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SOCIAL SKILLS AND AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

A Guidebook to Social Skills for people with an Autism Spectrum Disorder



ABSTRACT

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This thesis is product based and its aim is to produce a guidebook for people with an autism spectrum disorder which highlights behaviour which could be considered inappropriate in certain social situations and suggests how to address and modify the behaviour. The guidebook is designed using input from service users of my work-life partner organization and their opinions on as to how the characters should look and what kind of content should be included within the guidebook. The aim is that by using a participatory approach the characters within the guidebook will be relatable, the content relevant, and engaging to the intended audience.

My interest in the area originates from over 20 years' experience working with people with learning disabilities and autism spectrum disorders.

The process of developing the product was initially made by identifying some key social skill areas in which people with an autism spectrum disorder have difficulties with. To proceed relevant literature was reviewed, as well as using first-hand experience of some of the client group within my workplace. A questionnaire was developed in which I drew characters that I hoped would appeal to the client group and was sent to another contact of the working life partner who work directly with people with an autism spectrum disorder to find out what they would be interested in learning more about and how they would like to develop the characters. Following the results of the questionnaire the guidebook focused on personal space, paying attention and listening skills, eye contact, talking too loudly and sharing.

The Handbook was given to a specific group within the work-life partners clientele and the level of engagement and results of reaching the aims and objectives are unclear. As a result, I have self-evaluated the product. There has been some positive feedback from staff who support the client but how much of an impact the guidebook may have had remains unclear. The conclusion is that this project attempted to work with a very diverse group of people with largely differing abilities and hinderances. As every person with an autism spectrum disorder is affected differently, hoping to produce something that will appeal and engage a large proportion of the client group was unrealistic. However, it may be of use to some individuals that it appeals to and the hope is that the product may enable some individuals to create connections or friendships.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Triad of impairments, Developmental Disorder, Theory of Mind.

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1.INTRODUCTION

This thesis is designed to document the planning, background, implementation, and evaluation of a guidebook. The guidebook is planned to enable people with an autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) to recognise behaviour that may not be socially acceptable in some situations, for example, talking too loudly in a library or shouting in a classroom and, understand what steps can be taken to adapt or change that behaviour. The characters were drawn and designed based on the feedback gained from questionnaires that were developed in order to find what appeals to the target group. “Another type of visual support combines words with simple drawings in order to explain a social concept. Missed social information is provided through a concrete visual representation of thought, often incorporating a thought bubble as seen in published comic strips. The process of cartooning assists the participating adult in understanding the perspective of that individual and, therefore may provide invaluable insights for additional intervention” (Aspy & Grossman, 2007).

This project intends to produce a product-based thesis which will be a guidebook for people on the autistic spectrum illustrating social norms and expectations, the guidebook will be informed by people with an autism spectrum disorder and illustrated using hand drawn characters created from the feedback of the participants of the questionnaire. The aim of the guidebook is not to solve these problems with social interactions, but to provide practical, alternative approaches and hope that it may help some individuals to adapt their behaviour to suit different social situations.

2. BACKGROUND.

The United Nations Secretary-General message in 2020 states that “Persons with autism have the right to self-determination, independence and autonomy, as well as the right to education and employment on an equal basis with others.” (Guterres 2020). In this chapter the background of autism spectrum disorders will be examined, as well as current definitions and legislation. The World Health Organisation (2019) estimates that one in 160 children worldwide have an autism spectrum disorder. According to the WHO it is defined by a range of conditions with impairments in social communication, repetitive behaviour, and limited interests it also stresses that conditions are unique to the individual and the level it impacts upon individuals vary substantially. The prevalence of autistic spectrum disorders appears to be growing globally which may be explained by better diagnostic criteria, tools, and reporting. The causes of an autism spectrum disorder are unclear but scientific research suggests a number of factors including genetic and environmental.

In the 1940`s autism became identified as a range of disorders through the research of Hans Asperger and Leo Kanner, who while working independently (Kanner based in the United States and Asperger in Vienna), produced papers detailing autistic traits within children. Kanners research focused on children who had seemingly withdrawn from others, had a need for repetition, deficits in language, communication and, unable to relate to others. Aspergers research focused on children who displayed unusual behaviour, appeared socially withdrawn, had intense interest in specific subjects, attention span was deficient and motor skills hindered. Lorna Wing in her paper in 1981, believed Kanner and Asperger were describing the same disorder which she identified as a spectrum disorder in her paper encompassing the lower functioning individuals of Kanners

research and the higher functioning subjects of Asperger. (Aspy & Grossman, 2008).

People with an autistic spectrum disorder have their rights to lifelong education and to be assisted to reaching their full potential protected through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (Article 26) and the Convention on the rights of people with disabilities which is an international agreement which states member states have the obligation to address problems and respect the needs of people with disabilities, including autism.

2.1 Target group

Having worked with people with an autism spectrum disorder affecting them to varying levels of ability for over 20 years, my understanding is that the social difficulties present themselves in many different forms. Not understanding the norms of social conventions and, using odd behaviours as a means of coping with a confusing and overwhelming environment can lead to being over friendly or not friendly enough, striking the right balance is difficult, for most people for someone with an autism spectrum disorder, it can be an overwhelming task. Being unable to competently read facial expressions or body language, not understanding what response to give to greetings, thanks, or apologies, but knowing that some response is expected will almost certainly develop anxiety and behavioural problems. Due to a perceived aloofness that is sometimes misconstrued as a desire to not want to interact with others, people with an autism spectrum disorder often tend to be isolated because of the extreme anxiety they face by simply not knowing how they should respond and what is the expected reply to someone's query. Many people with an autism spectrum disorder may desperately want to be accepted in their community, workplace and/or social networks but the extreme anxiety sometimes caused by social interaction can lead to individuals with an autism spectrum disorder socially distancing themselves.

The end users of the guidebook are intended to be adults on the autistic spectrum who can read, follow illustrated pictures and have an understanding of the social interaction etiquette. Many people on the autism spectrum have problems with social interactions, creating and maintaining friendships is difficult despite a

strong desire to have a healthy social circle outside of their immediate family circle. People with an autism spectrum disorder have a need for friends despite the common myth that they do not wish to socialize with others. Difficulties in making friends could arise from being uncomfortable in social situations. Unwritten social rules are not readily understood by people on the autism spectrum (Aspy & Grossman 2007). The Guidebook can be useful to the target group in identifying behaviours that may be barriers to successful social interactions and can be common in people with an autism spectrum disorder, it is hoped that by using hand drawn pictures it may resonate with some individuals from the target group.

The pictures involve typical social problems such as sharing one's possessions and using appropriate tone of voice and show how it can be perceived by others when, for instance people do not want to share. The guidebook could be useful to some people on the autism spectrum who may be visual learners and they may be able to identify with the visuals in the guidebook. The drawings are accompanied by text explaining the effects certain behaviours may have on others and it's hoped that the text is simple and clear enough for the target group to understand the message.

The product aims to present a concise and easy to read guide to social and communication skills rather than a teaching tool it intends to create situations that may be familiar to the target group and to help inform situational expectations. Regardless of the obvious and prevalent challenges with social interactions facing people with an autism spectrum disorder, professionals still struggle to find a solution and progress has been made but, there is still much to be done. (Weiss & Harris, 2014).

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

To develop the product different proven techniques and interventions around social skill deficits in people with autism will be researched. Much of the literature sourced is geared toward children, finding source material aimed at adults was problematic with a few exceptions.

In his book *Group Interventions for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders*, Cotugno (2009) examines the theories behind current intervention practices and the benefits of group work in developing social skills training as opposed to peer modelling. While the book is aimed towards children and has a leaning towards the benefits of group work there was still a great deal of relevant information. “For the ASD individual, deficits and impairments in social competency and social skill development will affect and limit an individual’s capacity to experience social interactions in normal ways, to understand their meaning, and to learn how to adapt and manage them effectively as one moves through each stage of social development.” (Cotugno,2009).

“The responsibility for teaching social skills belongs to family, school, speech therapists, psychologists, job coaches, employers and others, it is impossible to prepare individuals for employment and independence in adulthood without addressing social skills” (Aspy & Grossmann, 2007).

Language development is often delayed in children with autism and an estimated 25% of people with autism develop little or no functional language (Boucher 2012). Given that language development and communication impairments are part of the diagnostic criteria of an autism spectrum disorder its essential that these are considered when developing any kind of product aimed at people with autism. Taking that into account the product will use language that is of a level

accessible to a large percentage of the target group, language that is too complicated with professional jargon would not be appropriate therefore the project will attempt to use text and illustrations appropriate to the target group. People with an ASD are often better visual learners and may have difficulty understanding meaning in verbal instruction. In many cases visual instruction may provide greater clarity, images and three-dimensional objects can remove much of the ambiguity of verbal instruction.

A reliable source of knowledge concerning autism spectrum disorders comes from Dr Temple Grandin who is also on the autism spectrum.

Dr Temple Grandin is an author, an animal expert and consulted widely on the humane treatment of cattle, she developed a system for leading cattle to slaughter which alleviates the anxiety in the animals. Having an autism spectrum disorder Grandin applied her means of managing her own anxiety to the development of the cattle system which is now in use worldwide. She describes herself as a visual learner 'I think in pictures. Words are like a second language to me. I translate both spoken and written words into full-colour movies, complete with sound, which run like a VCR tape in my head. When someone speaks to me his words are instantly translated into pictures.' (Grandin 1995)

4. DEFINITIONS OF KEY CONCEPTS

Key concepts for this project have been chosen for their relevance to the area of social skills in the target group. Autism Spectrum Disorder was a key concept chosen in order to introduce the wide range of deficits which might be encompassed within this diagnosis. The Triad of impairments is relevant in that it defines three prevalent deficits common to people with an autism spectrum disorder all of which have an impact on creating effective social interactions. The Theory of Mind was a key concept relevant to this project as problems with theory of mind could lead to a person being unable to understand that another person may not be perceiving things in the same way which could again lead to misunderstandings and unsuccessful social interactions.

4.1 ASD Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Autism is a developmental disorder which affects people in many ways ranging from mild to severe, as such it is called a spectrum disorder. At the milder end of the spectrum many people can lead productive and fulfilling lives, at the severe end of the spectrum it can be very disabling, and some people may need full time care assistance.

The exact cause of autism is not known but many researchers believe there to be a combination of genetic and environmental factors which cause an abnormality in brain structure and function. “Autism is a neuro-developmental disorder characterized by impaired communication and social interaction and repetitive behaviours. Several lines of evidence indicate that genetic, environmental, and immunological factors may play a role in its pathogenesis.” (Kidd 2002)

Autistic Spectrum Disorder is the umbrella term for Autism and other related disorders.

4.2 The Triad of Impairments

The Triad of Impairments was developed in the 1970s and while dated it may still be considered relevant in many leading autism organisations. The triad of impairments theory considers there are three main areas of deficit within an Autistic Spectrum Disorder. These areas are social communication, social interaction and imagination and repetitive behaviours. Some people with ASD may seem to be able to communicate well but most will have difficulties with the social aspects of communication for example they may have difficulties understanding and processing verbal language, they may talk about inappropriate subjects not relevant to the conversation, understanding gestures, body language and facial expressions may be difficult for someone with ASD. For some people with an ASD participating in conversations can be difficult they can respond with yes/no answers or turn the conversation to their own area of interest such as train timetables and continue to talk at length on that subject (Bruner & Feldman 1993).

Colloquialisms may cause problems as people with an ASD can sometimes take things literally so phrases such as “don’t have a fit” (meaning don’t get angry) or “he lost his rag” (he lost his temper) could be interpreted very differently by someone with autism. Other social norms such as using appropriate level of eye contact or not invading others personal space can also be confusing to someone with an ASD. People with an autistic spectrum disorder tend to spend more time engaging in individual and solitary activities than interacting with their peers (Humphrey & Symes 2011).

Many people with ASD have good creative abilities but have problems in predicting alternative outcomes or imagining what happens next. Therefore, routines and structure are important. Deficiencies in Theory of Mind result in not being able to recognise that others think differently and may have different points of view. Children with autism tend to play in a very ordered manner e.g.

they may stack blocks in order of colour and shape rather than building things. Best, Arora, Porter and Doherty (2015) state that “the deficit in imagination is manifested as restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or activities.

4.3 Theory of mind

Theory of mind may begin to develop in children around four years of age it is the ability to understand the thoughts and feelings of others. People with autism commonly have delayed development of theory of mind.

A useful tool to demonstrate this was developed by Simon Baron-Cohen in 1985 called the Sally – Anne test. Sally puts a small ball into a basket and goes out for a walk, while Sally is out Anne takes the ball out of the basket and puts it in to a box. Participants are then asked to guess where Sally will look for the ball when she returns. People with impairments in theory of mind may choose the box as they know that is where the ball is and can’t imagine that Sally would believe it to still be in the basket. (Baron-Cohen 2003)

‘One hypothesis is that the core deficits found in autism can be explained by the fact that persons with autism are not able to recognize that other persons have minds. To recognize that another person has a mind is to recognize that person as someone who has a mental life independent of your own, with beliefs, preferences, desires, and the whole range of intentional attitudes.’(Barnbaum,2008).

5. PRODUCT PLANNING

Autism Finland agreed to be the working life partner on the project, following an interview there in March 2020, the project was explained and what were the desired goals. It was discussed at length the projects limitations and strategies to overcome them, given that the target audience are often reluctant to share opinions. They were enthusiastic and receptive to the project. Autism Finland explained that they function in an advisory fashion but, they have close working relationships with Autism Foundation Finland which does provide services to people with an autism spectrum disorder, and they could provide the contacts within Autism Foundation Finland.

Autism Finland was founded in 1997 and functions as an advocacy and advisory service for people with an ASD and their families. It serves as the umbrella organisation for 25 other ASD associations it has over 3,500 individual members and its function is to provide advice, assistance, and counselling. It aims to enhance opportunities in education, training, rehabilitation, and employment for people with an Autism spectrum disorder. “Autism Finland is a national expert and non-governmental organization promoting the inclusion and equality of people with autism spectrum disorder and their close ones in society. We support our member associations, influence in decision making, spread information on autism, launch projects, educate peer experts and experts by experience, and provide counselling and guidance. Our members include associations around Finland.” (Autism Finland *n.d.*)

Since February 2020 I have been working as an art instructor with Autism Foundation Finland, my position involves teaching art practice such as painting, drawing and sculpture to encourage self-expression as well as creating projects that can facilitate and encourage teamwork. I work with people with a wide range of abilities and on different levels of the autism spectrum. Art and creativity are important aspects in encouraging social interaction with people with an ASD.

There are many opportunities to encourage expression and sharing when creating or discussing artwork.

Autism Foundation Finland is a non-profit established in 1998 which is nationwide foundation and a social enterprise. Autism Foundation Finland activities consist of versatile housing, work and day activities, counselling and coaching, healthcare reception services, and development and research activities. (Autism Foundation Finland. *n/d*)

The guidebook is intended to produce a light-hearted and humorous reflection on some of the social norms and behaviours considered polite and acceptable.

The rules of social interaction are often confusing for someone with an ASD understanding facial expressions, body postures, tone of voice, sarcasm, eye contact or the many other ways people communicate in verbal or non-verbal ways can be challenging and lead to difficulty forming and maintaining relationships. Due to problems with social interaction many individuals with an autism spectrum disorder suffer from the consequences, experiencing loneliness and bullying to a greater extent than their peers (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000).

In order to develop a successful product, the needs and requirements of both the business partner and client group need to be identified and addressed. The process of designing a product should align itself with the partners future business goals, while, as in this case, remaining as a tool to help individuals to achieve their potential. Juran (1988.) suggests “we follow the product to see whom it impacts” That has been a fundamental principle of this process, to produce a product that has an impact upon individuals and something that can help and guide people who may be struggling fitting in to normal expectations.

To avoid a conflict of interest I have not asked the service users in my workplace for input into the guidebook instead I will have been collaborating with a group from another service in the Helsinki area who have been provided with the questionnaire. They were supported by competent and able staff members who know them well and knew how to encourage participation.

Autism Finland has several peer support groups for people with autism, these groups meet on a regular basis and discuss any problems they may be having, share stories, advice and help each other through a mutual understanding. My original idea which I discussed with Autism Finland was to attend these groups introduce myself and the project and find out if anyone would be interested in helping me develop the handbook.

Due to limitations imposed over the COVID 19 epidemic with regards to physical meetings, the plan was revised.

The product was discussed with the Helsinki regional manager from Autism Foundation Finland who was enthusiastic but had concerns about the level of feedback the service users could provide or due to their difficulties engaging with other people they may not be as forthcoming with their responses.

Discussion followed as to how best to obtain input from the service users so that the guidebook was created in conjunction and a participatory approach maintained. It was important to create the guidebook as a joint enterprise focusing on what the service users would like to know more about rather than someone else deciding what they thought was important.

It was agreed that, given the difficulties people with an autism spectrum disorder have when faced when presented with too many choices, questions would be devised as tick boxes to indicate preference and underlining to indicate interest in a subject or not. (Appendix 1).

The Helsinki regional manager of Autism Foundation Finland suggested that collaboration with another branch of the service might yield the best results given that the service users are on the higher functioning level of the autism spectrum and may be more able to participate. Contact details were exchanged and consultation sought from the Art and Culture coordinator at the Autism Foundation Finland based in the Vallila region of Helsinki.

The Art and Culture co-ordinator suggested a group within the service which would be willing to participate in the development of the product using an illustrated questionnaire (Appendix 1) designed that the target group would feel comfortable with. As the guidebook is illustrated with hand drawn characters it was important to get the opinions of the target group to create characters that they could identify with. Different characters and scenarios were experimented with before developing the main characters to be presented to the target group for their feedback. It was important the hand drawn characters would appeal to the target group that they would be able to identify and sympathise with the characters.

Due to the Covid 19 situation it was advisable to avoid travelling between different services and the art and culture co-ordinator carried out the questionnaire with seven service users which were then used to inform the character development and the scenarios.

Through the consultation group session, it was possible to have the target groups input in developing the drawings of the main characters to be used in the handbook, input into the scenarios they would like to explore and what to them is important that the guidebook try to portray. “Several cartooning techniques have been developed to help to understand the emotions and perspectives. Cartooning is a visual method of assisting others in perspective taking.” (Aspy & Grossman 2007)

5.1 Goals and Objectives

The thesis aims to produce a guidebook for people on the autistic spectrum which will be accessible, relevant, and informed by people with an autism spectrum disorder.

Goals of the guidebook are to provide practical solutions to common problems in social interactions faced by people on the autism spectrum for example using the correct tone of voice in conversations, talking about appropriate subjects,

turn taking in conversation or when physical contact is appropriate. By using illustrations alongside text, it is hoped that the guidebook can be more accessible than by using text alone.

The Objectives are, that I have identified a core group of people with autism who are interested and wish to contribute to the character development and areas on which to focus on in the guidebook.

Regular feedback was sought from working life partners and reflected in the guidebook, the service users' input was essential to the creation of the guidebook.

I have produced an illustrated guidebook aimed at people with autism which addresses social skills, offers coping strategies and is informative and accessible. The guidebook was created in English and Finnish language the Finnish translation provided by Heidi Lewis.

The overall aim of this thesis is to create and describe the process of producing a guidebook using participatory means that helps define behaviours within social situations. Behaviours which may be deemed to be unusual or unacceptable within certain situations are addressed and the guidebook aims to offer strategies to help adapt to different situations.

To define the goal of the product is to put the emphasis on the outcome and expected or hoped achievements of the product. The goal provides a means to reflect on the success or failure of the product. "Goals and objectives provide the foundation for measurement. Goals are outcome statements that define what an organization is trying to accomplish, both programmatically and organizationally. Goals are usually a collection of related programs. In contrast to goals objectives are very precise, time-based, measurable actions that support the completion of the goal" Greenwood. (1981.)

Objectives were defined using the SMART analysis. SMART is an acronym for Specific, Measurable, Assignable, Realistic and Time-related which were defined by Doran (1981). The specific relates to targeting an area for improvement, Measurable what is quantifiable or indicative of progress, Assignable specifies

who will undertake the task, Realistic considering limitations on resources etc, what is the realistic outcome, Time-related, when can results be expected.

Following the SMART guidelines, the goal of this project was to plan, implement and evaluate the social skills guidebook for adults with an autism spectrum disorder. The guidebook is intended as an introductory facilitation tool which can be enhanced by the facilitator of the projects and allow for conversations within a group pertaining to social interactions.

The objectives were initially based upon my own experience before developing into what the service users would like to gain from the product. Preliminary and main objectives are listed in table 1.

TABLE 1. Objectives

Objective 1	Discuss with working life partners the need and viability of the project. (March 2020)
Objective 2	Identify with working life partners, service users who may be interested and who may benefit from the project.
Objective 3	Create a visual questionnaire for service users to gain response and interest levels in the product
Objective 4	Assess results of the questionnaire to direct the final product in terms of what the service users want and how to provide it.
Objective 5	Create the final product based on the service users' feedback regarding characters and social situations.

Following the completion of these objectives the social skills guidebook was created and given to service users for reflection and evaluation.

5.2 Needs Assessment

To produce a viable product a needs assessment is essential to its success. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines the needs assessment as such; “Needs assessment is the collection and analysis of information that relates to the needs of the affected populations and that will help determine gaps between an agreed standard and the current situation.” (WHO,n/d)

As the client group the product is intended to be of assistance to, is typically reluctant to participate it was important to try and get some level of interaction with the project from the service users’ point of view.

The questionnaires were drawn and designed to allow the service users to partake in the process without unduly causing anxiety or stress concerned with task completion which can affect someone with an autism spectrum disorder.

5.3 Budget.

There are no costs involved with the project other than my employer allowing me time to work at another service within the organisation for the purpose of gathering information to allow a participatory approach to the guidebook. My work-life partner has expressed a desire to share the product on an on-line basis so that individuals can download the guidebook. My work-life partner wishes to expand upon the project and cover more areas within social skills and it may be published at a later date.

5.4 Project Ethics

Protecting people from harm will be a key consideration for this project, physical mental or social harm can arise in unexpected situations precautionary measures, risk assessments and behavioural profiles will be taken into account.

There are several ethical considerations when working with a vulnerable group. Much of the target group has learning disabilities as well as autism so ensuring that they are clear about what is being asked of them is essential, as is ensuring that they are aware that they are under no obligation to participate and can withdraw at any time and all their information will be protected and not used if they don't wish it to be. Informed consent will be sought before any research takes place. Kathleen K Miller (2015) offers in her article that should autism be considered as a disease or a variation on normal? While she accepts the advocacy and rights of a person with an autism spectrum disorder, she also argues that the unrecipricosity can fracture immediate family relations.

5.5 Risk Assessments

The risk assessment table was created by evaluating what could be considered to be the highest risks to the project succeeding, the risks were assigned a risk rating based on likelihood then should the risks occur alternative measure were identified and also risk assessed to help minimise the problems.

Risks: The risks are rated 1 -5. 5 being the highest risk and 1 being the lowest

TABLE 1. Risk assessment of participation in the project.

Risks	Risk Rating	Alternative Measures	Risk Rating
Lack of participation due to Covid 19	4	On -line consultation	3
Service Users unwilling to take part.	4	Illustrated questionnaire used to gather opinions	1
Lack of participation in the group due to anxiety	4	Request support from staff the service users are familiar with.	2

The table reflects that there is a large risk of lack of participation in the target group for some foreseeable reasons. The table then illustrates figures using alternative measures and lowering the risk rating.

6. EVALUATION

Ensuring the viability of the product was essential to its success, as was, the products growth and sustainability

Is there a need to further develop the guidebook? Was the content clear and understandable? The guidebook has been produced in both Finnish and English (appendix 2 and 3) It is possible to be further developed with more situations and possibly characters added too, it has been given to a few service users. It has been popular with the service users but that may be as the characters are relatable rather than the content. Staff members have given positive feedback also. The service users given the guidebook are service users within my service placement so their opinions will not be added to avoid a conflict of interest. The handbook will be made available within my workplace at Autism Foundation Finland. In order to measure how successful, the handbook is, who found it useful, if they would recommend it to their peers, do they think it serves a useful tool in understanding social skills, it may be necessary to develop it further and cover more specific topics relevant to the target group.

6.1 Self Evaluation

All of the objectives defined at the beginning of the project were met. Meeting and discussing with working life partner, the needs and viability of project. The working life-partner was enthusiastic and receptive to the project and advised on other organisations that support people with an autistic spectrum disorder. My working life-partner and I discussed suitable candidates for participation in the initial questionnaire and a group from another service within the organisation were identified. The group were likely to be interested in the project and while wanting to be social and create friendships, find it difficult due to their social interaction problems. The challenge at this point was having a clear vision of how I wanted to present my proposal, the service users may not have felt comfortable with someone unfamiliar to them asking them to participate and give their feelings towards the project. At the same time the Covid 19 restrictions prevented staff from working across different areas of the service so it was decided that the local staff would deliver the questionnaire and being

familiar with the service users there, would probably know the best approach to use for achieving participation.

All of the objectives began as SMART objectives but as the Covid situation interrupted many of the planned activities the timed element of SMART was not achievable. However the objectives were Specific they explained who would be consulted or what would be done. They were measurable by feedback from questionnaires and finished product, it was achievable in the sense the I produced a guidebook informed by people with an autism spectrum disorder, and it was realistic given that I have had a lot of experience with the client group and the guidebook was planned that it might help some individuals.

Based on the results of the questionnaire it was quite challenging to decide which characters to proceed with as all participants had liked all of the drawings. It was decided to include all of the characters in the different situations. The questionnaire asked which areas of social interaction the service users would like to learn more about and this seemed to show clearly areas of interest. None of the participants showed an interest in learning more about good manners but all wanted to know about personal space.

Taking into account the feedback from the service users I created the guidebook by drawing the characters to portray the social situation, then writing a short description of how it might affect others and what they can try, to help overcome any of these difficulties. It was difficult drawing the characters, so they would not become caricatures, but be relatable to the service users and the message still be easily identifiable.

The choice of the topic remains of interest with myself and my working-life partner, and it is hoped that the handbook can still be developed further with more input from the service users and at some later date when Covid restrictions are further lifted it can be used as intended.

There were many learning and development opportunities throughout the process. Time management is essential when in employment and trying to complete a project of this nature, one of the biggest obstacles faced on this project was finding time to complete all aspects. A more time specific and detailed plan could have been beneficial in hindsight. With the help from the working-life partner the project was enabled

to continue if not exactly as it was hoped, a back-up plan could have helped maintain motivation with the project as there were many times of frustration which could have been avoided if a plan B could have been adopted instead of constantly struggling with obstacles in the original plan.

The research was from a wide range of sources and although some of those sources are older than recommended the information is relevant and applicable to this project.

The project was initiated and designed to meet the needs of several different individuals but given that people with an ASD experience difficulty on an individual level some things are more relevant than others.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a lot of good material online available for teaching social skills to different target groups and for this purpose more time and consideration could have been given to researching existing resources.

On contemplation the project may have been too broad and ambitious. When delving further into what is considered social skills how they are not readily available to all of us, and the difficulties others face with what most people take for granted. The project wasn't entered into naively but given the scope of possibilities may have been underestimated. As a solo project albeit with help and assistance from working life partners and service users it could have benefited from another perspective and assistance in time consuming tasks could have helped achieve results faster. The project has been completed in Finnish and English and will continue to expand covering further areas of social skills.

As the subject is a difficult area for the target group is it ethical to ask them to engage with something, they are not entirely comfortable with? The client group were given support and guided through the questionnaire but were the responses accurate or what they thought the instructor wanted to hear? Do they really understand the process in which they are being asked to partake? Many people with an autism spectrum disorder frequently want to do or say the right thing that they think will please the other person so receiving an accurate response could prove difficult. As Aspy and Grossman (et al) surmised in *The Ziggurat model* (2008) expressing and understanding emotions have frequently been difficult for people with an autism spectrum disorder and as such the deficits common in the condition relay themselves as social and emotional maladjustment.

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APPENDIX 1

Questionnaire

Hi my name is Stephen and I work at Espoo OVP as well as studying sosionomi I am doing my thesis on Autistic Spectrum Disorder and Social Skills and would like to get your opinions about it. I will make a guidebook with illustrations and would appreciate it if you could give your thoughts about whether you like the characters or the subjects. Thank you for you time and I will share the book with you when it is completed.

These are some of the characters in the guidebook you can put a cross the box to say if you like them or not. You can also comment or give a suggestion underneath if you want to.

Do you like this character?

Yes No

In the guidebook will look at different social skills and how to use them. You can underline to show which ones you are interested in :-

Starting a conversation	Interested	Not interested
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Speaking too loud or too quietly	Interested	Not interested
----------------------------------	------------	----------------

Understanding facial expressions	Interested	Not interested
----------------------------------	------------	----------------

Talking about suitable subjects	Interested	Not interested
---------------------------------	------------	----------------

Body language	Interested	Not interested
---------------	------------	----------------

Listening	Interested	Not interested
-----------	------------	----------------

Sharing	Interested	Not interested
---------	------------	----------------

Good Manners	Interested	Not interested
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APPENDIX 2

Guide book

A SOCIAL SKILLS GUIDEBOOK



A GUIDE TO SOCIAL SKILLS FOR PEOPLE WITH AN AUTISTIC SPECTRUM DISOR- DER

Stephen Lewis

Social Skills

Social skills are what people use to communicate with each other, to express our needs, likes and dislikes.

Social skills are important for building relationships, meeting new people and to communicate our thoughts and feelings.

Social skills include verbal and non-verbal communication which is not easy for everyone to understand.

This Guidebook

Learning social skills can be difficult as its not something taught at schools. People usually pick them up as they grow but for some people it is more difficult than others.

This guidebook can help you too understand some of the social skills needed to create and maintain friendships and what mistakes to try and avoid.

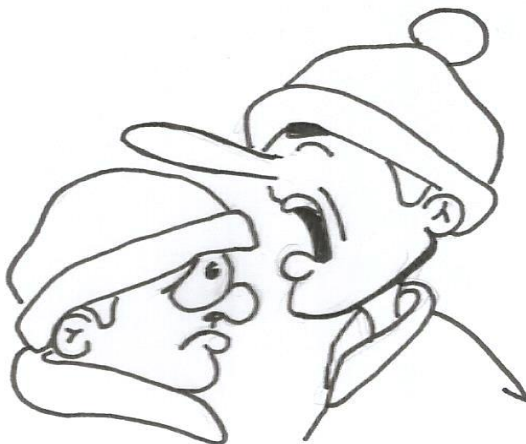
PAYING ATTENTION AND LISTENING



When in a conversation with someone it is good to stand facing them and looking at their face, so that they feel they are being listened to. If you are distracted or looking at your phone or tablet, they may feel you are not interested in what they have to say.

Asking a few questions about the subject is a good way of showing interest. If a person feels that you are interested in what they are saying they will want to spend more time with you and then you can share interests and find subjects to talk about that interest you both.

PERSONAL SPACE.



When you share space with other people it is important to remember not to stand too close to them. Some people can feel a little uneasy or intimidated if another person stands too close to them when they are talking.

If you stand too close to other people, they might feel anxious about it and not want to spend any more time with you because of that.

A good rule to remember is to try and stay the length of your arm away from people you are talking with.

EYE CONTACT



It is important when talking to someone to keep good eye contact. Good eye contact shows you are interested in what the other person has to say and it shows you are friendly and welcoming. People who are anxious in social situations can find it difficult to make eye contact.

If you find it difficult making eye contact you can try to focus on another part of the persons face like, between the eye brows or the top of the nose, this will look like you are making eye contact.

TALKING TOO LOUDLY



Sometimes people can find it hard to know the right volume of voice when talking to others. It is not always easy as different places need different levels of voice for example talking in a church or library you would need to speak very quietly but if you were at a football match you would need to speak loudly so that the other person can hear you.

If you are unsure about the right level of voice to use you can ask friends and family to let you know when you are talking too loudly.

SHARING



Sharing is an important social skill it teaches us to be kind and respectful to others. If you are willing to share your things with others they will be grateful that you have let them use your things and think of you as a nice and generous person and may share their things with you.

By sharing your things, you allow the other person to experience the pleasure you get from that item.

If you find it difficult to share you can practice by sharing for short periods of time before asking for your thing back.

SOSIAALISTEN TAITOJEN OPAS



Sosiaalisten taitojen opas henkilöille, jotka
kuuluvat autismin kirjoon

Stephen Lewis

SOSIAALISTEN TAITOJEN OPAS

Sosiaalisten taitojen opas henkilöille, jotka kuuluvat autismin kirjoon

SOSIAALISET TAIDOT

Ihmiset käyttävät sosiaalisia taitoja kommunikoidessaan muiden kanssa. Sosiaalisten taitojen avulla voidaan ilmaista tarpeita ja toiveita.

Sosiaaliset taidot ovat tärkeitä, kun luodaan ihmissuhteita, tavataan uusia ihmisiä ja viestitään muille ajatuksistamme ja tunteistamme.

Sosiaalisiin taitoihin kuuluu sekä verbaalinen että nonverbaalinen viestintä. Molempia voi välillä olla vaikeaa ymmärtää.

TÄSTÄ OHJEKIRJASTA

Sosiaalisia taitoja ei opeteta koulussa. Sen vuoksi niiden opettelu voi olla haastavaa. Usein odotetaan, että kyseiset taidot opitaan kokemuksen kautta. Toisille tämä on hankalampaa kuin toisille. Tämä ohjekirja voi auttaa ymmärtämään minkälaisia sosiaalisia taitoja tarvitaan ystävyysuhteiden luomiseen ja ylläpitämiseen. Se opastaa, kuinka välttää tyypillisiä virheitä sosiaalisissa tilanteissa.

HENKILÖKOHTAINEN TILA



Muiden kanssa jutellessa on tärkeää muistaa, että et seiso liian lähellä. Muuten henkilö, jonka kanssa keskustelet, voi tuntea olonsa epämukavaksi. Hyvä muistisääntö on pitää keskustelukumppani käsivarren etäisyydellä.

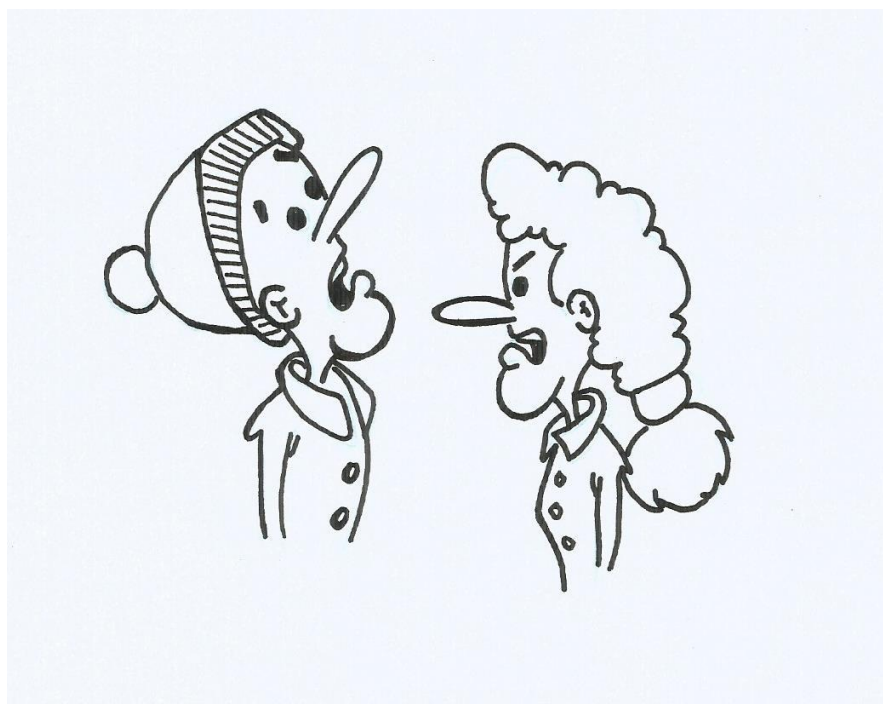
KESKITY KUUNTELEMAAN TOISTA



Keskustellessasi pyri pitämään katsekontakti. Jos katselet muualle tai leikit puhelimellasi toinen osapuoli voi kokea, ettet ole kiinnostunut siitä, mitä hän sinulle kertoo.

Kun keskityt katselemaan ja kuuntelemaan ihmisiä, joiden kanssa puhut, he haluavat viettää enemmän aikaa kanssasi. Sen jälkeen voitte jutella asioista, joista te molemmat olette kiinnostuneita.

PIDÄ KATSEKONTAKTI



Jutellessa on tärkeä pitää katsekontakti. Hyvä katsekontakti kertoo, että olet kiinnostunut siitä, mitä toinen henkilö sinulle kertoo. Se voi myös osoittaa, että olet ystävällinen ja avoin. Jos henkilö on hermostunut, hänen voi olla vaikeaa säilyttää katsekontakti. Jos sinulle on vaikeaa säilyttää katsekontakti, voit keskittyä katsomaan henkilöä esimerkiksi kulmakarvojen väliin. Tämä antaa vaikutelman katsekontaktista.

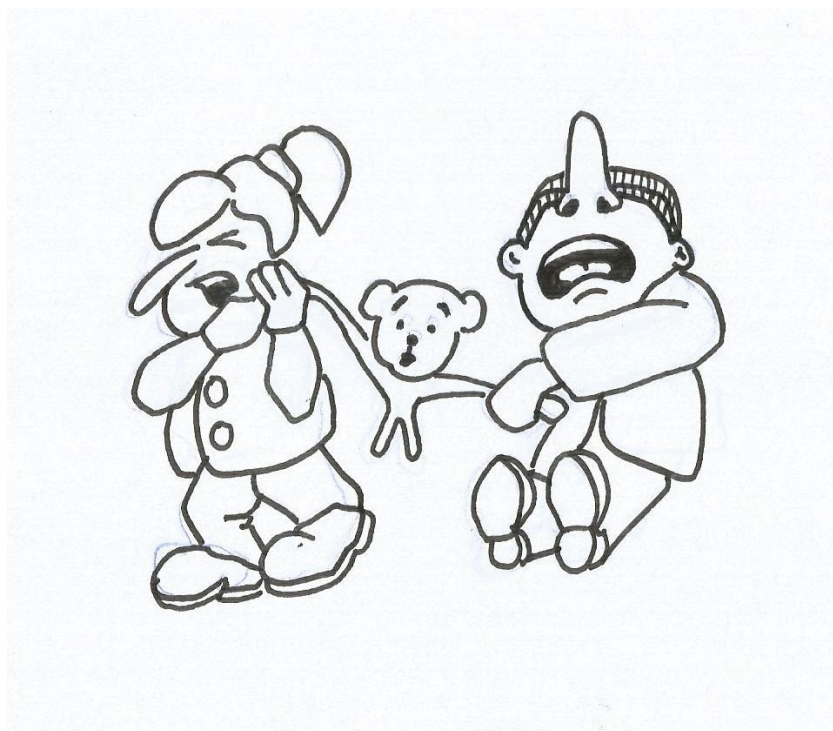
LIIAN KOVAA PUHUMINEN



Aina ei ole helppoa säilyttää sopivaa äänenvoimakkuutta. Sopivan äänenkäytön oppiminen ei ole kovin helppoa, koska erilaisissa tilanteissa vaaditaan erilaista äänenvoimakkuutta. Esimerkiksi kirjastossa tai kirkossa oletetaan, että puhutaan hiljaa, mutta urheilukatsomossa on pakko puhua kovempaa, jotta tulee kuulluksi.

Jos olet epävarma siitä, puhutko liian hiljaa tai kovaa, voit kysellä ystäviltäsi tai perheeltäsi, mikä olisi sopiva äänenvoimakkuus.

JAKAMINEN



Jakaminen on tärkeä sosiaalinen taito. Se opettaa meitä olemaan ystävällisiä ja kunnioittavia toisia ihmisiä kohtaan. Jos olet valmis jakamaan tavaroitasi muiden kanssa, he arvostavat sitä ja muistavat sinut anteliaana ja mukavana ihmisenä. Kun jaat jotain sellaista, joka on sinulle tärkeää, voit antaa toisellekin mahdollisuuden nauttia siitä samalla tavalla kuin sinä.

Jos koet jakamisen hankalaksi, voit harjoitella sitä jakamalla aluksi jonkin tavaran vain pieneksi hetkeksi.

