



# Social communication skills in the classroom

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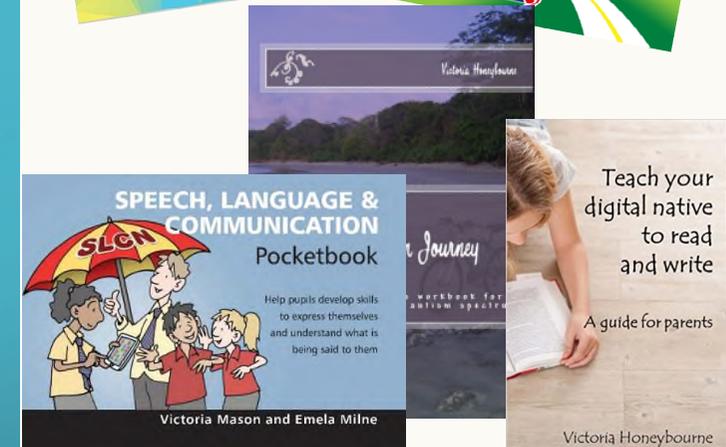
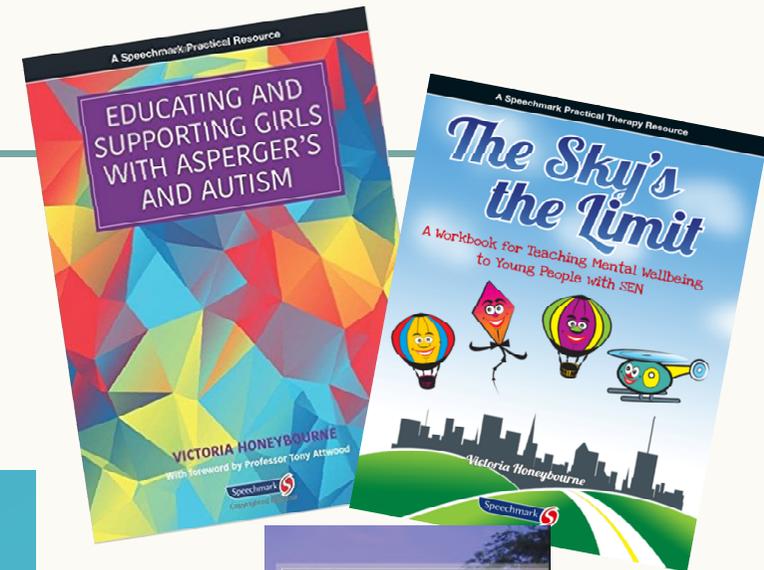
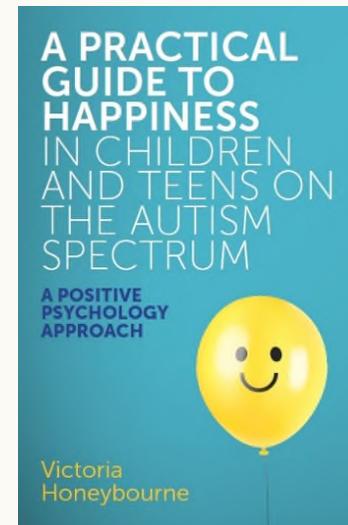
# Aims of this workshop

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- ❖ To understand what is meant by social communication skills.
- ❖ To identify some difficulties and differences in social communication skills for children and young people on the autism spectrum.
- ❖ To explore what can be done in the classroom and school setting to support children and young people on the autism spectrum with their social communication skills

# About me

- ❖ Professional background
- ❖ Personal experiences –  
Asperger's diagnosis
- ❖ Books





# What do we mean by social communication skills?

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- Social communication is complex and we are continually learning these skills through childhood, adolescence and into adulthood.
- Difficulties can occur for many different reasons.
- Individuals on the autism spectrum can have difficulty in several areas of social communication. Indeed, this difference in connecting socially is the essence of autism ('autism' comes from the Greek words 'autos' meaning 'self').

# Social Communication – What is it?

facial  
expression

posture

movement

'body language'

touch

eye contact



gestures

proximity /  
personal  
space

# Social Communication – What is it?

tone of voice

pace

how we use our  
voice

intonation

volume

stress



# Social Communication – What is it?

turn-taking

relevance

asking and  
answering  
questions



conversational  
skills

changing and  
maintaining  
topics

Giving enough  
information but  
not too much

beginning and  
ending  
conversations

# Social Communication – What is it?

politeness /  
manners

cultural  
awareness

following  
the  
'unwritten  
rules'

'social skills'

level of  
formality



appropriateness

adapting to the  
context and  
audience

# Social Communication – What is it?

Shared interests / values  
/ experiences

Conversational  
and social skills

Making  
friends

‘people skills’

assertiveness

Maintaining  
friendships

Sorting difficulties  
/ negotiating



# Social Communication – What is it?

Labelling and  
recognising emotions in  
self

Recognising  
emotions in  
others

Emotional  
intelligence

Managing  
emotions in  
others

Managing  
emotions in self

Expressing  
emotions  
appropriately

Self-  
awareness



# Possible differences for individuals on the autism spectrum

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- Eye contact
- Other non-verbal communication (hand flapping, gesture, facial expression, body language etc.)
- Sensory input may increase anxiety or be overwhelming (lighting, noise, smells, too many people)
- Can be difficult to eliminate background noise
- Understanding and using tone of voice, intonation, stress, pace
- Using and understanding language literally



# Possible differences for individuals on the autism spectrum

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- Honesty / directness (may appear abrupt or rude)
- Dynamics of group conversation (turn taking, interrupting etc)
- Relevance (e.g. speaking at length on a special interest)
- Alexithymia (recognising and understanding their own feelings)
- Theory of mind (seeing things from others' perspectives)
- Not connecting on a social level / not seeing the point
- Lack of confidence



# What's important when considering teaching social communication?

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- Aim is not to make individuals 'less autistic'
- Do not assume that good social communication skills means there is no autism, and do not assume poor skills means an individual is autistic
- Help individuals to understand what is expected and how people interact to reduce anxiety and increase their confidence to communicate with a wider range of people
- Help them to understand and accept their feelings, emotions and interpretations of situations as equally valid
- All will need something different; do not make assumptions or generalisations



# Adult communication strategies

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- Adults can make changes to their own communication and to the environment to support children and young people on the autism spectrum with their social communication
- Many of these strategies will help all pupils, not only those who are on the autism spectrum



Model what you want to see (e.g. don't use a loud voice in a quiet area)



Use a calm and neutral  
tone of voice



Don't expect eye contact if it is uncomfortable (ask pupils to face the direction of who they are listening to instead)



Allow additional  
processing time and don't  
increase pressure to  
respond



Explain the expectations  
(and the unwritten ones!)



Reduce sensory  
distractions in the  
environment when  
possible



Try not to talk too much  
and try to use fewer  
words. You don't always  
have to fill silence with  
words!



Sometimes talking 1:1 can  
be easier than in a larger  
group.



Use active listening techniques (e.g. avoid leading questions)



Try not to mislabel feelings



Accept all feelings and  
thoughts as equally valid



Structured socialising can  
be easier than  
unstructured socialising



Provide quiet spaces, keep them quiet, make it normal to use these.



Don't always force communication – some individuals will need time away from people.



Allow students to work  
with supportive peers



Have clear and consistent rules and routines. Rules need to make sense!



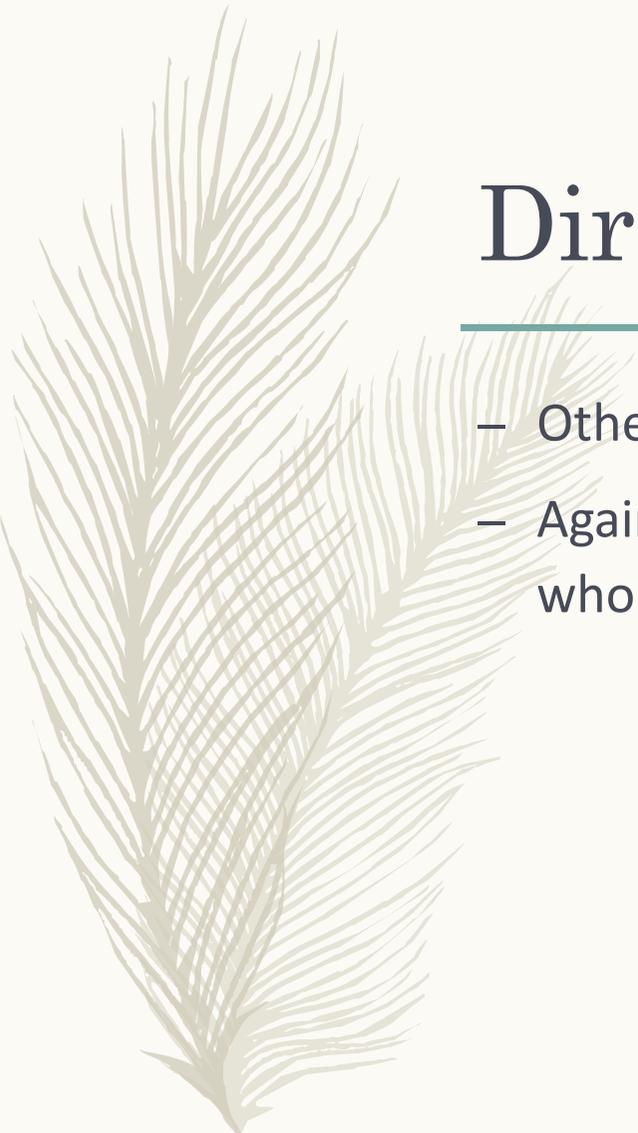
It is hard to unteach a rule  
– make it clear from the  
beginning.



Use a 'time to talk' chart for children so they can see that they can come back to a special interest.



Avoid imposing  
neurotypical values and  
views of happiness.



# Direct teaching and learning

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- Other students can benefit from being taught some skills explicitly
- Again, some of these strategies will help all pupils, not only those who are on the autism spectrum

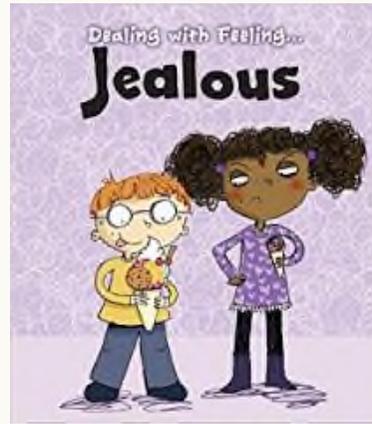
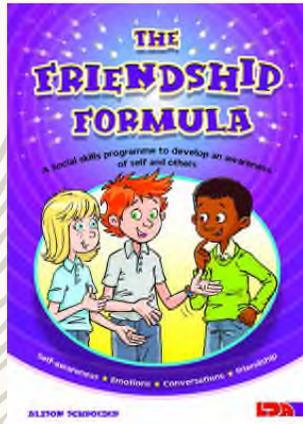


## **Group work**

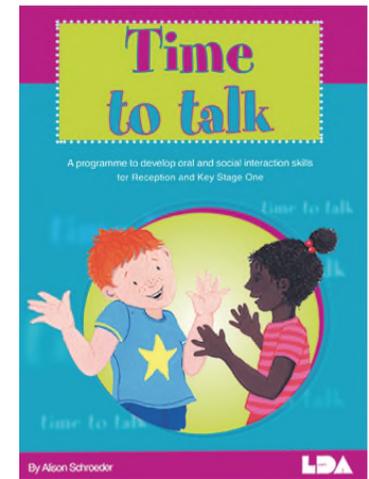
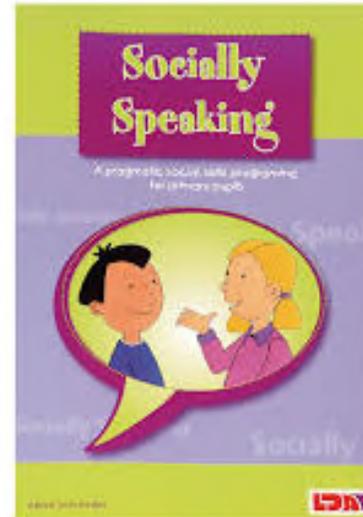
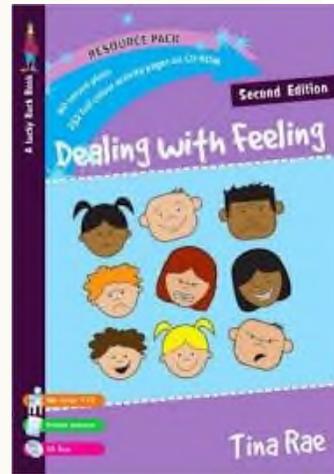
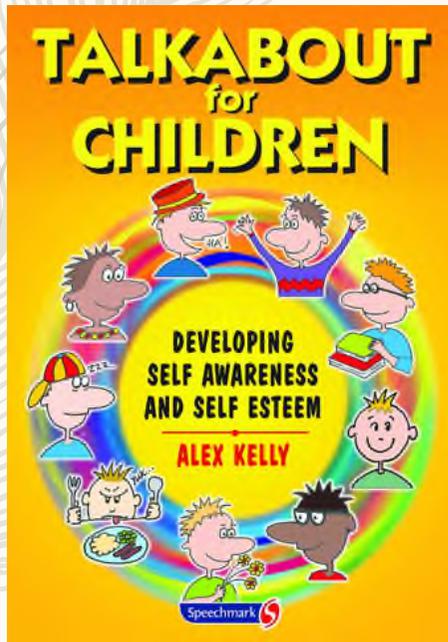
Clear expectations for group work.

A group agreement.

Reinforce regularly to all.



Social Communication Groups.





**'Social Thinking'**



# Social Stories

## Comic Strip Conversations

<p>Going to the</p>  <p>Grocery Store</p>	 <p>Today, we are going to the grocery store. First, we will get into our van and drive to the store.</p>  <p>When we get there we will get a grocery cart or basket to fill with food.</p>
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<p>School</p>  <p>I really like Jane. I want her to go to the cinema with me.</p> <p>Hi, I know you, you're Jane. I'm Tim.</p> <p>Hi! Yes, I'm Jane</p> <p>I don't know Tim. I feel worried.</p>
<p>School</p>  <p>I'm really nervous</p> <p>Will you go to the cinema with me?</p> <p>When?</p> <p>Help! He's asked this very suddenly. I don't know him</p>



## Use everyday opportunities

MFL

Drama

English

Role play

Video

Situations that occur in real life



## Try other ways

Reading

Journaling

Lego Therapy

Arts, crafts and music therapies



# Key points

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- Adults can change their communication and the environment which can really help
- Some things can be taught and learned
- There are many opportunities in everyday classroom contexts
- As always, acceptance is key. See things as differences rather than ‘wrong’.

# My books

A practical guide to happiness in children and teens on the autism spectrum: a positive psychology approach (JKP, 2018) 10% DISCOUNT CODE (Y17) – ORDER JKP.COM

Teach your digital native to read and write: a guide for parents (2017)

Educating and supporting girls with Asperger's and Autism (Speechmark, 2016)

Your Autism Journey: A self-exploration workbook for young women on the autism spectrum (2016)

The Sky's The Limit: A workbook for teaching mental wellbeing to young people with SEN (Speechmark, 2015)

The Speech, Language and Communication Pocketbook (Teachers' Pocketbooks, 2014)

