



## 2. Peer Relationships

Spotlight on  
Supporting Autistic  
Girls and Gender  
Diverse Students  
at School

**Neuro-affirming tips and strategies** to support autistic girls and autistic gender-diverse students with their peer relationships at school:

- Teach autistic students about friendship red and green flags. Support them to understand their own needs and boundaries, and to know that good friends are the people you can be your authentic self around.
- Facilitate authentic social connections through interest-based lunchtime clubs and activities. These activities allow for semi-structured play and can take some of the pressure off autistic students having to navigate free or unstructured play times at school. They can also allow autistic students to expand their peer circle and form connections based on shared interests.
- Some autistic students may benefit from explicit teaching about how to approach peers, how to join or leave games and conversations, and friendship conflict resolution strategies. Social stories, role playing and scripts can be help, but these need to be authentic to the child and developed directly with them. It is equally important that neurotypical children are taught to be open to different ways of communicating, playing and being friends.
- Some autistic students may prefer to connect with students who are older or younger than themselves. Taking a flexible approach and allowing access to all play areas at the school can help these students find friends who may not necessarily be in their class or year.

### WHAT MAKES A GOOD FRIEND

#### GREEN FLAGS

-  Authentic connection
-  Interest-based Conversations
-  Support autistic identity
-  Respect sensory preferences
-  Understand individual needs
-  Positive impact on wellbeing

#### RED FLAGS

-  Disrespecting boundaries
-  Not being able to be yourself
-  Taunting with triggers
-  Mocking special interests
-  Pushing out of comfort zone
-  Minimising feelings



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### More **neuro-affirming tips and strategies...**

- Some students may benefit from having a buddy who can be a supportive 'go-to-person' during unstructured times. However, this needs to be a genuine connection and not forced on either student.
- Where an autistic student only has one or two friends or peers they connect with, don't assume that they need to widen their social circle. Check in with them. If they do want to expand this friendship circle, it needs to be done authentically, safely, and led by the student.
- Completing group assignments with peers can be a huge source of anxiety for some autistic students. Allowing students to work with someone they are comfortable with, or looking at other accommodations, including the option of working alone, can help alleviate some of the peer-related stresses.
- Be mindful of seating arrangements within the classroom. Constantly changing seat placements can be a source of great stress for autistic students. If seat changes are required, it can be helpful to make sure your autistic students are sitting near people they are comfortable with (and not next to students who may be triggering or unsupportive).
- Autistic students may experience fluctuating capacity in navigating peer interactions. One day they may be fine working in small groups, or may have no problems in varied social settings, and the next day they may not cope as well. Checking in with your autistic students and allowing for accommodations may be necessary.
- Some autistic students may prefer to be alone during breaks. This may be their way of regulating and getting some energy back during the school day. It is important to check in with students and offer accommodations and support to find a safe place where they can be alone. Opening up a quiet place like the library during breaks can give students a place to go where they are not feeling excluded but are able to have the space that they need.
- Learn about the Double Empathy Problem. Autistic expressions of friendship and socialising can look different to the neurotypical 'norm', but they are equally valid and authentic. Creating a culture of whole-school inclusivity, where different ways of playing, socialising and communicating are celebrated, will help all students to feel valued and respected.