

# Enhancing Social and Communication Skills with Leisure

## ① HOW DOES AUTISM IMPACT SOCIAL/COMMUNICATION SKILLS?

Two defining characteristics of autism are difficulties with social communication and having repetitive behavior or focused interests. These traits can make it hard for autistic students to engage and connect with their peers. If autistic students do not feel understood by their peers, this could lead to feeling ostracized and increased isolation.

While some autistic students may prefer playing alone, it is important to provide learning opportunities on how to engage with others so that they have the tools to confidently socialize and communicate when they choose.

## ② HOW CAN LEARNING LEISURE SKILLS IMPACT SOCIAL/COMMUNICATION SKILLS?

Participating in preferred activities is naturally reinforcing for autistic students. By embedding chances for socialization into leisure activities, engaging with peers may eventually be paired with the reinforcement of engaging in the preferred activity. This increases the likelihood of social interactions becoming reinforcers themselves. This may be especially beneficial for autistics with a history of negative social interactions (e.g., being bullied, feeling left out, unsure how to connect with others, etc.).

Shining social situations in a positive light by pairing them with preferred leisure activities can help build confidence in their social interactions. It can also provide an opportunity for autistic students to receive additional reinforcement for their social and communication skills when they otherwise might not have (e.g., applause for acting in a play provides positive attention for their communication skills).

### Leisure Impact on Communication Skills



Studies have shown that communication skills can increase after participating in regularly scheduled leisure activities.

One such study demonstrated an improvement in autistics' social/communication skills during recreation participation they found enjoyable due to repeated opportunities to practice their interaction skills in a setting where they felt more comfortable in (Özen, 2015).

## Leisure Impact on Social Skills



Engaging in leisure activities with peers can foster positive social relationships by allowing students to connect through mutual interests.

This can lead to the development and maintenance of a strong social support system that not only improves how autistic students connect with others, but can also help them identify how to have their social and emotional needs met.

## Leisure Impact on Personal Competencies\*



By having the freedom and opportunity to choose which leisure skill(s) to engage in, autistic students may develop a better understanding of what they enjoy and how they prefer to do things.

This can increase skills, such as self-awareness, intrinsic motivation, self-regulation, making choices/decisions, and self-advocacy.

Giving autistic students opportunities to confidently engage in social opportunities embedded within preferred activities can improve their defined quality of life.

\* Personal competencies involve understanding yourself and regulating your emotions. This is an important part of developing social skills, as being confident in your own identity can guide how you interact with others.