

Social Communication/Autism Spotlight on: School-Age Children



COMMUNICATION
ACROSS THE LIFESPAN

Better Hearing & Speech Month

School-age children generally have mastered much of what is considered social communication—knowing how to have a conversation with others, relate to their peers, and use appropriate language depending on the listener and setting, among other skills. However, some kids struggle with social interactions in school. This may be due to a *social communication disorder* or *autism spectrum disorder*.

Social communication includes three major skills:

1. **Using language** for different reasons, such as greeting (saying “hello” or “good-bye”), informing (“I’m going to get a cookie”), or demanding (“Get me a cookie now”).
2. **Changing language** for the listener or situation, such as talking differently to a baby than to an adult—or talking differently on a playground than in a classroom.
3. **Following rules** for conversation or storytelling, such as taking turns when talking, staying on topic, knowing how close to stand to someone, making eye contact, and using gestures.

Children with social communication problems may say the wrong thing or act the wrong way when talking (such as laughing at inappropriate times). Or they may tell stories that do not make sense—or use language in limited ways. Although these skills evolve throughout childhood, by the time they reach school, children should have a good handle on most of them.

Social Communication Skills in Elementary-Age Children (5–11 Years) Include:

- Plays games and sports with other children
- Expresses opinions
- Understands figures of speech or “hidden” meanings, like “it’s a piece of cake”
- Understands other people’s facial expressions and body language
- Cares about other people’s thoughts and feelings

Social Communication Skills in Teens and Young Adults (12+ Years) Include:

- Takes part in group activities, like classroom projects, school clubs, or team sports
- Uses facial expressions and body language to fit the conversation
- Understands another person’s opinion
- Tells or writes creative and detailed stories
- Understands and uses humor when talking and writing

Social Communication Disorder Versus Autism Spectrum Disorder: All children with autism spectrum disorder have difficulties with social communication, but a child can have a social communication disorder without having autism. Autism is characterized by social communication problems *in addition to* restricted, repetitive behaviors such as flapping arms, focusing more on objects than people, or saying the same phrase repeatedly. Children with social communication problems or autism also may have other language disorders such as problems with vocabulary, grammar, reading, or writing.

Getting Help: Speech-language pathologists can help children develop the language, social, and academic skills they need to reach their full potential. Parents with concerns can ask their school for an evaluation (qualifying children have a right to services in schools, under federal law) or seek a private speech-language pathologist.



Speech-language pathologists can help!

Learn more at www.asha.org/public.



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