

Friendship

The Practical Guide to Living on the Wrong Planet

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Key Concepts -

- Aspies can be confident and expressive in social interactions and find success in building relationships.
- Friendship and social interaction is easier and comes more naturally for an Aspie when there is an effective person-environment or person-activity fit.
- It is important to know what types of activities you enjoy or in which you might want to participate in order to provide the right opportunities to meet others with similar interests.
- It is important to know what your positive qualities are in order to best be able to use them to attract the friendship of others.

Life is often happier and more successful when we have other beings in our lives that care about us. All human beings desire friendships with people who care about them and respect them.

In a Neurotypical world, friendships are usually based on skills such as:

- recognizing and responding to non-verbal cues in a conversation
- intuitively understanding the unwritten rules or expectations in a social setting
- discussing and analyzing of feelings.

These skills, particularly when they are expected in a group setting or an activity that is unstructured or spontaneous (e.g., “What do you feel like doing tonight?”), make it more difficult for an Aspie to make friends. This can lead to a misconception that Aspies do not want friends or can not “do” friendships or social interaction without detailed instruction, skills practice, and intensive support.



However, in situations where there are well-defined social roles (e.g., teacher-student, expert-learner), shared common interests, clear goals and rules (e.g., political debate), concrete physical cues (e.g., caring for rescue animals), or social justice issues, Aspies are often confident and remarkably expressive in their social interactions.

A key finding in leadership research is that there is no single “ideal” leadership profile. A good leader is one whose skills and characteristics are a good match for a specific situation. For example, emergency life-threatening situations (e.g., paramedic, UN peace-keeping) may require an autocratic leader; problem-solving in emotionally-charged situations (e.g., family mediation) may require a collaborative leadership style.

In the same way, friendship and social interaction is easier and more natural for an Aspie when there is an effective person-environment or person-activity fit.

We will use the following worksheet in our workshop presentation.

Finding social settings that are a good fit with what I like to do

These are examples. Please list your own interests in the blank rows. We will brainstorm possible social settings.

Interests	I enjoy this	Willing to try it	Not interested	Possible Social Settings
Learning about something I am interested in, such as _____				Continuing education course, public lecture
Discussing or debating about a topic, such as _____				Discussion group, book club
Doing practical things to help people or animals				Volunteer (e.g. Mustard Seed, SPCA, CNIB)
Exploring nature or watching animals				Hiking group, wildlife photography class
Doing things to promote social justice				Joining a group such as Amnesty International, Greenpeace

Making Friends: Approach, Meet, and Attract Strategies

‘Approach’ friendship strategy

Neurotypicals tend to have a general concept or expectation that the key to making friends is to approach other people. When Neurotypicals provide advice on making friends, they often offer advice such as:

- “initiate a conversation”
- “show you are interested in the other person”
- “invite them to join you in doing something they like”

One of the reasons this “approach” strategy appeals to Neurotypicals is that it fits with the Neurotypical desire of being socially and emotionally valued. Neurotypicals understand that when we approach another Neurotypical and show interest in them (especially their feelings) and adapt ourselves to their interests and activities, we are sending them a non-verbal message that elevates their social status. The non-verbal message is that the other person is important, we want to be accepted as a friend or join their group, and they have the social power to decide if we should be accepted.

This “approach” strategy is usually not a comfortable fit for an Aspie. Because it is a strategy that requires the Aspie to adapt, it usually requires a lot of instruction and practice, creates anxiety, and has a low success rate that leads to discouragement.

There are two alternative friendship strategies that are more effective for Aspies:

‘Meet’ friendship strategy

The first alternative is to identify a comfortable person-environment or person-activity fit, and a social setting where individuals who share a common interest to “meet”.

This allows the Aspie to express their natural aptitude for learning, teaching, discussing, debating, or doing and “meet” others who share this same interest and whose goal is also to learn, discuss, debate, or do this activity.

Usually, these shared common interest groups or activities have some structured rules or common expectations about social interaction that everyone knows and understands.

For example, individuals may be free to debate and disagree with one another and no one is concerned about reading non-verbal cues or not hurting someone else’s feelings.

In fact, friendships can be made or strengthened by learning new information and correcting inaccurate facts through feedback from others, and individuals who are knowledgeable or skilled are socially respected.

When individuals in the common interest group are engaged in doing or building something, it is often structured as a parallel activity. Each person works on their own task alongside others who are engaged in the same activity. Each person is able to make decisions about their own activity independently of others.

Verbal communication during parallel activity is a supplement and not a requirement. That is, verbal communication is not necessarily required to accomplish an activity (because it is done individually and independently), but verbal communication can provide useful information that supplements or adds to someone's knowledge.

Since an Aspie will usually appreciate information that helps them understand or accomplish a task more effectively (or perfectly), this also strengthens friendships.

Participants are also free to concentrate solely on their activity without engaging in conversation, and this choice will be respected rather than viewed as 'non-social'. If someone concentrates solely on their activity and this results in a well-designed or well-built product or outcome, this expertise will trigger respect and lead to social interaction and conversation as others want to learn how to replicate this outcome.

The activities you identified on the worksheet as an area of interest or something you are willing to try also list possible social settings where you could use a "meet" strategy to explore friendship options.

"Attract" friendship strategy

Most Aspies have wonderful personal qualities that can enhance and enrich the lives of people who become their friends.

Since Aspies do not tend to fixate on social status and emotions in the same way as Neurotypicals, Aspies are often freer to simply "be" rather than feeling the need to "be someone". It is usually the Neurotypical and not the Aspie who creates a mental story that maintains a grudge or resentment, based on inaccurate or incomplete "theory of mind" assumptions about what motivated another person to act in a particular way.

The Aspie tendency to think in "black-and-white" categories and do what logically makes sense can lead to:

- a commitment to social justice and equality,
- a willingness to help others when asked, and
- do the extra work needed to accomplish a group goal.

A unique sense of humour, the ability to find unique and creative solutions to a problem, loyalty and trustworthiness, and the freedom to express an opinion or idea without self-censorship are characteristics that many Aspies bring to a friendship.

Parents, relatives, spouses, or an understanding teacher may recognize and appreciate these Aspie characteristics, and wish that other people saw the person they know – rather than simply the social difficulties or behaviors that others may find disconcerting.

Neurotypicals are able to use “theory of mind” skills to identify and take advantage of opportunities to share information about their positive personal qualities in a way that will attract other people. This self-disclosure attracts the interest of others and prompts others to initiate conversations and potential friendships.

Aspies can use this “attract” strategy if it is implemented in a more structured and concrete literal way. This approach is usually most effective when you are able to work together with a Neurotypical ally who can help you:

- identify your strengths and positive qualities,
- summarize these in a general concept (Neurotypicals find it easier to think and talk in terms of generalized “personality traits”), and
- provide information on how others may think about or respond to this concept (e.g. who will be attracted to that quality).

Useful activity

Ask some of the people who know you best (e.g. parents, siblings) what they think are some of your positive qualities. Make a list of these qualities.

Below is an example from a friend on what she sees as some of her positive qualities, specifically in relation to the unique characteristics Asperger's lends to who she is as a person:

- I value truth, honesty and integrity. There is no game playing or hidden agenda in my relationships.
- I can be very objective - In a situation where NT's may tell themselves a negative social story, I go away and analyze it and apply logic. When I consider the situation again I can now be more objective about it and not harbour resentment or ill feelings towards the other person.
- People value my unique perspective and advice on various situations and seek it out.
- I am a loyal, true friend who really cares for those I love.
- I am not as emotional as NT's, I operate more from logic, so I can keep a clear head under stressful situations, especially when I have been trained in how to respond e.g. emergency situations.
- I am a deep thinker and I have a need to take the time to reflect and analyze.
- I have the ability to focus intently to the exclusion of all else – this helps me in my work.
- I don't ever feel that I am ever an expert on a subject; I am always aware that there is something more that can be learned or investigated on a subject.
- I show others that it's OK to be silent with someone; I don't always feel the need to fill a silence.
- I demonstrate that it can be OK to be alone; not having someone to do something with doesn't stop me from pursuing an interest or going to an activity; I'm comfortable with my own company.
- I notice and appreciate details and I can help others see and appreciate these details – I do this through my work, appreciation for nature, writing, art, etc.
- I often ask questions others may not have thought of (or are afraid to ask).
- My motivation in a task/project comes from the satisfaction of a job well done. It is not for the awards/recognition/accolades/career advancements that might motivate NT's, they're nice to have but not my goal.
- As long as the job is well done, I don't care who takes the credit for it. I'm quite sincerely happy to give recognition to others.
- Socially, I enjoy a really good discussion/conversation, witty repartee - one on one or in a small group situation.

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Once you have identified your positive characteristics, you will need to provide this information to others – communicating this information is essential to attracting others.

Some ways to communicate your positive qualities and use the “attract” strategy

Facebook makeover

Since many Aspies find the internet to be a comfortable person-environment fit, it is often helpful to do a “Facebook makeover” as part of your “attract” strategy.

Here are some suggestions for an effective Facebook makeover:

- Ask an NT ally to review your Facebook profile and identify:
 - (a) information that presents a good description of your strengths
 - (b) information that is confusing, difficult to understand, or could be interpreted in a negative way
 - (c) what type of people will likely be attracted to the information on your profile.
- Together with your NT ally, make a list of all the positive qualities about you that you want to list on your profile. This could include your areas of interest, things you have accomplished, social justice concerns, hobbies or extra-curricular activities, music you enjoy, things you find humorous, etc
- Collect pictures that show you doing the things that interest you. Rather than posting a picture of only scenery, your picture will have more attraction power if it shows you hiking in that scenic location. That shows that you are someone who *does* things and not someone who just *looks* at things.
- Provide a brief description or some information about what is happening in the picture. For example, a picture of you hiking could include a statement such as “We hiked for 5 hours to reach this mountain peak”.
- Include pictures that show you doing things together with other people. Because friends do things together, showing pictures of you doing things with others lets the viewer see that you can be (and are) a good friend.
- Include a picture or some information that is humorous. Most people like to laugh and want to be with people who have a sense of humour. Not everyone has the same sense of humour, so use your NT ally to ensure that your humorous post will not be considered offensive or immature by some viewers.
- Post something that lets the viewer think and respond. For example, post something about a social justice cause or important issue (e.g., a news item, an opinion, a question) since this can start a discussion.
- Avoid posting information that should be kept private and could be used to take advantage of you or get you in trouble. This includes details about where you live, comments related to sex or finances, pictures or statements about activities that are illegal, and threats or negative comments about others.

Personal appearance makeover

Many Aspies wear clothes that are comfortable and they are not concerned about what others might think of their appearance. However, you can also use what you wear or how you look to give others information about your interests and personal values.

Purchasing t-shirts that show your interests and values will provide others with information and attract them to ask you questions or discuss the issue. This is most effective when you have a political, social justice or environmental interest. Other people who share your strong commitment will see you as part of the same social group, and will evaluate you and want to be your friend based on your ideas and values rather than superficial external things (e.g., appearance). The conversation is likely to be thoughtful discussion or a debate rather than Neurotypical “small talk”, so you will end up in a person-activity situation that fits with your natural Aspie preferences.

Think about ways that you might be able to communicate or give clues to others about your interests and who you are through your appearance.

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