

Social Skills for the Neurodivergent Child

Presented by Lisa Mortensen

Hi, everybody. Thank you for coming. I have not presented in a long time, so bear with me. My topic tonight is social skills for the neurodivergent child. We'll start out with some pointers about how we can discern between the types of behaviors that we need to help our children learn to adapt versus the types of behaviors that we need to or should maybe think about learning to accept.

From there, I'll go on to discuss some of the common mistakes that we as parents make when trying to teach our kids social skills. Then I will explain at the end, how we can be more effective helping our kids to be socially successful.

Before all that, I thought I'd tell you a little bit more about Pamela and I. We've known each other for decades. About a little more than 18 years ago, we discovered that we were both pregnant at the same time. She was expecting her youngest child, Sawyer, here on the left, who was born with Down syndrome. Sawyer also has a 24-year-old brother who's autistic, and Pamela has two other kids as well. We both have four. I was expecting my second youngest, Caleb, over there.

Caleb is a mixed bag. He's autistic, he has oppositional defiant disorder, he has OCD, he has ADHD, and he has anxiety. He has three other siblings who are all neurodivergent as well, varying diagnosis.

As a teenager, Caleb was having a really difficult time, particularly with his ODD. We started having just tons of arguments at home and at school, and every argument ended the same way. Caleb in tears, crying about how he just needed more social interaction, which broke my mama heart.

I was looking for some place where he could go and be with kids like himself, hang out, have fun, and still learn more about how to get along with them. There wasn't anything like what I was looking for. I was just graduating from my college program, and I thought, "Why can't I do this?" So looked for some ideas, found some ideas, told Pamela what I was doing, and she was all in. Thus, Spectrum Social Club was born.

Between the two of us... Well, so first of all, I'm the owner and director. Pamela is the Deputy Director. You'll be meeting with her during the breakout session, so you'll get to hear more from her. She's great. She teaches me a lot.

Together, we have about 40 plus years of combined experience parenting kids and parenting neurodivergent kids. Then we have degrees and certificates in autism and that stuff. It's there if you're interested.

To begin with, we're going to talk a little bit about this. Parents with neurodiverse kids walk a very tight line because we are the mediators between the neurodiverse community and the rest of the world. It is our job to determine which behaviors we're going to tell our kids they need to adapt to be able to make do in the world and which behaviors we're going to tell the world and ourselves to accept and make the world a bigger place for kids like ours.

That's a hard line to walk. It's hard to make those decisions. My mentor, Steph West, she's in Texas. She had 30 years of special Ed experience before she started her social club, which inspired my social club. She divides behaviors into two categories: the accept behaviors, which are those that we should accept, and the except behaviors, which are the exceptions to the rule of what we should accept.

Her rule of thumb is that the accept behaviors fall into three categories. Those are, if the behavior is going to hurt the child, if the behavior is going to cause the child to hurt somebody else, or if the behavior is going to hurt the child's ability to make and keep friends or succeed socially. Everything else is an accept behavior.

One thing that I have learned over many years is that most of the things that I feel a need to correct are usually accept behaviors. Here's an example. You guys are going to learn a lot of stuff about me and my family tonight. Caleb is 18. He's a very sweet, gentle soul, and he loves animals, and he has a ton of stuffed animals. He used to love pigs. We have like 40,000 stuffed pigs. Now he loves foxes, and his current favorite stuffed toy is this Japanese mythological fox called the kitsune that his brother gave him. He named it Cherry. It's very cute, white and red, and he carries it everywhere with him in a little draw string backpack he calls the chariot. Get it?

He's a very funny guy. But he's 18. Lately, we've been going to tour vocational programs because he's graduating soon, and we need something for the next step. He always wants to take Cherry everywhere. I struggle with that. But I've started just letting him do it and watching what happens. I have noticed that I'm the only one that seems to be uncomfortable with my 18-year-old bringing his stuffed toy with him. Everybody else is really into Cherry, "Tell me about Cherry."

We are working a little bit on some of the except behavior drivers which are asking people to pet Cherry and shoving Cherry in their face. We're working on changing that to, you can pet Cherry if you would like to. But other than that, there's no need for me to change that about him. It's part who he is, and it's beautiful.

I have learned that while sometimes it's hard for me to make that determination, if I watch other people for their cues, I can see what is making them uncomfortable, and we might maybe need to work on that, and what is perfectly fine and part of who my son is, and it's great, and it's awesome, and he has a lot to contribute.

Okay, Before we go on to talk about mistakes, I have a disclaimer to make. My oldest two were in high school when I started taking child development classes. That was rough. I went through a period of, "I am

the worst parent on the planet, and somebody should come take these people away from me." It was hard. I bet you went through the same thing.

There are absolutely no perfect parents. None. Everybody makes mistakes, and mistakes are how we learn, and that's okay. Bad parents would not be sitting here right now. Bad parents don't care about how to be better parents, right? You guys are all fantastic parents.

There's this guy that I admire. I don't know if you're familiar with Asperger Experts yet. If you're not, you probably will be at some point. Danny Raede, he is on the autism spectrum himself, and he's the founder of it. He likes to say that people... Oh, I'm on the wrong slide. "People do the best they can with the emotional capacity that they have." I've morphed that a little bit for parents. My saying is, "Parents do the best they can with the life experience and the knowledge that they have." Like that old saying, "Know better, do better."

My goal with my material tonight is not to make any of you walk out of here feeling like worse parents than you thought you were when you walked in. It is to make you feel like awesome parents who now have some more tools in their bag to work with. So no guilt allowed.

What is the biggest mistake that we as parents make when it comes to teaching social skills or anything? In my personal experience, it is teaching our kids stuff we later have to unteach them. When you have neurodivergent kids, that's hard because they are cement thinkers, which in my mind means once it's in there, it is buried in cement, and you can't get it out.

It's hard, but we have to try to be very intentional about the things that we teach our kids. The hard thing is that quite often we don't know what it is. We don't want to teach them until it's already too late. We're very good at that at my house. I have another story to tell you.

Caleb's my second youngest. When the next youngest was born, my baby was born, they're 22 months apart. Caleb was still waking up all the time in the middle of the night. I knew I could not both wake up and nurse a baby and then deal with the other one waking up, too. My husband and I had an arrangement that Caleb was his and the other one was mine in the middle of the night, which was great. My husband didn't love it, but learned to love it because he developed a really special bond with Caleb, which was great. But he liked to talk about that. He always talked about how dad and Caleb had this special relationship.

When Caleb was somewhere in the middle of elementary school, that got stuck in his head that dad loved Caleb, mom didn't. That dad was the parent that he should always go to about everything because mom didn't care. When I picked up on that, I was not happy, and I told my husband about it, and he worked very hard for quite a while to get that out of Caleb's head. Caleb and I have a great relationship now, but that's just an example of things get in there, and we don't even mean them to. So this can happen unintentionally.

So how this applies to social behavior, there's two main ways. The first thing is having different standards at home than we have in public. We all do this. I'm pretty sure all of you grew up with this to some extent or another in your house. There are things that are perfectly fine that you wouldn't do out in public. Embarrassment time.

Growing up in my house, that meant that belching out loud was an Olympic sport. My dad was very proficient at it, and he was super proud of his two daughters whenever they were able to make a good showing of it. We knew, though, that that was something that was okay at home, but we didn't do it in public.

When I started having my own family, that was just what you did, right? The Olympic belching continued at home, and I just assumed my kids would figure out that this is not how you behave in public. That did not happen with my youngest. She's 16, and we're still working on unteaching that you don't do that in public. She doesn't care. That's fine, that's her. But I would have preferred if I had not taught my child that. There you go.

At Spectrum, we teach group behavior versus alone behavior. Because there are some behaviors that are only for when you're alone. A group is any more than one person. A group could be as big as a workshop full of parents, a Colosseum full of people, or as small as one parent and one child, but it's still a group. If I had it to do all over again, I would make sure that my kids understood that group behavior was group behavior. It doesn't matter whether it's just us or if it's everybody, because that way you don't have to go back and unteach anything.

There's an advanced social skill, which is being able to read a group and figure out what is acceptable and is not within a group. That's a really hard skill. We work on it at Spectrum. But for us as parents at home, especially with younger kids, we just try to be as consistent as possible with the expectations between home and public. It will set them up for social success. The other mistake, this is not on you guys, this is on experts, which I'm not an expert. That is, focusing on teaching social skills and rules versus teaching social awareness. The thing about rules and skills is that they don't fit every situation. They might fit some situations, they might fit most situations, but they don't fit all.

That can create confusion for our kids, and it can backfire in their faces. I'm going to say neurodivergent kids, but especially autistic kids love rules. They love to keep them precisely, and more importantly, they love to enforce them for others. We had an experience this summer at our first summer camp. Great little guy, sweetheart. Somebody somewhere along the line taught him it was rude to point, which is one thing I don't understand that social rule, never have, but taught him it was rude to point.

Therefore, anytime anybody lifted a finger, whether it was to show someone where something was or whatever, he was in their face yelling at them that it's rude to point. That did not cause a lot of happy social interactions for that poor little guy. We started working on trying to explain to him that that might be a rule that works with your family or in certain situations, but you have to see that this group of people is fine with this, we didn't get there. It's a long, hard lesson to learn. Social rules just don't translate always.

Social awareness is our ability to assess, understand, and problem-solve social situations. Social awareness is dynamic and flexible. It allows us to be able to respond to any social situation that we're in, whether it be here or at school or at home. We can read the room because we're socially aware. Social awareness is the framework within which we use social skills. Teaching social skills without social awareness is like bringing home a piece of IKEA furniture that has all the pieces parts in the box, but no instructions. Because you've got all the stuff, but you don't have a clue what to do with it.

I love analogies. That's one way that I learned. I've got one for you, and I apologize in advance for the awful pun. But once it came into my head, it had to be used. Here you go. Imagine you had to teach an alien about shoes and wearing shoes. You could start with the shoe sole, sorry, skills, or you could teach the shoe sole awareness. So the skills would be things like knowing how to walk in stilettos, knowing how to tie your shoes, things like that. Those are great things, and you need them sometimes, but you don't need them all the time.

The awareness would be understanding what shoes are for and why we wear them, understanding that there are different kinds of shoes that work better for different types of activities, and knowing how to determine which type of shoe you need for the activity you want to do we want to do. Those are the kinds of things that underlie using the skills. It's the same thing with social skills and social awareness.

How do we help our kids develop social awareness? To understand that, I'm going to cover just a little bit of why neurodivergents struggle with social understanding. For that, we're going to have a little mini neuroscience lesson.

We neurodivergents, okay, so first of all, we'll break down the word neurodivergent. Neuro means brain. Divergent means different, right? Neurodivergents use their brain differently. What that means for us is one of the main ways that we use it differently is in the frontal lobe right here. The frontal lobe is our executive function center. Executive function is all the little things that help us to be organized and to help us socially interact, like flexible thinking, problem-solving, emotional regulation, self-control, memory, which we do use for social stuff, by the way, remembering people's names or what they like.

When you can't effectively use your executive function, understanding social awareness and being able to interact socially is a lot harder. To develop social awareness in our kids, we need to help them develop their ability to use their frontal lobe in their executive function.

We can do that by using ours to supplement theirs to begin with. The best thing I can equate it to is when you're helping a little child to walk or to dance, you put them in front of you with their feet on your feet, and you move, and they at least get the feeling of what that feels like. That's what we're going to do.

We're going to verbally walk our kids through social interactions with three keywords: notice, wonder, and think. Now, this is something that they use a lot in education. They use it in English classes when kids are reading books to try and figure out what they learn from a story they were reading. They use it in art class

when they have kids look at a piece of art to analyze what they're getting from the piece of art. They use it in science. They use it in math, they use it in history. We're going to use it socially.

When your child is having a social interaction, you're going to use the word notice to help them recognize feedback that they're getting from the social interaction. For example, I noticed that Susie stopped playing with you and walked away. Just observing that out loud to them helps them recognize it.

Then we use the word wonder to cause them to consider why that feedback happened. I wonder if Susie got frustrated because you insisted on doing everything your way. Now, you probably know the answer to that question, but for them, we're going to wonder because that causes them to wonder.

Then we're going to use the word think to help them consider options they could use to make it work out better next time. "What do you think you could do differently next time you're playing with the lot? Or next time you're playing with Susie?" Now, some kids might need a little bit more than just what do you think, so you can help them with options. The key to helping them with options is to do it in question form so that they are the ones making the decision. You're just giving them a list to choose from, like a menu. Give them several so that it's not one option. "Do you think you could do this?" "Yeah." "Okay, good." Give them options.

Another important thing is we're doing notice, wonder, and think is to keep our voices in a neutral tone. We don't want this to sound judgmental. We don't want them to feel like they have to defend themselves because then they won't have an open mind anymore. We don't want to flat out tell them, "Susie just walked away because you did this, and next time you should do this if you don't want Susie to walk away," because then they're not thinking, they're not developing the ability to process through that on their own.

The nice thing about this process is we can use it like scaffolding on a building. This is something that we talk about in education, scaffolding. It's like a building. You take away what you don't need to support what's there. You start with the notice, wonder, and think. Like I said, you can give them options first with the think stuff. As they become more capable, you can leave off the think part, go to notice and wonder.

"I noticed Susie stopped playing with you and walked away. I wonder if she got frustrated because you insisted on doing everything your way." Then, some kids might need a little prompting to start the wheels turning, so you could just do, or interesting. That might be all they need to spur them. If it's not, then you can go back to the think. But if it is, great, because then they're learning, and they're learning to use their executive function.

Then step three is you take off the wonder, and you just make the observation and let them go from there. Again, you can use that mmh, or interesting, to spur them onto the next step. "I noticed Susie stopped playing with you and walked away. Interesting." Then you leave them to it. Over time, they get better at processing through these situations.

Then, once they're good at that or better at that, that's when we can start plugging in social skills and helping them have more tools to handle the social situations. Sorry.

Okay, so in summary, we want to use consistent behavioral expectations for home and in public to help them not have to try and make those decisions on their own. We want to focus It's only on correcting behaviors that would prevent them from making friends or from getting along successfully in a social situation and not things that only bother us or maybe only bother our family.

My youngest is really picky about sounds that Caleb makes, and he makes a lot of sounds because he's always tapping, and it drives both of us crazy. But we try really hard to not bother him about it because that's us. Other people don't even notice him doing it.

Then we are going to build our child's social awareness by helping them to recognize, understand, and problem-solve through social situations using notice, wonder, and think.