

## Social Routines

When it comes to autism, the general consensus is that autism can be seen as a lack of social initiation and social reciprocity. The diagnostic criteria indicate this. In children between 1 year and 2 and a half years, we look at:

- the number of spontaneous vocalizations directed towards others
- the number of social contacts
- facial expressions directed towards others
- the ability to respond to name
- the ability to attract the attention of others
- sharing emotions and comments during interaction
- the use of gestures

Overall, the quality of the social relationship is crucial for the child's development within this context. Social interactions in the case of children with autism are almost absent. The fact that they are not present or insufficiently present, or are of poor quality, has an impact on other areas of development, and the effect is cascading.

We learn through attention to the environment AND through attention to people. During interactions, children learn about how to relate to each other and how to communicate.

Also, think about the multitude of skills that, in order to be maintained over time, generalized, and demonstrated spontaneously, need to be reinforced (at least partially) through social reinforcement.

Examples:

- a) Sharing what brings them joy/ upsets them/ hurts them
- b) Ability to spontaneously imitate behaviors of others/ versus imitation upon request
- c) Ability to communicate spontaneously, not in response to our questions or prompts
- d) Ability to solve most of the tasks given at school
- e) Self-help skills
- f) Ability to make friends

- g) Ability to turn towards others
- h) Ability to ask questions in class when they don't understand something
- i) Ability to understand nuances in a relationship
- j) Reading the other person's state
- k) Having flexibility in choosing discussion topics
- l) Adapting to a social context

Everything we do happens in a social arena, and it's challenging to navigate it when you're not interested in it and don't understand it.

We are talking about the growth of social interest, primarily defined as:

1. An exercise in paying attention to people.
2. A prerequisite that allows children to learn basic things.

But also as:

3. An experience that can make them more attentive to the overall stimuli in the environment and their complexity.
4. An experience that can awaken their preference for being in the company of others.

Social routines can lead to an increase in the interest of a child with autism in the company of adults. Social routines provide a platform that offers opportunities for interaction and the practice of spontaneous communication through facial expressions, gaze, gestures, body actions, and spoken language.

### **What are social routines?**

Social routines are not a recent invention. They have been here for hundreds of years; they are the natural way in which usually a mother or father interacts with their child from birth. We are talking about those face-to-face games that the child comes to request, and the parent repeats them, creating a routine together.

This type of interaction involves reciprocity. Typically, the adult begins by proposing a game. Then, they stop. The child sends signals to the adult to continue the game, which can be through looks, emotions, gestures, body actions, vocalizations, or words. The adult takes these signals into account and resumes the game. Then, they stop again to give the child a chance to communicate further.

The child sends a new signal to the adult. And so on, until the game ends or until one of the partners asks to stop the activity. During a social routine, no individual controls the other. Throughout the activity, the adult will leave as much space as possible for the child to communicate with them.

The child will do it at their developmental level: they may look at the adult if they are interested in continuing, approach them, watch them, turn their back, move away, show something they desire or have noticed in the environment, respond with a smile or a frown, vocalize, try to express in words what they want, or comment on what is happening.

Usually, social routines do not involve objects but are based on physical play. However, there can be exceptions. For example, objects under the control of the adult might be involved. The focus remains more on the interaction with the person than on the object.

Some examples of such activities without objects are Peek-a-Boo, Hide and Seek, Patty Cake, The Floor is Lava, What's the Time, Mr. Wolf?, Tag, Obstacle Courses, Itsy Bitsy Spider, If You're Happy and You Know It, Baby Shark, The Wheels on the Bus, Riddles, etc.

Some examples of such activities involving objects are pillow fights (where only the adult has a pillow), inflating and deflating a balloon, soap bubbles, puppet play.

### **What benefits do they bring?**

- Social routines contribute to the growth of affectivity and the exchange of emotions between adults and children. This sharing of affectivity is crucial later on for the development of behaviors related to Joint Attention. Behaviors related to Joint Attention include coordinated gazes between individuals and an object, the gesture of pointing to an object or event, and showing an object to the adult for shared attention.
- Bopp and Miranda (2011) followed children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) starting at the age of 4. They found that gestures (pointing to something of interest and showing an object of interest to a parent) predicted subsequent language understanding and production up to 5 years later.

Bopp and Miranda also discovered that "games and routines" (such as peekaboo, cherry on the cake, red light-green light, statues, hot potato) were predictive of language production over the 4 to 5-year period. This finding is not surprising, as games and routines often involve shared attention with a parent.

- This type of routine draws the child's attention to social and communicative cues coming from adults (visual contact, facial expressions, postures, physical gestures, anticipatory movements, facial expressions).
- It enhances the child's abilities to communicate by initiating, responding, or sustaining social interactions through gazes, facial expressions, gestures, sounds, and words.
- Social routines are an excellent way to practice social reciprocity as the foundation of interaction.

- Social routines are an excellent means of practicing our responsiveness as adults to children's behaviors. The better and more adults respond to children's communication attempts, the more they impact the child's development in terms of attention, initiative, persistence, and shared attention.
- Social routines are beneficial in helping children regulate their emotions, energy levels, and attention, preparing them for learning.
- During social routines, adults enhance the child's willingness to engage and play with different adults.

### **Examples of social routines**

- Girls, movies, or boys, songs or singers
- Hopscotch
- What's the time, Mr. Wolf?
- Princesses and knights
- Races
- Relays
- Rock, paper, scissors
- Pheasant
- Riddles
- The Boogeyman
- 1,2,3, stay against the wall
- Tag
- Catch
- Hide and seek
- Follow the leader
- Mirror
- Any song with choreography
- Musical chairs
- Guess the character
- Charades
- Telephone game
- Guess the number (I'm thinking of a number between..., Lower, Higher)

### **Steps in creating social routines:**

- a) Remember the games you played in your childhood.
- b) Peek into the park/nursery.
- c) Search on websites and online for game ideas.
- d) Above all, consider your child's individual characteristics.
- e) Conduct an observational investigation into your child's preferred activities. What activities does your child gravitate towards spontaneously? How does your child spend his free time? What routines does your child choose repeatedly or request? Preferences and potential rewards may be hidden here.
- f) Discover the active ingredients in the preferred activities. For each activity on the shortlist, ask yourself what makes it a favorite?

g) Once you have listed the active ingredients, invent/select social games that incorporate the specific active ingredients for your child.

## **Active Engagement and Social Routines**

At a general level, what promotes social routines is a broader concept called 'Active Engagement.' Active engagement involves what the child actively does, the concrete ways in which they participate or interact with materials or the learning context. When a child is actively engaged, they are more present and ready to learn. Being actively engaged implies a level of interest and joy that motivates one to participate in the activity.

Active engagement has been defined by Amy Wetherby and her team at Autism Navigator through eight components. Social routines are types of activities through which we aim to achieve active engagement and, implicitly, the eight components.

**How do we know that a child is actively engaged? Here are the eight components of active engagement.**

### **1. Emotional Regulation**

Is the child emotionally regulated? Can the child manage their emotions to remain available for social interaction and learning? Emotional regulation difficulties can range from being apathetic, bored, or absent to extreme enthusiasm or frustration. Children typically regulate their emotions either with adult assistance (e.g., seeking comfort from them, asking for help) or through other activities (e.g., persisting in a challenging task, seeking an alternative enjoyable activity, engaging in a different activity to stay motivated).

### **2. Productivity**

Is the child productive? Does the child participate appropriately during the activity? This involves being present, listening, and responding with anticipatory or initiating behaviors.

### **3. Social Connection**

Is the child socially connected? Is the child in the same space as the adult, aware of the adult's presence and actions? Is the child engaged in a shared experience with the adult, sharing interest? Does the child engage in reciprocal interactions?

### **4. Eye Contact**

Does the child make eye contact with the adult? Does the child look at the adult's face to fulfill needs, make requests, and share attention with others?

### **5. Response to Interaction Cues**

Does the child respond to interaction cues sent by the adult through sounds, words, gestures, or actions?

## **6. Initiation of Communication**

Does the child initiate the beginning or continuation of an activity using gestures, sounds, or words? Is communication spontaneous and used for various functions and purposes, such as fulfilling needs, attracting attention, or sharing joy and interests?

## **7. Flexibility**

Is the child flexible? Does the child demonstrate flexibility when using materials appropriately and in various ways? Can the child easily shift attention from objects to adults and back, as well as from one topic to another? Is the child open to change and not rigid in behavior?

## **8. Generation of New Ideas**

Does the child generate new ideas? Does the child come up with ideas during play, suggesting new game actions or topics?

**What do you have to do as an adult in order to promote Active Engagement in social routines?**

### **1. Position Yourself Face to Face with the Child**

Approach the child when they are not engaged in any activity (e.g., when sitting on the floor or walking through the room). Get close to them, lower yourself to their eye level, greet them, touch them gently, and suggest a new game. Before presenting your suggestion, prepare the space and remove any objects in the room that might grab their attention or compete with the toys you plan to use. When you have the child's attention and you are face to face, begin the game. Introduce the games one by one.

### **2. Follow Their Attention and Initiatives**

Continuously observe the child's state during the interaction. What are they looking at? What captures their attention? Are they apathetic? Are they very energetic? Follow their attention each time. If, during the game, something other than your actions captures their attention (e.g., someone enters the room, something falls off a shelf, they see something out the window, they play with their clothes, etc.), temporarily suspend the routine and join the child's current interest. Sometimes, all it takes is giving them some time to redirect their attention back to you. Notice to what extent they become interested in the game again, or anticipate the moment when you can resume your proposal. Adjust your state to theirs as needed (e.g., if they are apathetic, suggest more energetic games, use animation and enthusiastic expressions; if they are too agitated, suggest calmer routines).

### **3. Use Motivating Materials and Actions in Activities**

Prepare ideas for social routines in advance. When creating games, take into account the physical activities the child enjoys or their preferred stimuli (e.g., running, spinning, swinging, tickling, listening to theatrical voices, feeling suspense, being surprised, etc.). Observe which physical actions bring joy during leisure time, what makes them laugh, and what brings a smile to their face. The challenge then becomes incorporating these interests into the games, so the child is motivated to participate. How can you mediate this type of stimulation?

### **4. Propose Games at the Child's Developmental Level**

When preparing game ideas, consider not only the child's biological age but also their developmental level. What is their level of understanding? Which concepts are familiar to them? What about their play level? Do they play using cause-and-effect toys, prefer using objects for their intended function, or do they also use them with symbolic function (e.g., a pot as a car, a pencil as a magic wand, a ball as an apple)? Do they play both with objects and without props in their games (e.g., playing cops and robbers without involving any materials, playing Puppy Patrol without objects, pretending to play store without materials)? Social routine ideas will be simpler or more complex based on these details.

Equally important is to speak to the child at their developmental level (e.g., if a child spontaneously speaks with two words, we will speak with three words, if they do not speak at all, we will speak using one word, if they use four-word sentences, we will also use five-word sentences).

What should we say during the game? If there are songs, simply use the lyrics. If there are other games, choose simple words/phrases to repeat each time, like a mantra. Especially at the beginning, keep the language clean and avoid using filler words outside of those standard phrases you've chosen. It's important to present the game as cleanly as possible and leave space for the child's possible responses.

### **5. The Proposed Activities are Predictable for the Child**

Repetition is essential. The more familiar a game becomes, the more it turns into a routine, allowing the child to learn more and become a partner in the game. Repetitions enable them to understand the essence of the game and how they can contribute. If the game is short (e.g., spinning them in the air), present the game 2-3 times, then stop with an expectant look.

If the game is too long (e.g., songs, scissors-paper-rock), offer only a part (e.g., the first verse, the first four attempts), then stop with an expectant look. Try to interrupt the interaction just before a significant event (e.g., before catching them, before tickling them with your fingers, before saying "Achoo," before pretending to catch their nose), look at them, and wait. Check if the child signals whether they want you to continue or not.

Often, children initially respond by just looking at us (at most) when we stop the proposed game. Many times, children don't appear excited or interested in the vast majority of social games we present. Although in these situations, it is challenging for adults to continue presenting the games or come up with new game ideas, perseverance is necessary. For many children seemingly lacking motivation and preferring to engage in stereotypical behaviors, exposure to these games is precisely what they need. These games can become enjoyable and motivating for these children precisely because they turn into routines, becoming predictable and familiar.

Although initially, the child may show no signs of enjoyment, you can continue to present the game three times, perhaps a bit more slowly, to give them time to learn what the game involves and what to expect. After a few repetitions, the game may seem more interesting to them. However, if the child is visibly disturbed by the game (e.g., crying, avoiding physical contact, frowning, pulling back, protesting), stop and try a different routine. The goal of a social routine is to create a chain of behaviors between both partners, reinforced by social reward through interaction between the two.

Any routine is predictable when it has a clear beginning, middle, and end, as well as a sequence of steps presented in the same way. This helps the child understand what comes next and participate more effectively.

#### **6. In every activity, both partners have clearly defined roles**

The way we present the activity encourages the child to participate appropriately. This involves the child communicating, paying attention to the adult and their actions, and responding to messages. It's important not to get lost in the role of merely entertaining the child, forgetting to involve them in the process. Initially, as long as the child's attention is on the adult, even the smallest nonverbal behaviors play a role in communication. The child's actions at the beginning may be entirely unexpected and not conforming to what we think they should be, but it's essential to understand that they signal a desire to continue. Communication can be done through: looks, smiles, gestures, body actions, sounds, words, sentences.

Once the child has sent a signal, the adult delivers the continuation of the game and then stops again, waiting for another signal. Typically, it happens like this: the parent initiates, the child responds, the parent stops, the child initiates, the parent responds, then stops again, the child initiates again, the parent responds, and so on. Waiting for the child to send a signal balances the relationship. If the child hasn't shown signs yet, we simply continue the exposure. Then, we introduce short breaks and see if anything else emerges. Now, two people are actively participating in the game, each with a well-defined role. Continue the same game until the child's energy or attention begins to wane.

Therefore, the goal of the first stage is to create a chain of behaviors in which the child clearly demonstrates anticipation of what comes next (e.g., orients toward the adult, expresses positive affect, makes specific gestures, tenses up knowing they're about to be tickled).



It's crucial in this phase not to prompt the child's responses to participate optimally. This will be done later, in the second stage, after the child clearly shows that they understand the game. Only when they exhibit behaviors practically asking for the continuation of the game will we know that the child is transferring their motivation for the game onto us.

### **7. Interact based on ongoing turn-taking**

In the second stage, the emphasis is on encouraging social reciprocity and turn-taking. In the case of social routines, this involves many exchanges, and these exchanges require communication expressed through visual contact, gestures, actions, vocalizations, and words. It's essential for these exchanges to be balanced, meaning we aim to participate equally in the interaction, neither more nor less. These routines can be standalone or included during other daily activities: bath time, dressing, storytelling, meals, etc.

### **8. Promote the child's initiations, leave space, and thus create opportunities for communication**

Ideally, we should create an opportunity for communication every 5-10 seconds. To enhance initiations and spontaneity, it's crucial for us to make the necessary changes so that the child has a chance to communicate (e.g., lift an object, turn around, pause just before the expected action, give an expectant look). We then restart the game from any initiation and gently shape better response forms.

### **9. To encourage initiations, use delays (time delay) before using other prompts**

Time delay involves allowing time to pass, a silence, an interruption in the game to signal to the child that it's their turn to participate. It's essential for this pause to be playful, maintaining a positive affect throughout to signal to the child that they are encouraged to communicate. It's crucial to use these delays before other forms of assistance. This way, we give the child the opportunity to initiate. Often, children with autism wait to be asked or given precise instructions before interacting. It's important to teach them to initiate the continuation of the game, without these cues. Later, we will model fragile initiations. We must learn the art of waiting and its benefits.

### **10. Provide behavior models in interaction if needed for support**

Even if, initially, the child's initiations are very timid, the adult can make them more robust and explicit by using behavior models that the child can imitate. In other words, the adult can show the child exactly what to do (which actions, which gestures) or what to say exactly, but only if, initially, the child has signaled a desire to continue the social interaction.

### **11. Provide the necessary levels of prompts and ensure they are gradually withdrawn until the child can participate independently and fluently in the activity**

Sometimes, precisely because the child's initiatives or forms of participation are timid, we need to use various types of prompts (gestural, physical, verbal) to help the child participate more

effectively. As we practice the routine, it's important to gradually withdraw the level of support until the child can participate independently in the game. These prompts are based on the initiations already made by the child.

### **12. Use clear, necessary messages at the child's level to ensure understanding**

When giving instructions or explaining the rules of the game, use language that is accessible to the child, with a complexity that matches their level of development.

### **13. Strengthen reciprocal interaction using natural reinforcement**

During social routines, we will not use other external rewards apart from continuing the game. This is precisely why it's important to propose motivating routines for the child and observe the extent to which they ask us, in one form or another, to continue this type of interaction.

### **14. Vary the activity by providing more ideas**

Once the game becomes repetitive, add variations. Variations involve changing the steps in the game, changing locations, people, materials/ideas (e.g., instead of choosing animals as the theme for riddles, opt for characters from stories/instead of playing on the floor as if it's lava with pillows, use furniture from the house/instead of playing hide-and-seek at home, play in the park/instead of pretending the criminal stole something in the cops and robbers game, pretend the criminal ran a red light at the traffic signal). These changes teach the child to be flexible, not rigid.

### **15. Expand the activity, child's roles, and transitions**

In this stage, we can extend the routine by adding new steps to the already established chain. This gives the child the opportunity to stay engaged for longer periods and participate in new roles. We can start with very short interactions, and as the child learns to participate independently and more appropriately, we can add new components (e.g., pretending to go to the beach initially, and then expanding it by waking up, exercising, taking a shower, having breakfast, and then going to the beach).

Another way to expand the child's roles and the duration of the interaction is to add surprises to the game, sabotage various actions, do something unexpected, or make a mistake. These changes once again give the child the opportunity to communicate. Providing a wide range of variations and expansions, along with modeling from our side, will help the child come up with new ideas on their own eventually.

### **16. Model language, play, or interaction to develop communication**

The adult will provide relevant reply models, where necessary, for the child's new roles.

## **17. Continuously adjust expectations and the level of support based on the child's state**

Throughout the play, the child's state can change. It's important to check frequently how much the child continues to exhibit behaviors showing active engagement in interaction with us (e.g., emotional regulation, participation, social connection, eye contact, response to cues, initiation of communication, etc.). If any of these elements are missing, we will go back to the stage where it is a priority (for example, if the child is no longer emotionally regulated, we return to stage 1 where this is a priority/if they've forgotten how to participate effectively, we go back to stage 2 and use the necessary levels of prompts, as long as their interest in the game is still present).