

Dr. Vera's
CALM & CONNECTED GUIDES



stop the loneliness!

and help them find their people

An OT's Guide to Helping Your Child
with Autism Build Real Friendships

DR. FERNANDO VERA, OT

DR. VERA'S CALM & CONNECTED GUIDES

Stop the Loneliness

An OT's Guide to Helping Your Child with Autism Build
Real Friendships

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Important: This guide is for education and support. It does not replace medical advice, diagnosis or treatment, or individualized therapy. Every child with autism is different. Talk with your child's doctor about lasting sadness, anxiety, school refusal or any talk of self-harm. If your child is in immediate danger, call 911. In a mental health crisis in the U.S., you can call or text 988.

A note on language: this guide uses person-first language, such as "child with autism" and "child on the spectrum."

A LETTER BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Your child can have real friends.

If you picked up this guide, you have probably watched your child stand at the edge of the playground, heard “nobody likes me,” or waited for a birthday invitation that never came. It hurts.

As an occupational therapist, I want you to know two things. First, **most children with autism want connection**, even the ones who seem happy alone. They often just don't know how to start, or they've tried and it went badly. Second, **friendship for your child may look different, and different is fine**. Two children building side by side in near silence can be a real friendship.

That changes what helps. “Go and play” and “just be friendly” are not instructions. What works is **starting from your child's interests, setting up short, structured time with one child, teaching the words to use and stepping back slowly**.

The goal is not to make your child act like everyone else. It's one or two people who are glad to see them. This guide shows you how to help that happen.

How to use this guide

In the moment

Find the situation in the contents. Read the “Instead of... Try this” swaps on the left page. Each one takes about 30 seconds.

When things are calm

Read the right page: what to say, what to do, what to avoid and how to set up for next time.

Get to know your child

Fill in the friendship profile. It shows what your child enjoys, what's hard and where to start.

Share it

The “All About Me” page is made to hand to teachers, coaches, club leaders and other parents.

DR. VERA'S TIP

One good friend is enough. A single close friendship does more for a child than being popular ever could.

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START HERE

Where is your child starting from?

Children with autism approach other children in different ways. Knowing your child's pattern tells you what kind of help to offer first.

	HAPPY ON THEIR OWN	WANTS IN, DOESN'T KNOW HOW	TRIES, AND IT GOES WRONG
What it looks like	Plays alone, doesn't seek out other children, seems content	Watches from the edge, hovers, follows children around, says “no one will play with me”	Jumps in too loud or too close, takes over, talks at length, ends up in arguments
What's underneath	Other children are unpredictable and tiring. Alone time refills the cup	Interest is there. The steps for joining in are a mystery	Lots of interest, but trouble reading signals and adjusting
What helps first	Low-pressure time next to one child, around a favorite activity	Exact words and actions for joining, practiced at home	Clear, kind feedback and practice with one patient child
What to avoid	Forcing group play or assuming they don't care	“Just go and ask them”	Scolding in front of others or avoiding all play

Alone is not always lonely

Time alone is how many children with autism recover. The question to ask is not “Is my child alone?” but “Is my child unhappy about it?”

Watch for sadness

If your child seems down, anxious, or stops wanting to go to school, tell the doctor. Loneliness can affect mood, and help is available.

START HERE

How friendships grow

Friendship develops in stages. Find where your child is comfortable now, and aim for the next stage, not the last one.

near

share

trade

friend

STAGE 1

1 • Side by side

Doing their own thing next to another child, and noticing them.

- Same room
- Same materials
- No demands

STAGE 2

2 • Doing it together

One shared activity with a clear goal: a puzzle, a build, a game.

- Short visits
- Adult nearby
- Clear ending

STAGE 3

3 • Back and forth

Taking turns, swapping ideas, talking about what the other likes.

- Teach scripts
- Practice turns
- Coach quietly

STAGE 4

4 • Friends

They choose each other, look forward to meeting and can fix small problems.

- Regular meetups
- Step back
- Celebrate it

DR. VERA'S TIP

A child who is comfortable at stage one will not jump to stage four at a birthday party. Meet them where they are and build one step up.

START HERE

The P.A.L.S. method

One simple plan behind every page in this guide. When you're not sure what to do next, come back to these four letters.



Passions first

Start with what your child loves: trains, drawing, a video game, animals. Shared interests are the fastest and most natural path to friendship.



Arrange small and short

One child, one hour, one planned activity, on home ground. Small, successful meetups build more than big, stressful ones.



Lines to say and do

Teach the exact words and actions: how to join, how to ask, how to say no, how to end. Practice at home until they're easy.



Step back slowly

Stay close at first and coach quietly. As things go well, move farther away. The friendship has to belong to the children.

What NOT to do

- ✗ Force eye contact, hugs or “normal” behavior
- ✗ Correct your child in front of other children
- ✗ Arrange big groups before one-on-one works

Remember

You're not trying to change who your child is. You're helping other children get the chance to know them.

PRINTABLE

My child's friendship profile

Check how often you see each one. Share this page with your child's teacher, therapist or club leader.

MY CHILD...	RARELY	SOMETIMES	OFTEN
Shows interest in other children	☐	☐	☐
Plays or works next to another child comfortably	☐	☐	☐
Joins in when another child invites them	☐	☐	☐
Starts play or conversation with another child	☐	☐	☐
Takes turns in games and conversation	☐	☐	☐
Copes with losing or with changes to the rules	☐	☐	☐
Talks about things other than their favorite topic	☐	☐	☐
Notices when someone is bored, upset or joking	☐	☐	☐
Can say no or walk away when treated unkindly	☐	☐	☐
Has at least one child they like to be with	☐	☐	☐
Seems sad or worried about friends	☐	☐	☐
Needs quiet time to recover after being with others	☐	☐	☐

My child's three favorite things to do or talk about are:

part one

Getting Started

Playing alone, wanting in and not knowing how. Where friendship begins, and how to open the first door.

- | | | | |
|---|------------------------------------|---|--|
| 1 | Plays Alone and Seems Fine With It | 2 | Wants Friends, Doesn't Know How to Start |
| 3 | "Nobody Likes Me" | 4 | Only Wants to Talk About One Thing |
| 5 | Prefers Adults or Younger Children | 6 | No Invitations |

1

PART ONE · GETTING STARTED

Plays Alone and Seems Fine With It

What it looks like

At the park and at school, your child plays alone while others play together. They don't seem upset, but you worry about what they're missing.

What's really going on

Other children are loud, fast and hard to predict. Playing alone is restful and under your child's control. They may enjoy it, and still want connection in a quieter form.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Go and play with the other kids."~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"Sam likes trains too. Want to show him your engine?"

Why it works: A specific child and a shared interest give a reason and a first step.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Push your child into a group game.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Invite one calm child to play alongside, with the same toys.

Why it works: Side by side is the first stage of friendship, and it's enough for now.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Fill every afternoon with social activities.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Protect alone time, and add small doses of time with others.

Why it works: Rest is how your child gets the energy to be social at all.

More things to say

“You can build next to Maya.”

“She's using blue blocks. You've got red.”

“You played near Leo today. I noticed.”

Do this in the moment

-  Set out two sets of the same materials, side by side.
-  Point out what the other child is doing, without asking your child to join.
-  Keep first visits short: 30 to 45 minutes.
-  Let your child take a break alone whenever they need one.

Avoid

-  Saying “Don't you want friends?”
-  Comparing with siblings or classmates.
-  Reading contentment as not caring about people.

Set up for next time

-  Notice which children your child watches or mentions.
-  Choose activities with a shared focus: Lego, drawing, baking, a train track.
-  Ask the teacher who your child sits near or seems comfortable with.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child avoids all contact with other children or seems distressed around them, ask an OT or psychologist for guidance.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Ask your child, gently and more than once: “Do you want to play with someone, or is alone good right now?” Believe the answer.

2

PART ONE · GETTING STARTED

Wants Friends, Doesn't Know How to Start

What it looks like

Your child stands near a group and watches, follows children around without speaking, or waits to be asked and goes home sad.

What's really going on

Joining in looks simple, but it's a chain of small skills: watching, moving close, finding a way in. Nobody has shown your child the steps.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Just go up and say hi."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Watch what they're playing. Then say, 'Can I be the goalie?'"

Why it works: Joining with a role works better than a greeting. "Hi" leaves nowhere to go.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Hope your child figures it out at recess.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Practice joining at home with you or a sibling playing the other child.

Why it works: A rehearsed line is much easier to use when the moment comes.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Step in and ask the other children for them.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Stand nearby, give a quiet cue, and let your child say the words.

Why it works: Your child gets the support and still owns the success.

More things to say

“That looks fun. Can I play?”

“I can be the one who counts.”

“If they say no, you can say ‘Okay, maybe later.’”

Do this in the moment

-  Teach three steps: watch, move close, ask with a role.
-  Pick games with clear rules, like tag or catch, as first targets.
-  Practice what to do if the answer is no.
-  Praise the trying, whatever the result.

Avoid

-  Sending your child in with no plan.
-  Showing your own worry on your face.
-  Coaching loudly in front of the other children.

Set up for next time

-  Write the joining line on a small card for a pocket.
-  Arrange a one-on-one playdate with a child from the group.
-  Ask the teacher to pair your child with a kind classmate for a job.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child wants friends and is getting more and more discouraged, ask the school about a lunch group or social skills group.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Children rarely turn down a helper. “Can I be the one who...” gets a yes far more often than “Can I play?”

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PART ONE · GETTING STARTED

“Nobody Likes Me”

What it looks like

Your child comes home saying no one will play with them, that they're weird, or that they hate school. Your heart breaks.

What's really going on

Your child has noticed they're on the outside. That awareness is painful, and they may not have the words to explain what actually happened.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~“That's not true! Everybody likes you.”~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

“That sounds really lonely. Tell me what happened at recess.”

Why it works: Being believed comes first. Then you can find out what's really going on.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~“Well, what did you do to them?”~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

“You're a good friend to have. Let's work out one thing to try.”

Why it works: Your child needs you on their side before any problem-solving.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Call the other parents in anger.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Ask the teacher what they see, and make a plan together.

Why it works: The teacher sees what you can't, and can set up small chances to connect.

More things to say

“I’m so glad you told me.”

“Some kids take a while to find their people.”

“Who was kind to you today, even a little?”

Do this in the moment

-  Listen all the way through before offering ideas.
-  Help your child draw or act out what happened.
-  Name your child's real strengths as a friend: honest, loyal, funny.
-  Plan one small, friendly step for tomorrow.

Avoid

-  Brushing it off or changing the subject.
-  Promising it will be better tomorrow.
-  Criticizing the other children in front of your child.

Set up for next time

-  Look for a group built around your child's interest, in or out of school.
-  Invite one child over who has shown any kindness.
-  Read stories with characters who feel different and find their friend.



GET MORE HELP IF

Tell the doctor if your child is sad or worried most days for two weeks, refuses school, or says anything about not wanting to be alive. Call or text 988 in a crisis.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Ask “Who was kind today?” every day. It trains both of you to notice the possible friends who are already there.

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PART ONE · GETTING STARTED

Only Wants to Talk About One Thing

What it looks like

Dinosaurs, trains, one video game.
Your child talks about it at length to anyone, and other children drift away.

What's really going on

A deep interest brings joy and comfort, and it's the topic where your child feels sure of themselves. They may not notice the listener's signals or know how to switch.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Nobody wants to hear about trains again."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Tell two things about trains. Then ask Ben what he likes."

Why it works: The interest stays welcome, with a simple rule for sharing the floor.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Try to stamp out the interest.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Find other children who share it: a club, a class, an online group.

Why it works: With the right audience, the interest is how your child makes friends.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Expect your child to notice boredom on someone's face.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Teach a check-in question: "Do you want to hear more?"

Why it works: A question does the job that reading faces can't yet do.

More things to say

“Your turn, then their turn.”

“What do you think Ben likes? Let's ask him.”

“You know so much. Let's find someone else who loves this.”

Do this in the moment

- ✓ Practice “two things, then a question” at dinner.
- ✓ Give your child daily time to talk about the topic freely with you.
- ✓ Use the interest as a bridge: trains to maps to travel.
- ✓ Praise asking a question about someone else.

Avoid

- ✗ Shaming the interest or calling it obsessive.
- ✗ Banning the topic.
- ✗ Cutting your child off sharply in front of others.

Set up for next time

- ✓ Help your child make something to share: a poster, a model, a short talk.
- ✓ Play a conversation game: roll a die to choose who picks the topic.
- ✓ Make a list of two or three “backup topics” other kids like.



GET MORE HELP IF

If the interest crowds out eating, sleeping or schoolwork, or causes distress when interrupted, talk with the doctor.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Deep interests are a strength. Many lasting friendships, and many careers, start with one child who loves trains meeting another.

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PART ONE · GETTING STARTED

Prefers Adults or Younger Children

What it looks like

Your child chats happily with teachers and grandparents, or plays well with much younger kids, but avoids children their own age.

What's really going on

Adults are patient and predictable, and they adjust to your child. Younger children play simpler games. Same-age peers move fast and have unwritten rules.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Why don't you play with kids your own age?"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"You were so kind with your little cousin."

Why it works: Those friendships are real practice. Praise what your child does well.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Stop your child from playing with younger kids.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Use those skills as a bridge: add one same-age child to an activity your child is good at.

Why it works: Confidence built with easier partners carries over.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Pick the most popular classmate for a playdate.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Choose a gentle, patient peer, even if they're a year older or younger.

Why it works: The right temperament matters more than the exact age.

More things to say

“You're a great teacher. Show Mia how it works.”

“Jay likes drawing as much as you do.”

“It's okay to have friends of different ages.”

Do this in the moment

-  Notice what makes adults and little kids easier: slower pace, clear rules.
-  Set up same-age play with those same features.
-  Give your child a helper or leader role.
-  Let relationships with adults and cousins continue.

Avoid

-  Calling it babyish.
-  Forcing groups of same-age children.
-  Assuming this will never change.

Set up for next time

-  Look for mixed-age settings: a hobby club, scouts, a family group.
-  Ask the teacher which classmates are kind and patient.
-  Invite one child for a short visit around a shared interest.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child has no comfortable contact with any children, ask the school about supported play or a social group.

DR. VERA'S TIP

*A friend who is two years younger or three years older is still a friend.
Fit matters more than birthdays.*

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PART ONE · GETTING STARTED

No Invitations

What it looks like

The class has parties and playdates, and your child is never asked. They may not notice yet. You notice every time.

What's really going on

Other families often don't know your child or what to expect. Children invite the kids they play with at recess, and your child may not be in those games.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Wait for an invitation to come.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Be the one who invites: one child, one hour, one fun plan.

Why it works: Hosting puts your child on home ground and gets things started.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"He has autism, so it might go badly."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"He loves Lego and does best with a plan. Want to come for an hour Saturday?"

Why it works: A warm, clear invitation makes it easy to say yes.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Skip the school gate and class events.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Get to know one or two parents yourself.

Why it works: Children's friendships often grow through the parents.

More things to say

“Who would you like to have over?”

“We'll plan what to do before they come.”

“You invited him, and he came. That's a start.”

Do this in the moment

-  Ask the teacher which child might be a good match.
-  Plan an activity your child is good at.
-  Keep it short and end on a good note.
-  Send a thank-you text and suggest a next time.

Avoid

-  Telling your child about parties they weren't invited to.
-  Taking it out on other parents.
-  Inviting the whole class for a first try.

Set up for next time

-  Volunteer at school or join a class event to meet families.
-  Join a small activity where the same children meet each week.
-  Keep a list of children who have been kind.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child is being deliberately left out by a group, talk with the teacher. Exclusion can be a form of bullying.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Most parents are happy to say yes. Many are simply waiting for someone else to go first. Go first.

part two

Playing Together

Playdates, rules, turns and losing. How to set up time with another child so both of them want to do it again.

7 Playdates That Fall Apart

9 Losing Games

11 Too Rough or Too Close

8 Has to Be in Charge

10 Sharing and Taking Turns

12 Doesn't Join Pretend or Group Games

7

PART TWO · PLAYING TOGETHER

Playdates That Fall Apart

What it looks like

The friend arrives and your child ignores them, goes to their room, argues over toys or has a meltdown. You both dread the next one.

What's really going on

An open-ended playdate is full of unknowns: what to play, how long, whose turn. Without structure, your child runs out of coping energy fast.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Invite a child over for a whole afternoon to "just play."~~

✓ TRY THIS

Plan one hour with two activities and a snack.

Why it works: Structure replaces guessing, and short visits end before things go wrong.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Leave them alone and hope for the best.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Stay nearby and step in quietly with an idea when play stalls.

Why it works: A little adult help at the right moment keeps things going.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Be nice to your guest!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"First Lego, then snack, then outside. Here's the list."

Why it works: A picture plan tells both children what's happening.

More things to say

“What's next on our plan?”

“Snack time! Come to the table.”

“Five more minutes, then it's time to say bye.”

Do this in the moment

- ✓ Choose activities with a shared goal: baking, a build, a board game.
- ✓ Put away toys your child can't bear to share.
- ✓ Have a quiet spot ready if your child needs a break.
- ✓ End while both children are still having fun.

Avoid

- ✗ Long visits and sleepovers at first.
- ✗ Screens as the whole playdate.
- ✗ Scolding your child in front of the guest.

Set up for next time

- ✓ Go over the plan with your child beforehand, with pictures.
- ✓ Afterward, talk about one thing that went well.
- ✓ Invite the same child again within two weeks.



GET MORE HELP IF

If every playdate ends in distress, ask an OT or psychologist about supported play sessions.

DR. VERA'S TIP

The best playdate is one that ends with both kids asking, “Can we do this again?” Shorter is almost always better.

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PART TWO · PLAYING TOGETHER

Has to Be in Charge

What it looks like

Your child makes all the rules, tells everyone what to do, and gets upset or quits when others have their own ideas.

What's really going on

Control makes play predictable. Other children's ideas feel like sudden changes. Your child isn't being bossy for fun. They're trying to feel safe.

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Stop being so bossy. No one will play with you."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"You pick the first game. Kai picks the second."

Why it works: Taking turns to choose keeps some control and shares the rest.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Let your child run the whole playdate to keep the peace.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Use a visual: two cards, "my idea" and "your idea," that swap.

Why it works: Seeing whose turn it is makes giving up control easier.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"You have to do what your friend wants."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Let's try Kai's way for five minutes. Then we check."

Why it works: A short trial with an ending is easier to agree to.

More things to say

“Whose idea is it now?”

“That’s a different way. Let’s see what happens.”

“You tried his idea. That was flexible.”

Do this in the moment

-  Practice taking turns to choose with you at home first.
-  Use a timer for each child’s turn to lead.
-  Praise any flexibility right away.
-  Pick games where the rules are fixed and written down.

Avoid

-  Calling your child bossy in front of friends.
-  Always giving in.
-  Unstructured games with made-up rules, early on.

Set up for next time

-  Play “change one thing” at home: swap a rule and keep playing.
-  Read stories where characters compromise.
-  Teach the phrase: “Okay, we can do it your way this time.”



GET MORE HELP IF

If any change to rules or plans leads to meltdowns, ask an OT or psychologist about building flexibility.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Call it “being flexible” and make it a superpower. Children will work hard for a skill that has a name and gets noticed.

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PART TWO · PLAYING TOGETHER

Losing Games

What it looks like

Your child cries, quits, flips the board, accuses others of cheating or refuses to play unless they're sure to win.

What's really going on

Losing is a sudden, unwanted ending with big feelings attached. Your child may think in all-or-nothing terms: winning is good, losing is a disaster.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**SAY** INSTEAD OF

~~"It's just a game. Don't be a sore loser."~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"Losing feels bad. Take a breath. You can say, 'Good game.'"

Why it works: You name the feeling and hand over a script for what to do with it.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Always let your child win at home.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Play short games where they win some and lose some, with you coaching.

Why it works: Losing in a safe place is practice for losing with friends.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Start with long, competitive games.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Choose quick games or ones where everyone works together.

Why it works: Low stakes and fast rematches make losing matter less.

More things to say

“Good game. Want to play again?”

“Oh well. Maybe next time.”

“You lost and you stayed calm. That's hard to do.”

Do this in the moment

-  Model losing well yourself, out loud.
-  Agree on the “good game” line before starting.
-  Praise staying calm more than winning.
-  Offer a short break if feelings rise.

Avoid

-  Mocking tears or anger.
-  Changing the rules so they never lose.
-  Lectures in the moment.

Set up for next time

-  Try cooperative board games where players beat the game together.
-  Practice with games of chance, where losing isn't about skill.
-  Make a small chart for “good sport” moments.



GET MORE HELP IF

If losing leads to aggression or long meltdowns, work with an OT or psychologist on coping with big feelings.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Teach the words first: “Good game.” The feeling catches up later. Many adults are still working on it.

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PART TWO · PLAYING TOGETHER

Sharing and Taking Turns

What it looks like

Your child grabs, hides toys when friends visit, can't wait for a turn or screams when another child touches their things.

What's really going on

Giving up an object with no clear idea of when it's coming back feels like losing it forever. Waiting is hard when time is invisible.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**SAY** INSTEAD OF

~~"You have to share. Give it to her."~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"Two more minutes, then it's Ella's turn. Then it comes back to you."

Why it works: Knowing it will return makes letting go possible.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Expect your child to share their most treasured things.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Put special items away before a friend comes.

Why it works: Nobody shares everything. Protecting a few things makes sharing the rest easier.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Say "wait your turn" with nothing to show when.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Use a sand timer or a turn card that passes back and forth.

Why it works: A visual shows the wait has an end.

More things to say

“My turn, your turn.”

“When the sand runs out, we swap.”

“You waited! Here it comes.”

Do this in the moment

-  Start with very short turns: 30 seconds each.
-  Choose toys with many pieces, so there's enough for both.
-  Give the waiting child something to do.
-  Praise handing over, right away.

Avoid

-  Snatching the toy to give to the other child.
-  Shaming your child as selfish.
-  Long waits early on.

Set up for next time

-  Practice turn-taking with you: rolling a ball, stacking blocks.
-  Play simple turn games every day.
-  Let your child choose which toys will be “sharing toys” for the visit.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child becomes aggressive over objects, ask an OT or behavioral specialist for a plan.

DR. VERA'S TIP

“Sharing” is vague. “Taking turns with a timer” is clear. Teach the clear one.

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PART TWO · PLAYING TOGETHER

Too Rough or Too Close

What it looks like

Your child hugs too hard, stands nose to nose, pokes, tackles or touches other children's faces and hair. Other kids back away.

What's really going on

Your child may crave strong touch and not feel how hard they're pressing. The idea of personal space is invisible unless someone makes it visible.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Get off him! You're hurting him!"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Step back. One arm away. Now ask, 'Want a high five?'"

Why it works: A clear distance and a replacement give your child something to do.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Expect your child to sense how close is too close.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Teach the "space bubble" with an arm's length or a hula hoop.

Why it works: A rule your child can see and measure is one they can follow.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Cancel playdates because of rough play.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Give heavy work before friends come: jumping, pushing, carrying.

Why it works: A body that has had its input needs less from other children.

More things to say

“Check your bubble.”

“Ask first: ‘Can I hug you?’”

“Gentle hands look like this.”

Do this in the moment

-  Practice the arm's-length rule in a mirror and with family.
-  Teach high fives and fist bumps as greetings.
-  Step in early with a quiet cue word.
-  Praise good space when you see it.

Avoid

-  Shouting across the room.
-  Labeling your child as rough or aggressive.
-  Rough-and-tumble games at the start of a playdate.

Set up for next time

-  Read a picture story about personal space.
-  Plan active outdoor play as part of the visit.
-  Teach your child to notice a friend stepping back as a signal.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child often hurts other children without meaning to, ask an OT for a sensory plan.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Give the need a place to go. Ten minutes on the trampoline before a friend arrives can change the whole visit.

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PART TWO · PLAYING TOGETHER

Doesn't Join Pretend or Group Games

What it looks like

The others play house, superheroes or a made-up chasing game. Your child stands apart, lines up the toys, or says the game is silly.

What's really going on

Pretend play runs on fast-changing, unspoken rules. For a literal thinker, it's confusing: what are we doing, and how does it end?

Instead of... try this

3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Use your imagination! Just pretend."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"In this game, you're the shopkeeper. You say, 'That's two dollars.'"

Why it works: A clear role and a line make pretending something your child can do.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Expect your child to pick up made-up games on the spot.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Act out common games at home first, with scripts and props.

Why it works: Having done it before makes it far less confusing.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Insist on pretend play.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Offer other ways to be together: building, drawing, sports, board games.

Why it works: Friendship doesn't require pretending. Shared activity is enough.

More things to say

“You can be the one who drives the bus.”

“What happens next in the story?”

“You'd rather build? Ask if they want to build the castle.”

Do this in the moment

- ✓ Start pretend play from your child's interest: a train station, a vet for dinosaurs.
- ✓ Use real props to make the game concrete.
- ✓ Give your child the same role several times.
- ✓ Join the game yourself and model what to say.

Avoid

- ✗ Mocking literal thinking.
- ✗ Forcing a role your child dislikes.
- ✗ Assuming they don't want to be included.

Set up for next time

- ✓ Watch other children's games together and talk through the “rules.”
- ✓ Play simple story games: restaurant, shop, doctor.
- ✓ Suggest rule-based games to the group, like tag or hide-and-seek.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child shows no pretend play at all by school age, mention it to the speech therapist or OT.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Many children with autism love being the one with a job: ticket seller, scorekeeper, builder. A role is a way into a game.

part three

Talking and Understanding

Conversations, jokes, honesty and arguments. How to teach the hidden rules that other children seem to just know.

13 Starting and Keeping a Conversation

15 Honesty That Hurts Feelings

17 Arguments With a Friend

14 Missing Jokes, Sarcasm and Hints

16 Interrupting and Not Noticing Boredom

18 Is This Person Really a Friend?

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PART THREE · TALKING AND UNDERSTANDING

Starting and Keeping a Conversation

What it looks like

Your child doesn't greet people, answers in one word, walks away mid-sentence or doesn't ask anything back.

What's really going on

Conversation is fast and full of unspoken rules: when to talk, what to ask, how to end. Your child may want to talk and simply not know the pattern.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Say hello properly. Look at her."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"You can wave or say hi. Either is fine."

Why it works: A choice of greetings takes away the pressure and still connects.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Expect conversation to come naturally.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Teach a simple pattern: answer, add one thing, ask a question back.

Why it works: A pattern gives your child a map for what comes next.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Force eye contact while talking.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Let your child look near the face, or talk while doing something together.

Why it works: Many children listen and think better without eye contact.

More things to say

"I like Minecraft. What do you like?"

"What did you do at the weekend?"

"I have to go now. See you tomorrow."

Do this in the moment

- ✓ Practice "answer, add, ask" at dinner every night.
- ✓ Give two or three starter questions about other kids' interests.
- ✓ Talk side by side: in the car, on a walk, while building.
- ✓ Praise any question your child asks someone else.

Avoid

- ✗ Correcting in front of other children.
- ✗ Insisting on eye contact.
- ✗ Answering for your child.

Set up for next time

- ✓ Role-play greetings and goodbyes with puppets or figures.
- ✓ Make a pocket card with three questions to ask.
- ✓ Watch a short show clip and spot who asked a question.



GET MORE HELP IF

A speech-language pathologist can teach conversation skills step by step. Ask the school or your doctor for a referral.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Side by side beats face to face. The best conversations with many children with autism happen while their hands are busy.

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PART THREE · TALKING AND UNDERSTANDING

Missing Jokes, Sarcasm and Hints

What it looks like

A friend says “Nice one!” after a mistake and your child thinks it's a compliment. Or they take a joke as an insult and get upset.

What's really going on

Your child tends to take words at face value. Sarcasm, teasing and hints depend on tone and facial expression, which are harder for them to read.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**SAY** INSTEAD OF

~~“He was only joking. Don't be so sensitive.”~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

“That was a joke. He said the opposite of what he meant, to be funny.”

Why it works: Explaining how the joke works helps your child spot it next time.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Assume your child will pick it up over time.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Teach common sayings and sarcasm like a new language.

Why it works: What others absorb, your child can learn through clear teaching.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~“You should know when someone's kidding.”~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

“If you're not sure, you can ask: ‘Are you joking?’”

Why it works: A question is a simple tool that works in any situation.

More things to say

“Are you joking or serious?”

“‘Break a leg’ means good luck. Funny, right?”

“Friendly teasing comes with a smile.”

Do this in the moment

- ✓ Point out sarcasm in shows and name the clues: voice, face, situation.
- ✓ Keep a fun list of sayings and what they really mean.
- ✓ Use clear, direct language yourself.
- ✓ Explain privately after a misunderstanding.

Avoid

- ✗ Using sarcasm with your child when they're upset.
- ✗ Laughing at literal answers.
- ✗ Blaming your child for a misunderstanding.

Set up for next time

- ✓ Play a game: “Joke or real?” with silly statements.
- ✓ Read joke books together and explain why each is funny.
- ✓ Tell teachers your child takes language literally.



GET MORE HELP IF

A speech-language pathologist can work on understanding non-literal language.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Literal thinkers are often very funny once they learn how jokes work. Wordplay and puns are a great place to start.

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PART THREE · TALKING AND UNDERSTANDING

Honesty That Hurts Feelings

What it looks like

“Your breath smells.” “That drawing is bad.” “You’re fat.” Your child says exactly what they see, and other children are hurt or angry.

What's really going on

Your child is being truthful, not cruel. They may not realize that words land differently for the listener, or know the rule about keeping some thoughts inside.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~“That was so rude! Say sorry right now.”~~

✓ TRY THIS

“That was true, and it hurt her feelings. Let’s keep that one as a thinking thought.”

Why it works: You separate honesty, which is good, from the effect, which can be taught.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Punish blunt comments.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Teach two kinds of thoughts: “saying thoughts” and “thinking thoughts.”

Why it works: A simple sorting rule is something your child can use on the spot.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~“If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything.”~~

✓ TRY THIS

“Find one true thing that’s kind: ‘I like the colors you used.’”

Why it works: Your child can stay honest and still be kind.

More things to say

“Is that a thinking thought or a saying thought?”

“You can tell me later, in private.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

Do this in the moment

-  Explain privately and calmly after it happens.
-  Practice sorting example comments into the two groups.
-  Teach a short apology line.
-  Praise kind honesty when you hear it.

Avoid

-  Shaming in front of others.
-  Teaching your child to lie.
-  Assuming bad intent.

Set up for next time

-  Make a list of topics that are usually “thinking thoughts”: bodies, smells, money, age.
-  Role-play with puppets saying both kinds of things.
-  Let trusted adults know your child is direct, not unkind.



GET MORE HELP IF

If blunt comments are causing serious trouble at school, ask the speech therapist or counselor for help teaching social rules.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Honesty is one of the best things about your child as a friend. They will never pretend to like someone. Teach the filter, and keep the honesty.

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PART THREE · TALKING AND UNDERSTANDING

Interrupting and Not Noticing Boredom

What it looks like

Your child talks over others, keeps going when the listener has turned away, or doesn't notice a friend trying to change the subject.

What's really going on

Reading faces and body language takes effort your child may not have to spare while talking. A thought that isn't said right away may also feel like it will be lost.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Stop interrupting! Wait your turn."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Hold that thought. Put your hand on my arm, and I'll come to you."

Why it works: A signal lets your child know they've been noticed and will get a turn.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Expect your child to read a bored face.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Teach three clues: looking away, short answers, moving away.

Why it works: Specific clues can be learned, the way you learn road signs.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Can't you see he's not interested?"~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Pause and ask: 'What do you think?'"

Why it works: A built-in pause gives the other person a way back in.

More things to say

“Your turn to talk. I’ll listen.”

“Do you want to hear more, or talk about something else?”

“I was talking a lot. What about you?”

Do this in the moment

-  Practice with a talking stick or object at dinner.
-  Use a timer for one-minute turns.
-  Give a private hand signal that means “pause.”
-  Praise waiting and listening.

Avoid

-  Scolding in public.
-  Letting others mock your child.
-  Finishing your child's sentences.

Set up for next time

-  Watch a show with the sound off and guess how people feel.
-  Let your child write or draw a thought to save it for later.
-  Role-play a chat where you show the three “bored” clues.



GET MORE HELP IF

Ask about a social communication group led by a speech-language pathologist.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Give your child a notebook for “things to tell you later.” Knowing the thought is saved makes it easier to wait.

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PART THREE · TALKING AND UNDERSTANDING

Arguments With a Friend

What it looks like

A small disagreement ends the friendship. Your child says, “He’s not my friend anymore,” holds a grudge or doesn’t know how to make up.

What's really going on

All-or-nothing thinking turns one argument into the end. Your child may not know that friends can disagree and still be friends, or how to repair things.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~“Don’t be dramatic. You’ll be friends again tomorrow.”~~

✓ TRY THIS

“You’re angry with him. Friends can be mad and still be friends.”

Why it works: You accept the feeling and teach that the friendship can survive it.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Sort it out with the other parent over their heads.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Help your child plan what to say to fix it.

Why it works: Repair is a skill your child will need for life.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~“Just say sorry.”~~

✓ TRY THIS

“You could say: ‘I didn’t like that. Can we start over?’”

Why it works: A line that’s honest is easier to say than an apology they don’t feel.

More things to say

"I felt upset when you changed the rules."

"Can we start over?"

"I'm sorry about my part."

Do this in the moment

-  Wait until your child is calm before talking it through.
-  Draw what happened, with speech and thought bubbles for each child.
-  Find each child's part without blaming.
-  Practice the repair line together.

Avoid

-  Taking sides right away.
-  Forcing a quick apology.
-  Banning the friend after one argument.

Set up for next time

-  Tell stories of your own arguments with friends and how you fixed them.
-  Read books where friends fall out and make up.
-  Teach a calm-down step for use during disagreements: walk away, breathe, come back.



GET MORE HELP IF

If arguments turn physical, or your child is often in conflict at school, ask the counselor or a psychologist for support.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Drawing the argument as a comic strip helps a child see the other person's side in a way that talking rarely does.

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PART THREE · TALKING AND UNDERSTANDING

Is This Person Really a Friend?

What it looks like

Other children tell your child to do silly or risky things, take their snacks or money, or are friendly one day and cruel the next. Your child calls them friends.

What's really going on

Your child may be so glad of attention that they miss the signs of being used. They tend to trust what people say and may not see hidden motives.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today**SAY** INSTEAD OF

~~"Those kids are using you. Stay away from them."~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"A friend makes you feel good and safe. How do you feel after being with them?"

Why it works: A question helps your child reach the answer themselves, so it sticks.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Assume your child knows what a friend is.~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

Make a simple "friend or not a friend" list together.

Why it works: Clear rules help your child judge behavior, not just words.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Why did you do what they said?"~~

✓ **TRY THIS**

"If someone says 'Do it or I won't be your friend,' that's a trick. You can say no."

Why it works: Naming the trick gives your child a way to spot it.

More things to say

“Friends don't ask you to do things that get you in trouble.”

“You can say, ‘No. I don't want to.’”

“Come and tell me. You won't be in trouble.”

Do this in the moment

-  List what friends do: take turns, are kind, keep you safe, are the same each day.
-  List warning signs: dares, secrets, taking things, laughing at you.
-  Practice saying no and walking away.
-  Thank your child every time they tell you something.

Avoid

-  Blaming your child for being tricked.
-  Banning all contact without explaining.
-  Overreacting, which teaches your child to stop telling you.

Set up for next time

-  Tell the teacher what's happening and ask them to keep watch.
-  Help your child spend more time with kinder children.
-  Teach the rule: “No secrets from Mom or Dad about friends.”



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child is being used, dared, threatened or touched, tell the school right away. If there is any risk to their safety, contact the school and the doctor the same day.

DR. VERA'S TIP

*Teach one test: “After I'm with this person, do I feel good or bad?”
It's a question your child can use for the rest of their life.*

part four

School and Beyond

Recess, bullying, parties, clubs and screens. How to help your child find their people in the wider world.

19 Alone at Recess and Lunch

21 Birthday Parties and Group Events

23 Online Friends and Gaming

20 Teasing and Bullying

22 Clubs, Teams and Activities

24 Brothers, Sisters and Cousins

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PART FOUR · SCHOOL AND BEYOND

Alone at Recess and Lunch

What it looks like

Your child walks the edge of the playground, sits alone at lunch or spends recess in the library. The teacher says they seem fine.

What's really going on

Recess is the least structured, loudest part of the day. There are no rules to follow and no adult leading. For your child it may be the hardest time, not the fun one.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Hope it gets better by itself.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Ask the school for a structured option: a lunch club, a game led by an adult, a buddy.

Why it works: Structure turns a confusing free-for-all into something your child can join.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Did you play with anyone today?"~~

✓ TRY THIS

**"What was the best part of recess?
What was the hardest?"**

Why it works: Open questions give you real information without pressure.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Insist your child be with others the whole break.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Agree on a mix: ten minutes with a group, then quiet time.

Why it works: Your child may need recess to recover. Both needs matter.

More things to say

“Tomorrow, you could ask to join the four-square game.”

“It's okay to need a quiet break.”

“Who was near you at lunch?”

Do this in the moment

-  Ask the teacher what your child actually does at recess.
-  Suggest a job: equipment helper, library assistant, gardener.
-  Send a game or item that invites others: a ball, cards, chalk.
-  Practice one playground game at home.

Avoid

-  Grilling your child every day.
-  Asking the school to keep them in at recess as the only answer.
-  Showing your sadness to your child.

Set up for next time

-  Ask about a peer buddy or “circle of friends” program.
-  Find out where kids with similar interests gather: chess, art, the reading corner.
-  Ask that social goals be included in your child's school plan.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child dreads school or comes home distressed most days, meet with the teacher and counselor.

DR. VERA'S TIP

A lunch club built around an interest, such as Lego, drawing or card games, is the most effective thing a school can offer.

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PART FOUR · SCHOOL AND BEYOND

Teasing and Bullying

What it looks like

Your child is called names, copied, left out on purpose, pushed or tricked. They may not tell you. You notice torn clothes, lost things or sudden fear of school.

What's really going on

Children who seem different or alone are targeted more often. Your child may not recognize bullying, may not have the words to report it, or may fear making it worse.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Just ignore them."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"That is not okay, and it's not your fault. I'm going to help."

Why it works: Your child needs to know an adult will act. Neither ignoring nor fighting works.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Confront the other child or their parents yourself.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Report it to the school in writing and ask for their plan.

Why it works: A written record gets action and protects your child.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Expect your child to handle it alone.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Teach a simple plan: say "Stop," walk away, tell a named adult.

Why it works: Three clear steps are something your child can remember under stress.

More things to say

“Stop. I don't like that.”

“Telling is not tattling. Telling keeps you safe.”

“Who is your safe adult at school?”

Do this in the moment

-  Stay calm and thank your child for telling you.
-  Write down what happened: who, what, where, when.
-  Ask the school who your child can go to and where they're safe.
-  Check in every day for a while, briefly.

Avoid

-  Blaming your child or asking what they did.
-  Promising to keep it secret.
-  Advising your child to fight.

Set up for next time

-  Practice the “stop, walk, tell” steps at home.
-  Help your child spend break times near friendly children or adults.
-  Follow up with the school in a week, and again after that.



GET MORE HELP IF

If bullying continues, involves threats, injury or anything online or sexual, go to the principal in writing and tell the doctor. If your child talks about self-harm, call or text 988 or go to the nearest emergency room.

DR. VERA'S TIP

*Ask about bullying indirectly: “Is anyone mean to kids in your class?”
Children often tell you about themselves by talking about someone else.*

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PART FOUR · SCHOOL AND BEYOND

Birthday Parties and Group Events

What it looks like

Your child begs to go, then clings to you, hides, melts down over the noise or the games, and wants to leave after ten minutes.

What's really going on

A party has everything that's hard: noise, crowds, surprises, waiting, losing and unfamiliar food. Wanting to go and being able to cope are two different things.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Arrive on time and stay to the end.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Come for the part your child can enjoy, and leave while it's going well.

Why it works: Thirty good minutes count as a success your child will remember.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Go and join in. Don't be shy."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"We can watch first. Tell me when you're ready, or if you need a break."

Why it works: Watching is a way of joining, and it lowers the pressure.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Turn up without knowing the plan.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Ask the host what will happen, and tell your child beforehand.

Why it works: Knowing the schedule removes most of the surprises.

More things to say

“First games, then cake, then home.”

“Show me the break card if you need out.”

“You stayed for the singing. That was brave.”

Do this in the moment

-  Bring headphones, a comfort item and a safe snack.
-  Find a quiet spot when you arrive.
-  Stay nearby without hovering.
-  Help your child give the present and say happy birthday, then relax.

Avoid

-  Forcing party games.
-  Staying after the signs of overload begin.
-  Apologizing for your child in front of them.

Set up for next time

-  Practice party moments at home: singing, candles, pass the parcel.
-  Start with small parties and familiar children.
-  For your child's own birthday, keep it small and on their terms.



GET MORE HELP IF

If your child wants to attend events and can't manage any of them, ask an OT for a step-by-step plan.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Being the first to arrive is easier than walking into a full, noisy room. Come early, and let the party build around your child.

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PART FOUR · SCHOOL AND BEYOND

Clubs, Teams and Activities

What it looks like

You've tried soccer, swimming and scouts. Your child refused to join in, got overwhelmed, was left out or asked to quit after two sessions.

What's really going on

Many activities are fast and loud, with complex rules and lots of waiting. But the right activity, with the right leader, is one of the best places to meet friends.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Pick the activity all the other kids do.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Pick one built on your child's interest and strengths.

Why it works: Interest brings motivation, and it brings children who like the same thing.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Sign up for a whole season straight away.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Ask for a trial session, and talk to the leader first.

Why it works: A leader who understands your child makes all the difference.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"You have to stick with it. We paid for it."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Let's try three times. Then we decide together."

Why it works: A short, clear commitment is fair, and gives it a real chance.

More things to say

“What would make it easier next time?”

“You don't have to be the best. You just have to enjoy it.”

“Coach knows you might need a break.”

Do this in the moment

-  Look at individual or small-group options: swimming, climbing, martial arts, art, coding, chess, music.
-  Tell the leader what helps your child and what's hard.
-  Arrive early so your child can see the space while it's quiet.
-  Stay for the first sessions if it's allowed.

Avoid

-  Large, competitive team sports as a first try.
-  Comparing with siblings.
-  Quitting after one bad day, or forcing months of misery.

Set up for next time

-  Ask about inclusive or autism-friendly programs in your area.
-  Invite one child from the activity for a playdate.
-  Visit and watch a session together before joining.



GET MORE HELP IF

Ask your OT, school or local autism organization for a list of inclusive activities near you.

DR. VERA'S TIP

The leader matters more than the activity. One patient coach who is glad to see your child is worth more than the best program in town.

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PART FOUR · SCHOOL AND BEYOND

Online Friends and Gaming

What it looks like

Your child's friends are all in a game or a chat. They're happier online than anywhere else, and you worry about safety and screen time.

What's really going on

Online, there's no eye contact, no noise and time to think before replying. Shared games give a ready-made topic. For many children with autism, these friendships are real.

Instead of... try this 3 swaps you can use today

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Those aren't real friends."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Tell me about your friends in the game. What do you build together?"

Why it works: Taking it seriously keeps your child talking to you, which keeps them safer.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Ban online play, or leave it completely unsupervised.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Set clear rules together, and keep devices in shared rooms.

Why it works: Being involved protects better than banning or ignoring.

SAY INSTEAD OF

~~"Don't talk to strangers online."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Never share your name, school, address or photos. If anyone asks, or asks for secrets, tell me."

Why it works: Specific rules are easier for a literal thinker to follow.

More things to say

“Can I watch you play for a bit?”

“If something feels weird, come and get me. You won't be in trouble.”

“Online friends stay online unless we meet them together.”

Do this in the moment

-  Use parental controls and privacy settings, and check them regularly.
-  Know which games and chats your child uses, and with whom.
-  Set time limits with a visual timer and warnings.
-  Help turn a local online friend into a supervised in-person meetup.

Avoid

-  Taking the device away as punishment for telling you something.
-  Private chats with adults or people your child doesn't know.
-  Devices in the bedroom overnight.

Set up for next time

-  Play the game with your child now and then.
-  Teach what bullying and scams look like online.
-  Look for moderated groups for kids with shared interests.



GET MORE HELP IF

If anyone asks your child for photos, personal details, secrets or to meet, save the messages, report the account and contact the police.

DR. VERA'S TIP

The rule that protects most is this one: “You will never be in trouble for telling me.” Say it often, and keep to it.

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PART FOUR · SCHOOL AND BEYOND

Brothers, Sisters and Cousins

What it looks like

Your child fights with siblings, ignores them or depends on one sibling for all their play. The sibling feels responsible or resentful.

What's really going on

Siblings and cousins are your child's first and most available peers. That makes home the best practice ground, and puts a lot on the other children.

Instead of... try this

 3 swaps you can use today**SAY** INSTEAD OF

~~"You have to let him play. He doesn't have anyone else."~~

✓ TRY THIS

"Play one game together, then you get your own time."

Why it works: A limit makes it fair, so the sibling can give freely.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Leave them to work out every fight alone.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Teach both children the same rules: turns, timers, break spots.

Why it works: Shared tools give both children a way through.

DO INSTEAD OF

~~Make the sibling the helper or teacher.~~

✓ TRY THIS

Set up activities where both are equal, or your child with autism is the expert.

Why it works: Being equals builds a friendship. Being the helper builds resentment.

More things to say

“You two built that together. Look at it!”

“Everyone gets a turn to choose.”

“It's okay to need a break from each other.”

Do this in the moment

-  Plan short, fun activities both enjoy.
-  Give each child one-on-one time with you.
-  Protect each child's special belongings and space.
-  Thank the sibling for kindness, specifically.

Avoid

-  Blaming the sibling for conflicts.
-  Expecting the sibling to include your child every time.
-  Comparing the children.

Set up for next time

-  Explain autism to siblings simply, and answer their questions.
-  Invite cousins for short, planned visits.
-  Look into sibling support groups in your area.



GET MORE HELP IF

If a sibling seems anxious, withdrawn or overloaded, talk with a counselor. Siblings need support too.

DR. VERA'S TIP

A game your child with autism is truly good at changes how a sibling sees them. Find that game, and play it often.

TOOLS

A playdate that works

A good playdate is short, planned and built around something your child loves. Use this checklist before every visit until they run themselves.

Who

One child. Choose someone kind and calm who shares an interest. Ask the teacher for ideas.

Where

Your home at first, or a quiet outdoor place. Put special toys away beforehand.

How long

Forty-five minutes to an hour. Tell the other parent the end time when you invite them.

What

Two planned activities with a shared goal: a build, baking, a board game, a craft.

Snack

A simple snack in the middle gives everyone a break and something easy to do together.

Ending

Give a five-minute warning. End while it's going well. Say what you'll do next time.

How to make it work

- ✓ Go over the plan with your child beforehand, with pictures.
- ✓ Stay close, and step in quietly with an idea if play stalls.
- ✓ Afterward, tell your child one thing they did well.
- ✓ Invite the same child again within two weeks.

DR. VERA'S TIP

Repeat what works. The same child, the same activity and the same snack, three times in a row, is how an acquaintance becomes a friend.

TOOLS

Lines to say

Practice these at home until they come easily. Change the words to sound like your child. A line that's been rehearsed is there when it's needed.

Joining in

"That looks fun. Can I play?" "Can I be the goalie?" "I can keep score."

Starting a chat

"What are you making?" "I like your backpack. Is that from the game?" "What did you do this weekend?"

Keeping it going

"Me too!" "What happened next?" "What do you think?"

Saying no

"No thanks." "I don't want to do that." "Stop. I don't like that."

Fixing a problem

"Can we start over?" "Let's take turns choosing." "I'm sorry about my part."

Ending

"I have to go now." "That was fun. See you tomorrow." "Want to play again at recess?"

Words to use

"Can I be the one who...?"

"Are you joking or serious?"

"Good game. Want to play again?"

DR. VERA'S TIP

Act out the lines with toys, puppets or by swapping roles. Children remember what they've done far better than what they've been told.

PRINTABLE

My playdate plan

Fill this in with your child before a friend comes. Draw or paste pictures in the boxes, and keep the plan where both children can see it.

My friend _____ is coming at _____

1 Say hi	2 Activity 1	3 Snack
4 Activity 2	5 Clean up	6 Say bye

DR. VERA'S TIP

Let your child choose the activities and the snack. A child who helped plan it is a child who wants it to go well.

PRINTABLE · SHARE WITH TEACHERS, COACHES AND OTHER PARENTS

All About Me

Fill this in with your child and give it to people who will spend time with them. It helps others see your child the way you do.

My name is:

Things I love and know a lot about:

I'm good at:

How I like to say hello:

Things that are hard for me:

What helps when I'm upset or overwhelmed:

A good way to invite me to join in:

Please don't:

PRINTABLE

Friendship log

Write a line after each playdate, club session or good moment at school. Over a few months you'll see what works, and how far your child has come.

DATE	WHO	WHAT WE DID	WHAT WENT WELL	WHAT WAS HARD	NEXT TIME

Children my child enjoys being with:

IMPORTANT

When to get more help

CALL 911 RIGHT AWAY IF

- ✗ Your child is in immediate danger or has been seriously hurt
- ✗ Your child has a plan to hurt themselves or someone else (you can also call or text 988)
- ✗ Your child is missing

Call your child's doctor soon if

- ✓ Sadness, worry or irritability most days for two weeks or more
- ✓ Refusing school, or stomach aches and headaches on school days
- ✓ Any talk of being worthless, wanting to disappear or not wanting to be alive
- ✓ Signs of bullying: unexplained injuries, lost or damaged belongings, fear of school
- ✓ A sudden change in sleep, appetite, behavior or skills
- ✓ Being asked for photos, secrets or personal details online

Who can help

PROFESSIONAL	HOW THEY HELP
Teacher and school counselor	See daily what happens with peers, and can set up buddies, clubs and a bullying plan
Speech-language pathologist	Conversation, non-literal language and social communication groups
Psychologist	Anxiety, low mood, social skills groups and coping with big feelings
Occupational therapist (OT)	Play skills, regulation, sensory needs and joining activities

In a mental health crisis in the U.S., call or text 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline), any time.

FOR YOU

Taking care of you

Watching your child be left out is one of the hardest parts of parenting. You may feel their loneliness more sharply than they do. You may also be lonely yourself: fewer invitations come for parents, too.

In the moment

- ✓ Notice your own hurt, separate from your child's
- ✓ Breathe before you react to another child or parent
- ✓ Say to yourself: "One friend is enough."

Every day

- ✓ Enjoy your child's company; you are their first friend
- ✓ Notice one small social win
- ✓ Do one thing that connects you with another adult

Every week

- ✓ Reach out to one parent, even with a short text
- ✓ Protect time for your own friendships
- ✓ Let one social plan go if everyone is tired

Find your people

- ✓ Local autism parent groups
- ✓ Your child's school or therapy team
- ✓ Online groups with kind moderation

DR. VERA'S TIP

The parents you meet at autism-friendly activities are often the ones who become your friends. Your child's people and your people may turn up in the same room.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Dr. Vera helps families turn hard daily moments into calmer, more connected routines. His approach is practical and respectful: understand what the nervous system needs, lower the load, and give parents words and tools they can use the same day.

He is also the author of Dr. Vera's Dementia Action Manuals, including *Stop the Chaos!*

More Calm & Connected Guides

Stop the Meltdown!

What to say and do when your child with autism is overwhelmed.

Stop the Sensory Overload!

Clothes, noise, haircuts, stores and a home calming kit.

Stop the Bedtime Battles!

A step-by-step bedtime plan for kids with autism.

Stop the Food Fights!

Sensory-friendly eating without the battle.

Stop the Potty Struggles!

An OT's toileting plan for kids with autism.

StartEmpowering.com