peers in activities designed to teach social skills sounds like a great idea.

Our students can learn new skills in those settings. But attending a group once a week for a few hours or even spending a week at a special summer camp will only provide a small bit of what they need.

Let's call it something else

I understand the term **Social Skills**. It is the "school" terminology we use to describe the curriculum that guides our teaching. It makes me want to pull out a checklist to evaluate how students are progressing.

But I think changing the terminology can open up some new opportunities for our students. Let's call it **Social Opportunities or Social Participation**. It's a little different than "play." I think that changing the vocabulary will change how we view the chances for really positive, rewarding experiences for our students.

Here are some examples

1. Matt's father is a coin collector. He goes to coin shows to buy and sell his coins. He is teaching Matt about the coins and he takes Matt to the coin shows with him. Matt is learning to talk to the other vendors about coins. When his dad has a booth at a coin show, Matt helps by talking to the customers about what they have for sale.
2. Katie has a neighbor, Grandma Mary, who has a dog named Jackson. Katie goes to Grandma Mary's house to visit Jackson. Sometimes she brings a bone for him. Grandma Mary lets Katie take Jackson for a walk around the block. Grandma Mary will often have cookies or some other treat to share with Katie. Katie and Grandma Mary are great friends. They spend some time together several times a week.
3. Tommy's mom uses a strategy that I will call "hire a friend." She did some searching and found a young man, Joe, who is a college student, studying special education. She hires Joe just like she would hire a babysitter. Joe comes to spend time with Tommy 2 or 3 times a week for a few hours.



Mom has asked Joe to do “boy” things with Tommy. Sometimes they play games or kick a soccer ball around. Joe takes Tommy out to lunch or for ice cream. They go to the movie or fishing or play at the park. Joe even takes Tommy to his own house to spend time with his brothers.

Joe benefits from having some “hands on” experience as he learns more about autism. Tommy has learned to look forward to Joe’s visits. They are building a meaningful relationship that they both enjoy. Mom puts Joe on the calendar so Tommy will know when to expect him and Tommy eagerly anticipates Joe’s next visit.

4. Max’s mom was looking for a way that Max could become more included in their church community. Max became interested in helping the men’s group set up and take down chairs used during their activities. Max loved the physical labor. The men were very kind to Max and spent time talking with him and encouraging him during their work times. Their social interactions soon extended beyond their chair jobs.

Having positive social opportunities

Each of these situations has provided an opportunity for a student with ASD to participate in activities that they found interesting and interact with people who are able to provide a positive social opportunity.

It doesn’t always have to be adults

We want our students to learn to interact successfully with their peers, too. But friendships that are built on common interests or activities have a nice solid foundation to build on.

There is benefit from having some positive experiences with people (of any age) who will understand our student’s uniqueness and who can be flexible enough to keep social opportunities positive and enjoyable.

Add some social opportunities to the summer schedule

As families transition into summer schedules, it’s a perfect time to look for some new social opportunities to add into their children’s lives. Remember. . .all our friends don’t have to be our age.

[Go here to share your experiences creating social opportunities for students with ASD.](#)