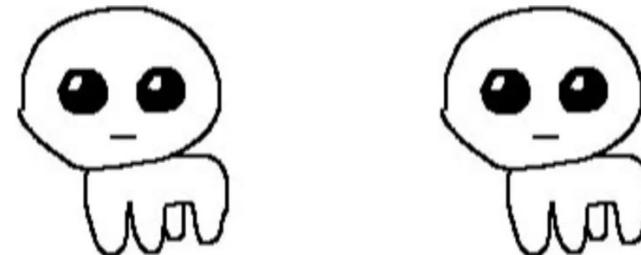

Utilizing Gaming for Supporting Autistic Friendship

Peter Jung M.Ed.





Agenda

Introduction

Understanding autistic friendship

Facilitated vs Organic Friendship

Using gaming to teach social skills and autistic friendship

Autistic social skills

About me

Autistic, diagnosed in 2021

Multiple jobs with autism

11 years of using tabletop and videogaming in therapeutic contexts, largely with neurodiverse clients

BA in Psych, M.Ed. in Curriculum Design (And on the UWT website)

Enthusiastic about creating a kinder world for autistic people, and understanding how autistic friendships form, and how to do that through autistic friendly social contexts (e.g. gaming)

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Why autistic friendship as a focus

Been running D&D social skills groups for a long time- Did a SSAP talk on this years ago

Neurotypical and autistic social skills not the same

Important to build both to help create better social outcomes as well as help learn how to survive NT world

Biggest complaint “My autistic child doesn’t have friends!”

Helps normalize autistic social traits

Important for you, providers, to think about supporting autistics in making friends in a way that works



What are social skills

Tools to engage with others effectively and form meaningful relationships and accurate communication

Social skills are things that don't come naturally, they are taught through years of experience

School, playgrounds, daycares all are oriented towards teaching neurotypical social skills, and not in a way that is accessible to autistics

Traditional model of social skills refers to masking- things like eye contact, perspective taking, teamwork, etc.

Autistic social skills are advocacy, being able to navigate each other's neurodiversity, being able to be comfortable and safe together.

Autistics have their own love languages

Autistics may need more support socially in all contexts but tend to do better with other autistics

Why it's important to rethink autistic friendship

What do we mean by friendship? What's a successful friendship? Hard to define.

Important to realize each friendship is a unique relationship between two unique people.

Strong social bonds create a support network

Support networks can form safety nets

Isolation is deeply harmful

Being desperate for approval can cause them to be taken advantage of



Understanding autistic friendships

Built different

Not easily categorized

Unique, non transferable

At higher risk to fall apart due to lack of existing scaffolding

Necessary for autistics wellbeing

Can be solely online

Shared interest/parallel play important



Why should autistics befriend other autistics/NTs

Both neurotypical and autistic friendship are super important

Neurotypical friendship can help organically teach how to interact successfully with NT people.

This isn't necessarily masking- this may be self advocacy, being able to articulate dysregulation, etc.

NT benefits from autistic friendship too

Healthy NT friendship should welcome ND traits

Autistic friendships are less stressful, may seem more like 'same wavelength.'

Lack the same rituals and norms, may have their own. The sudden "Bye."



Forming autistic friendships: Facilitated friendship

Early friendships are facilitated

Autistics may require additional structure to form friendships

Autistic centered spaces can facilitate these friendships

Good social groups can help this happen

Gaming is an excellent pathway towards structured friendship

Autistic mentoring can help



Organic friendship

Forms on its own

Based around shared interests

Special interests and the internet are your friend

Need some scaffolding, but finding structure can help





Why gaming?

High number of autistic gamers

Gaming creates a structured social activity with fixed norms

Massive variety of games out there, easy to find community

Social activity that can be done from anywhere

Personal to me

How gaming saved me





Utilizing games to teach traditional social skills

Gaming is experiencing a renaissance in the therapeutic/social skills world

I started out in Foster Care before moving to autism work

Focus on utilizing a game that is accessible to autistics to teach masking

Making masking fun by turning it into a playful sandbox instead of a training

Rewards are built into the game, powerful motivators for teamwork and communication

Perspective taking is critical, “What would your character do?”

No need for in person environments

Covid led to Discord

Moving groups online created a space for kids to interact outside of group in ways that were native to neurodiversity

An autistic co-facilitator helped manage the Discord server

Discord uses chat channels to compartmentalize conversation

Gaming functionality built in, kids could infodump at their leisure



Discord led to advocacy

Kids began sharing stories from their lives and helping each other advocate

In the span of a week, four kids in one of my groups came out of the closet

Kids would teach each other social skills through creating manuals for each other

“Autistic Joy” as a break from tragedy narratives

Through the game, bonding over autistic experiences

Advocacy led to autistic friendships

Kids became friends on their own terms

Gaming was central, COVID changed the screentime demonization

Self reports of being happy that they've been able to find friends

Friendship and growing up not lonely is incredibly important



How to facilitate autistic social skills

Realize that most social skills experiences built NT social skills, not autistic social skills

Being able to interact effectively with other autistics can come naturally, but like any type of social skill, it requires guidance and understanding that NT socialization norms may not apply

Be inclusive, welcoming, and open

Role model autism through self disclosure, sharing autistic focused media (not what you'd think), and center the autistic experience in a celebratory way.

Hire/Incorporate autistics



What are autistic social skills

Navigating each other's Neurodiversity

Being able to be Safe around each other (For all kinds of definitions of capital S Safe)

Advocating for each other

Exploring shared interest and autistic activities effectively

Autistic peer counselors/facilitators/leaders are key

Nothing about us without us

They will see things you can not

Powerful for modeling advocacy

Autistics belong as leaders in the fields of autism services

Important to see autistics in positions of power



NT and autistic social skills are both important

Understand that there is a place for both

NT skills can help with job placement, but not building a friendship that is autistic centered

Autistic social skills can build a powerful sense of community and fight loneliness

NT's benefit from befriending autistics and building 'autistic' social skills

The goal is to help them become advocates

Questions

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Thank you!

