



Student Wellbeing Hub

Developing positive
relationships and
empathy

Module 2
Years 7-8

Teaching resource for students
with autism

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Introduction

This resource is designed to support teachers of students with autism. It aims to help you as a teacher to understand some of the strengths and challenges that this diverse cohort of students brings to the topic. The core audience is teachers who work in mainstream schools rather than special schools.

The resource includes background information, links to resources designed for teacher use and resources that can be used with students.

The three main areas that this module covers are:

1. the unwritten rules of friendships and interpersonal interactions
2. understanding and awareness of feelings and emotions, including the difference between pleasant and unpleasant emotions and feelings in self and others
3. developing and being able to use pro-social skills, including responding to rejection in the school context.

Australian curriculum

Achievement standard links:

- ✓ By the end of Year 8, students evaluate strategies and resources to manage changes and transitions and investigate their impact on identities.
- ✓ They evaluate the impact on wellbeing of relationships and valuing diversity.
- ✓ They analyse factors that influence emotional responses.
- ✓ They investigate strategies and practices that enhance their own, others' and community health, safety and wellbeing.
- ✓ They apply personal and social skills to establish and maintain respectful relationships and promote safety, fair play and inclusivity.
- ✓ They demonstrate skills to make informed decisions, and propose and implement actions that promote their own and others' health, safety and wellbeing.

Unwritten rules of friendships and interpersonal interactions

This section of the module covers the unwritten rules of friendships and interpersonal interactions. The activities in this section are designed to help students with autism to develop their socio-emotional skills.

Students at this age are experiencing rapid hormonal and physical changes to their bodies. At the same time, they are changing the way that they interact with others and what they find interesting to do and talk about. For students on the autism spectrum, this age can be particularly difficult as socio-emotional skill gaps between them and their typically developing peers can become more apparent. This can result in students losing their friendship groups and struggling to understand the new social hierarchies and developing sexuality and relationship changes within their classmates.

Transitioning from primary to secondary school

The unwritten rule of friendships and interpersonal interactions change significantly from the primary school context to secondary school. Where a student was used to being left alone in the yard at recess playing with their toy dog, they may find that secondary school students are not so understanding. In addition, without explicit instruction, young people with autism can commit social mistakes that can have catastrophic consequences. For example, without an understanding of healthy and unhealthy interpersonal relationships, students with autism are at serious risk of being taken advantage of, or of unintentionally offending others.

Having conversations with students

It can be difficult to have conversations about positive/healthy friendships versus toxic/negative/unhealthy interactions. Students may reveal some challenging experiences during these conversations.

It can be challenging for educators to try to help young people work out how to manage interpersonal relationships if they currently experience or witness abuse in the home. Unless healthy norms are discussed and established, young people with autism growing up in abusive situations may believe that abuse is normal.

Teachers have an opportunity to challenge this, changing life outcomes. Referrals to child and adolescent mental health services may be required to provide psychological support in these situations.



It is important to follow mandatory reporting procedures and to discuss concerns with leadership to ensure students receive the support and guidance that they require. Where students live in less than optimal situations, this can become very apparent during this module.

Using real-life contexts

As it is very difficult for students with autism to apply new knowledge and skills, it is important that real-life contexts are used for teaching, such as analysing actual situations from school or the community. However, this can pose ethical issues in some situations, so books and visual media can also be used to good effect.

Using books or videos

Using books, movies, sitcoms or other media that your students are familiar with is one of the most productive ways of introducing the hidden curricula behind friendships and interpersonal interactions. Both positive/healthy and toxic/unhealthy interactions should be analysed. This helps students to not only know what not to do or put up with, but what to do or expect in its place.

If you would like to introduce this with a very obvious example, you could watch [FriendSheep¹](#) with the students. In this short cartoon, a hungry wolf takes a job in a building of sheep.

Discussion points:

- How was the wolf's friend trying to help him when the cupboard of dog food ran out?
- What could the wolf have done differently, before getting in the lift/elevator?

For a more nuanced look at meeting new people and making friends, a short video from UP, [Making friends²](#), will set the scene for a discussion on what happened when the two children met and how this was experienced by each child.

Discussion points:

- What emotions were the children experiencing when they first met?
- What did the little girl do and why do you think the little boy reacted how he did?
- What could she have done differently to check out if she wanted to be friends with the little boy?

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5VtARFNISH4>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wTDP-A--BhE>

- What was their shared interest?
- How do you know if you have something in common with someone?
- How can you meet/greet someone?

Friendships

Students need to understand the point of friendships and interpersonal relationships. People with autism often have a different and equally valid view of what friendships should be. Use a video clip as the basis for class discussion about how to evaluate whether a relationship is really a friendship. Use an example from the television shows that students are watching or select a clip from a series such as *The Big Bang Theory* or *Atypical*.

Discussion points:

- What makes a good friend? (Make this into a group poster/presentation.)
- What makes a bad friend/not-nice person?
- What do you want a friend to be interested in?

Students can then create their own friendship algorithm, being guided to include issues of healthy/unhealthy relationships. Make sure they include decisions about how to make friends as well as how to avoid people.

Note: Students may need to do the Teaching activity 1 activities prior to completing their friendship algorithm.

Resources



Book: *Improve your social skills* by Daniel Wendler



TedX Talk: [What being autistic taught me about being human](https://www.ted.com/talks/daniel_wendler_what_being_autistic_taught_me_about_being_human)³ by Daniel Wendler

This video contains difficult and emotive content around being bullied, but also clear ideas on reaching out to make friends and why to do this.



Web content [9 ways to differentiate real friends and toxic friends](https://www.lifehack.org/464461/9-ways-to-differentiate-real-friends-and-toxic-friends)⁴ by Chloe Chong

The content on this webpage can be shared with students visually or verbally.

³ https://www.ted.com/talks/daniel_wendler_what_being_autistic_taught_me_about_being_human

⁴ <https://www.lifehack.org/464461/9-ways-to-differentiate-real-friends-and-toxic-friends>

Teaching activity 1: Healthy versus unhealthy friendship behaviours

Option 1: Print out the following two pages of cards and have students sort them into healthy friendship behaviours and unhealthy friendship behaviours.

 <p>Celebrate your success</p>	 <p>Get jealous of your success</p>	 <p>Give you alone time</p>	 <p>Want all of your time</p>	 <p>Are caring and empathetic</p>	 <p>Judge and criticise you</p>
 <p>Respect you and value you</p>	 <p>Get angry with you a lot</p>	 <p>Can accept difference</p>	 <p>Always need to be right</p>	 <p>Doubt everything you say</p>	 <p>Believe your words</p>





Contact you to check in



Contact you when they want something



Accept you as you are



Try to change and control you



Let you have other friends



Don't want you to have other friends



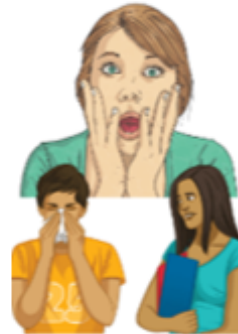
Respect your privacy



Tell other people your secrets



Supports you



Puts you down



Shares with you

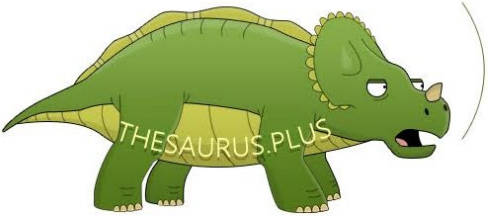



Asks for your money or your things



Option 2: Characteristics of friends

Ask students to complete the following table with words and/or pictures

<h3>Characteristics of real friends</h3> <p>synonyms for empathetic: empathic, sympathetic, sensitive, compassionate, understanding, feeling, responsive, commiserative, warm, vicarious</p>  <p>Image: Thesaurus.plus</p>	<h3>Characteristics of toxic friends (who are NOT real friends)</h3> <p>what are other words for hurtful?</p> <p>injurious, harmful, deleterious, detrimental, pernicious, bad, destructive, painful, damaging, mischievous</p>  <p>Image: Thesaurus.plus</p>
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Understanding and awareness of feelings and emotions

This section of the module is about understanding and awareness of feelings and emotions, including the difference between pleasant and unpleasant emotions and feelings in self and others.

Interoception

Many people with autism have a thinking style where they feel that what they are currently experiencing is going to last forever ('now is forever' thinking). This can make experiencing unpleasant emotions incredibly difficult and may be one of the reasons why some students with autism can present with such intense emotions. It is important that students develop an awareness that emotions do not last forever, that emotions are not only changeable, but that they themselves can shift their own emotions.

One of the ways to do this is by improving their interoceptive awareness. Another way is by improving their confidence and competence in responding helpfully to their own feelings and emotions, whether pleasant or unpleasant.

Students can undertake Teaching activity 2 on the next page to improve their interoception. It can be also useful frequently to reinforce that everything changes. Do this through discussion and observation of things like ice melting, hot drinks cooling, tadpoles growing into frogs and the weather.

Other useful, free resources for improving interoception include:

- [Interoception 301 activity guide](#)⁵ (Department for Education, South Australia)
- [Interoception, feelings, behaviour playlist](#)⁶ (Healthy Possibilities YouTube channel)
- [Star Wars yoga poses blog post](#)⁷ (27 fun poses, includes free downloadable PDF)

⁵ <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/sites/default/files/interoception-301-activity-guide.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLXTC2Uqaw5-0lh46oXp0BWIHQOXDdL1vU>

⁷ <https://bookretreats.com/blog/darth-vader-does-yoga-27-star-wars-yoga-poses/>

Teaching activity 2: Interoception

Sometimes when we hold emotional tension in our body we can experience it as physical tension.

Big emotions



1. Think about which muscles in your body get tight when you are experiencing **big emotions**.
2. Design an interoception activity to tense and relax the muscles in that body part. Remember that you can stretch and relax muscles or tense and relax muscles.
3. Draw or write description of your activity.

Sympathetic nervous system overload

Sometimes when we hold emotional tension in our body we can experience this as physical tension.



1. Think about which muscles in your body get tense when you are experiencing **sympathetic nervous system overload** (panic zone/survival behaviours).
2. Design an interoception activity to tense and relax the muscles in that body part. Don't forget you can stretch and relax muscles or tighten and relax muscles.
3. Draw or write description of your activity in the template below.

Worksheet: Interoception

“ When I am experiencing big emotions, I can do things to feel better myself.
Other people can also help me to feel better.

My favourite interoception activity will help me by calming my brain down and getting me ready to learn.

To feel better I need to:



and then do this interoception activity:

Sorting feelings and emotions

Emotions and feelings can be experienced as pleasant, unpleasant or neither (neutral). Some change depending on circumstances. For example, it may be neutral to feel hungry, but if you get really hungry it could become unpleasant.

Teaching activity 3: Feelings and emotions

This activity helps students to understand that different feelings and emotions can be unpleasant, pleasant or neutral and to identify which category various emotions and feelings fit into.



First, show students the video [Feelings and emotions vocabulary](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7uY2HrQ9qQ8).⁸

Next, provide them with cut-out emotion cards on the next page. Ask students to compare the pictures with depictions of the emotions/feelings. Then ask them to sort the pictures into the three categories:

1. pleasant feelings and emotions
2. unpleasant feelings and emotions
3. neutral feelings and emotions.

Ask them to explain why they chose each category. Are there some emotions that could be either pleasant or unpleasant depending on variables? If so, which ones and why?

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7uY2HrQ9qQ8>

Feelings and emotions cue cards

happy



sad



upset



excited



afraid



brave



amused



angry



furious



ashamed



bored



cold



hot



confused



disappointed



tired



exhausted



hungry



thirsty



surprised



nervous



proud



puzzled



relaxed



sick



sleepy



thoughtful



worried



shy



kind



malicious



jealous



overwhelmed



shocked



guilty



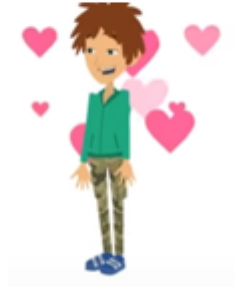
scared



content



in love



astonished



embarrassed



Teaching activity 4: Responding helpfully to feelings and emotions

Using the cue cards from Teaching activity 3, discuss how students can respond helpfully to each individual feeling or emotion. This discussion should encompass both how to respond helpfully to their own experience of that emotion or feeling and how to respond helpfully to others who appear to be experiencing that emotion or feeling.

Following on from that discussion, as a group, create a book, poster or slide presentation to record this information. Share the recorded information with the students as needed.

Example presentation slides for 'sad'

RESPONDING TO SAD – IN MYSELF

- I can remind myself it is ok to be sad, I won't be sad forever
- I can play my favourite music, this music makes me happy
- I can read a book I like, this book distracts me
- I can tell someone why I am sad, sharing unpleasant emotions can help me to feel in control of my emotions




Image: [Aliyah Jamous](#) on [Unsplash](#)

RESPONDING TO SAD – IN OTHERS

- I can ask my friend if he wants to watch a movie with me if he is sad
- I can sit near my sister and ask "are you ok?"
- I can hug my mum if she is sad
- I can give my poppa a tissue if he is crying



Example presentation slides for 'hungry'

RESPONDING TO HUNGRY – IN MYSELF

- I can eat a snack
- I can check if it is nearly meal time, and it is ok to wait for a little bit before I eat
- I can eat my lunch



RESPONDING TO HUNGRY – IN OTHERS

- I can remind my Dad to eat if he is hungry
- I can give my friend an apple to eat if they are hungry
- I can make a meal for my little sister if she is hungry



Recognising big emotions and survival behaviours in themselves and others

It can be useful for students to develop an understanding of how other people present for a range of emotions.

People with autism may struggle to notice and understand body language, tone of voice and facial expressions. They may however sense strong emotions in others and do things like cry when someone else is crying, or become highly anxious when a classmate is anxious.

One of the tools that may be helpful is a regulation scale. The students could compare their regulation scales, focusing on what body signals they experience and how they appear in 'big emotions'.

Teaching activity 5: Regulation scales

Regulation scales can be helpful tool for students. The next two pages contain regulation scale templates for 'big emotion zones' and 'panic zones'. Ask students to complete each template and then compare their regulation scales, focusing on what body signals they experience and how they appear in 'big emotions'.

Once students have evaluated how to respond helpfully to big emotions and panic-zone behaviour in others, role-play each scenario to build confidence in preparation for actual situations.



Note: If the students have already completed regulation scales in Module 1, they can share and compare these.

Big emotions zone



Sympathetic nervous system dominant

Why are you in the big emotions zone?

How does your body feel?

--	--

Panic zone



Sympathetic nervous system overload

Why do you get in the panic zone?

How does your body feel?

Developing and being able to use pro-social skills

This section of the module is about developing and being able to use pro-social skills, including responding to rejection in the school context.

Students with autism are able to use pro-social skills well when they understand what they are and when to use them. For example, simple etiquette, such as saying 'please' and 'thank you' (or signing or using AAC to communicate these concepts) is relatively easy to model and teach. Being proactively helpful is more difficult as it requires a much higher level of contextual awareness.



The short cartoon [Mr Indifferent](#)⁹ by Aryasb Feiz illustrates behaviours that are initially non-interactive and then replays each situation, showing helpful or pro-social ways of interacting.

Watch this video with students and then discuss all the helpful things that Mr Indifferent did after the elderly lady held on to his arm while she was waiting to cross the road. Ask the students why they think Mr Indifferent started to help others instead of ignoring them.

Ask them to write about one of the following:

- What are some of the nice things other people do for you at home or school or elsewhere?
- What are some of the nice things you do for other people?
- What could you do to be nice to a younger student?
- What could you do to be helpful to an elderly relative?
- If someone seems upset, how could you respond?
- If you are sad, how would you like someone to help?

Responding in helpful ways to rejection in the school context

Students with autism may experience bullying at higher rates than their typically developing peers. Some of this takes the form of isolating – leaving the student with autism out of peer/group activities and conversations. This form of rejection can be particularly difficult to manage and can lead to poorer mental health outcomes for some students. Students need to be confident in their understanding of healthy versus unhealthy interactions so that they can understand that they are being treated unkindly and that this means that the 'perpetrators' are not their friends and should be avoided.

This is not say that the students have no part to play in changing the peer dynamics. Inadvertent rudeness or lack of appropriate responses to context can frustrate and annoy

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qLGNj-xrgvY>

peers. However, some peers will just simply enjoy upsetting or distressing the student with autism, hoping to provoke a big reaction. This is bullying and should be called out as such.

If rejection is not managed well, it can set up a situation where bullies deliberately target the student with autism to provoke that rejection response. This in turn can result in greater feelings of alienation, rejection and loneliness in the student with autism. The high rates of suicidal ideation in young people with autism is in part due to these feelings of alienation and in part due to the repetitive thoughts that can occur in autism. Repetitive thoughts are thoughts that loop over and over as the person tries to process or come to terms with them, and often focus on negative events or conversations. If these thoughts become stuck, they are known as ruminating thoughts, which are an indication of mental health difficulties.

Some helpful tactics in response to (or to pre-empt rejection):

- ✓ Having an upright posture with shoulders back and head held high, which is interpreted by others as confident and can minimise issues of rejection and social isolation
- ✓ Having one or more supportive, healthy friendships
- ✓ Being comfortable in yourself
- ✓ Teachers and other school-based adults being aware of a challenging, unkind and/or bullying behaviour that targets individual students with autism

How to support the student to learn to manage this rejection in a pro-social/helpful way:

1. Build up their self-esteem.
2. Help them to understand that they are not defined by the negative events in their life, but by their achievements and their responses to others.
3. Try to ensure they are eating well, maintaining hydration and doing regular physical exercise, which will all optimise wellbeing proactively.
4. Encourage them to identify their interests and find other people with the same interests in real life or online (ensure students have access to explicit cyber safety education).
5. Find peer mentors with autism who are one to three years older, to help them interpret the world and develop positive and effective social strategies.

The remaining activities in this module are designed to help students work through the above five points.

Teaching activity 6: Who am I?



Ask students to consider and answer the following questions.

Ask students to consider and answer the following questions.

How do I communicate?

What are my goals in life?

Who in my life understands me (or is trying to)?

Who in my life do I understand (or am trying to)?

What brings me joy or happiness?

What makes me angry or frustrates me?

Who can I tell when I have a problem at school?

Who can I tell when I have a problem at home?

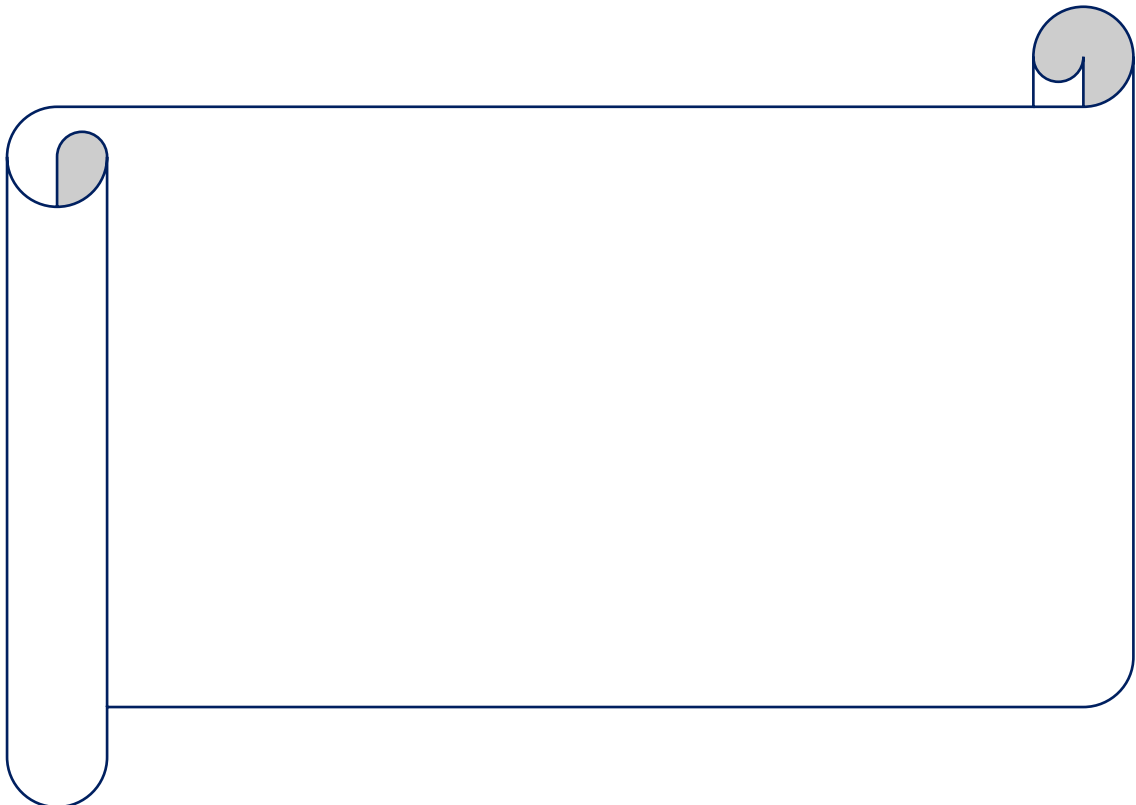
The best thing that has ever happened to me is:

Teaching activity 7: Self-esteem

Ask students to list or draw their achievements. Ask them to include everything they are good at or know a lot about:

A large, empty rectangular box with rounded corners and a vertical strip on the left side, designed for students to list or draw their achievements. The box is outlined in blue and has a light gray shadow effect on the left and top edges, giving it a 3D appearance as if it's a scroll or a piece of paper.

Ask students to follow up on their answers above. Ask: Why are these useful? What could you do in the future with these skills/knowledge?

A second large, empty rectangular box with rounded corners and a vertical strip on the left side, identical to the first one, for follow-up questions. It is also outlined in blue and has a light gray shadow effect.

Teaching activity 8: Making connections using my interests

Ask students to fill out the following table.

My interests and passions	What I could do with other people in this area of interest	Where I could interact with others in this area of interest (e.g. lunch club, local/community club or group, local library, online)

Teaching activity 9: My health action plan

Ask students to fill out the following table.

Day of the week	Exercise plan	Healthy foods I plan to eat today	How much water I plan to drink today	Fun/relaxing thing I plan to do today (after school)
Monday				
Tuesday				
Wednesday				
Thursday				
Friday				
Saturday				
Sunday				



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