

How to Be a Good Friend

Think about the qualities that make a good friend. A good friend is considerate, supportive, trustworthy, and fun!

Being a good friend to an autistic kid is just like being a good friend to anyone else.

There's no one guide to being a friend to an autistic kid because every person is different. Being friends with them is more than just supporting them as an autistic person, but it can be nice for your friend to know that you understand their autism and want to support them. Here are some tips on how to do that:

Be inclusive

- ▶ Autistic people may struggle with reaching out to a new friend, so invite them to eat lunch with you or hang out after school.
- ▶ Ask them questions and tell them about yourself! Social situations can be challenging for autistic people, but making sure they feel liked can help put them at ease.

Be patient

- ▶ Because they may have difficulties picking up social and nonverbal cues like gestures and facial expressions, autistic people can sometimes seem rude when they're not trying to be. Assume that they aren't trying to hurt your feelings, but don't be afraid to speak up if you feel hurt.
- ▶ If possible, let them know privately when they have said something inappropriate.

- ▶ Autistic people may need more downtime than other people, so make sure to give them space when they ask for it.
- ▶ They might talk about one topic for a long time because they aren't sure how to change the topic of conversation. If you want to talk about something else, ask your friend if they would like to hear about something you like.
- ▶ Some autistic people use communication devices, such as computers or letter boards, to speak. Don't be intimidated by these devices – they are helpful tools that function as a voice. If you are curious about how the device works, ask them or an adult.

Embrace your differences

- ▶ Autism is not a bad thing. It's a form of difference, and difference is beautiful! Celebrate the things that make your friend both different from and similar to you. Make sure that your friend knows that you wouldn't change anything about them. A great way to do this is to engage them in conversation about some of the things they love.
- ▶ Don't talk down to them, use a "baby voice", or otherwise make them feel that you see them as "less than."
- ▶ Appreciate your friend for who they are. Don't treat their autism like a "project" or act as though being friends with an autistic person is a form of charity.



Take a stand against bullying

- ▶ If your friend is being picked on, stick up for them! Don't remain silent or pass along harmful rumors. Even when they aren't around, it's important to stand up for them – even if this means standing up to your other friends.
- ▶ Sometimes, autistic people may not realize that they're being mocked or manipulated. That doesn't mean that the bullying is harmless!
- ▶ Talk with your friends about how you can address the bullying as a group or tell an adult you trust about the bullying.
- ▶ Laugh with your friend, not at them. If you think you may have accidentally hurt their feelings, check in with them. Autistic people are more likely to have been bullied in the past, so they may be more sensitive to teasing.
- ▶ Join or start a "spread the word to end the word" campaign at your school.

Let them control the conversation about their autism.

- ▶ Some people are very comfortable talking about their autism. Others aren't. Either way, telling people about their autism is their choice, so avoid telling other people unless your friend has told you that it's okay to.
- ▶ If you don't understand something that your friend does or says, it's best to ask them directly. Don't make assumptions about their actions or thoughts – just ask!
- ▶ Even though it may be hard to understand why certain textures, smells, or sounds make your friend upset, it's important to believe them when they say that something is hard for them or hurts them. At the same time, you don't need to assume something will bother them just because they're autistic.
- ▶ If your friend is nonverbal or doesn't talk much, pay attention to their body language and facial expressions to get a sense for how they feel. The more you get to know this friend, the easier it will be to read these signals!

Learn more about autism.

- ▶ There are lots of great resources about autism out there, including lots of interesting YouTube videos about what autism is and how you can support autistic people. The more you know, the easier it will be to accommodate for your friends!

Reflection Questions

- ▶ What do you value in a friend?
- ▶ What do you want your friends to understand about you?
- ▶ Why is it important to be patient with autistic friends?
- ▶ What steps could you take to be a good friend to an autistic peer?
- ▶ What is something new you've learned about autism?
- ▶ What remaining questions do you have?

