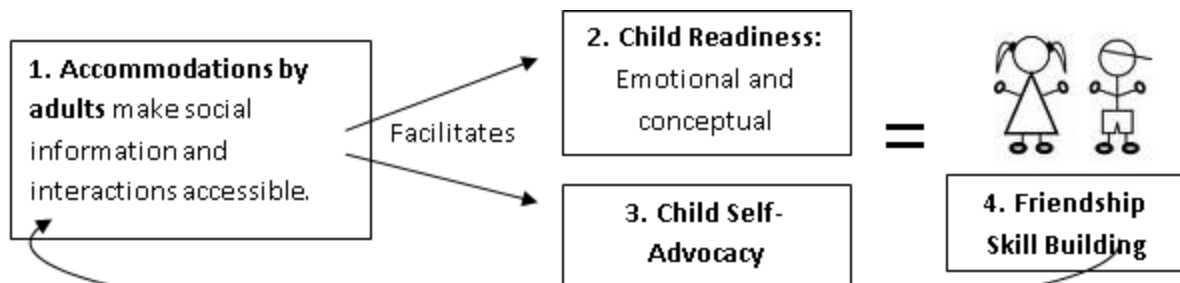

The Friendship Formula

by Nancy Swanberg, MS, LMHC



Every interaction is a social interaction. It's not just about going to parties or playing with friends. Interacting with the environment and the people in it involves social awareness that most of us take for granted. Imagine not being able to fit into the world around you no matter how hard you try.

It's hard for a child with autism to socialize because they are missing some fundamental social information, and because those who could help them find it difficult to accept just how much is missing. For example, we want to teach about the importance of listening to the other person in a conversation, but does the child even consider that other people have thoughts and feelings different from their own?

In order to help, this sort of social information needs to be broken down and delivered in ways you may have never considered. **First**, accommodations need to be put in place to ensure you are making sense to your child. You have probably heard of visual schedules or social stories™, and these are great accommodations. But there are many more, such as asking closed ended questions, using props to initiate a conversation, or giving instructions by singing them (examples below). Of course, the accommodations need to fit your child. Experiment with some, and you will see it is worth the effort.

Now you have communication that is more reliable. So what's the **second** part of this friendship formula? Your child needs to be emotionally and conceptually ready to receive social input and guidance. Simple concepts such as following a routine or identifying basic feelings are foundational elements necessary for friendships. Use the appropriate accommodations to help ready your child for this step.

Third, the child's self-advocacy skills are very important so that they can keep themselves emotionally safe and become a valid reporter of their interactions and encounters. In particular, being bullied is a serious issue for children and teens on the autism spectrum. Self-advocacy skills are invaluable for any situation in which your child feels confused or threatened and needs to ask for help.

The **fourth** part of the formula involves building friendships and friendship skills. At this stage we can finally address what most people think of as the basics, like taking turns in a game or listening to a friend who is talking. This is where many people start with children on the autism spectrum, but as you can see, skipping the first three steps is asking too much of the child.

The four steps of the friendship formula need to be revisited in a cyclical way to maximize social success and increase the child's quality of life. During each developmental stage there is more social responsibility, requiring a different level of social support.

1. Accommodations

(The following are just examples; you will want pages dedicated to this)

- Avoid idioms or explain them
- Watch use of sarcasm
- Sing or chant directions
- Social stories™
- Comic strip conversations™
- Picture schedules
- Written schedules
- Create communication dictionary
- Give specific measurable responses.
- Give step-by-step directions.
- State the obvious without trying to teach a lesson in order to reduce anxiety.
- When using humor, state you are doing so.
- Use props and visuals to initiate conversations.
- Give concrete choices when asking questions.
- Provide fidget toys (koosh balls, stress balls, etc.).
- Have contingency plans. (If this happens, then we'll do that.)
- Break down social information during new developmental phases.
- Use a visual timer such as a Time-Timer.

2. Child Readiness: Emotional & Conceptual (examples)

- Can follow a routine.
- People have different thoughts in their head and that is okay.
- Everything can't happen at the same time.
- There is more time in the future.
- Everyone makes mistakes.
- Understands what "waiting" means.
- Can **accurately** identify feelings.
- Can use (and possibly create) a 1-5 rating scale.
- Knows when it is appropriate to express feelings.
- Recognizes fun teasing from mean teasing.
- Knows you need to do some things when you don't want to.
- Open to feedback from others.

2. Child Readiness: Emotional & Conceptual (con't.)

- Realizes actions impact others.
- Understands changes in schedules can happen unexpectedly.
- Knows parents try to solve problems.
- Understands the purpose of rules.
- Understands the difference between rules and guidelines.
- Realizes rules are different in different places and contexts.
- Knows sometimes people don't make sense.

3. Self-Advocacy (examples)

- Child is a valid reporter of a social scenario or interaction (in an age appropriate way):
 - Describes a situation from the beginning
 - Knows facts from feelings or opinions
 - Can answer questions about an event
- Expresses feelings in a way others can understand at school and in the community
- Can assess accurate vs. inaccurate or unhelpful feedback.
- Becoming aware of social learning style or diagnosis.
- Understands what vulnerable means with regard to social situations.
- Knows when to walk away from a confusing conversation or situation.
- Can identify idioms and expressions they don't understand.
- Recognizes when a conversation is confusing.
- Can identify & appropriately express when someone is in personal space.
- Has basic problem solving skills (conflict resolution and negotiation)
- Decision making process is understood.
- Safety skills are appropriate for the environment.