

Next Steps

A series of resource guides for neurodivergent youth



Social Relationships

This guide shares simple tips to help build skills to meet new people and make connections.

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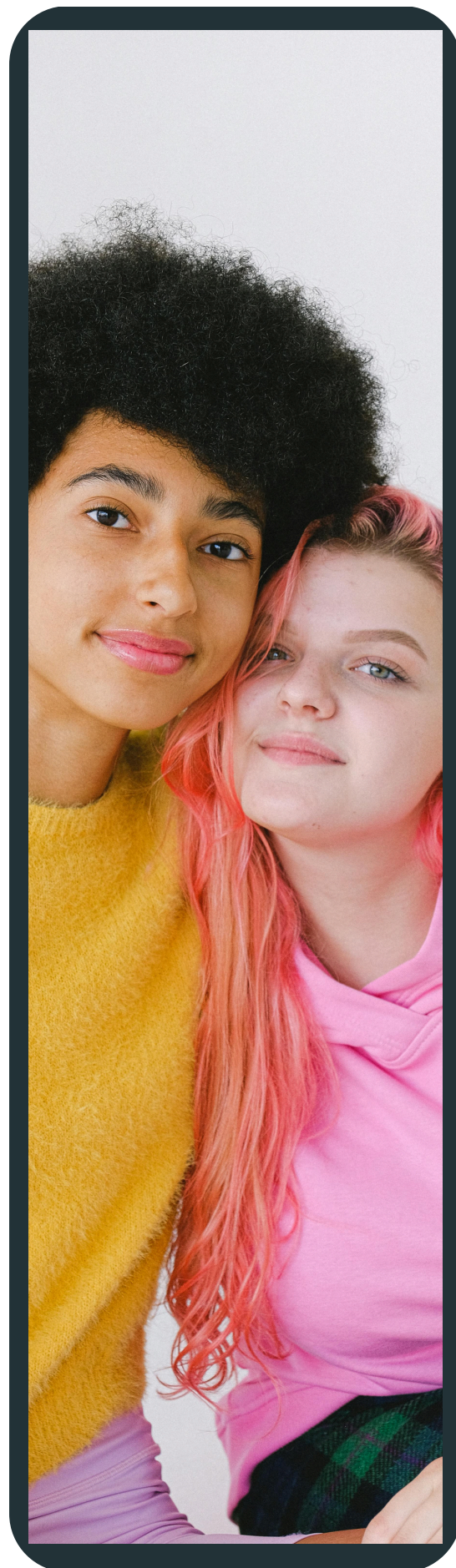
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Building connections with others can be an important part of life. For autistic people, meeting new friends (or someone to date) and finding shared interests can sometimes feel challenging. Today, there are many ways to meet new people, including through online communities. These online interactions can grow into meaningful in-person relationships that support mental wellness. In some cases, this might even lead to meeting someone you would like to date. Taking part in outings, meet-ups, or social groups can feel daunting, and beginning with online connections can make it easier to make in-person connections.

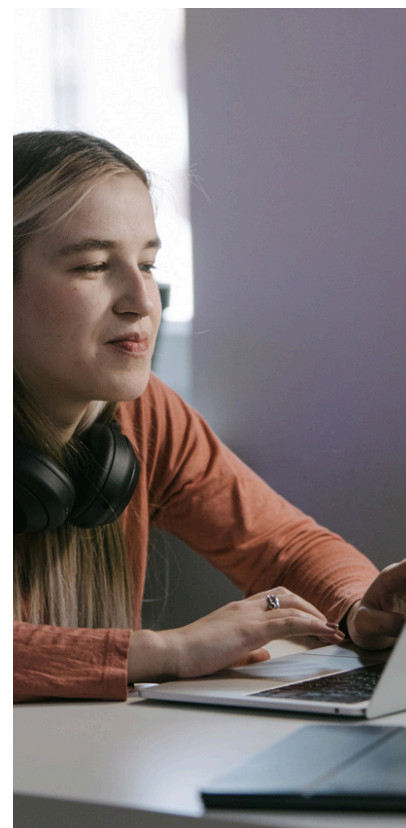
Use of Social Media to Build Community and Social Skills

For some individuals, social media can help them feel more connected, especially if face-to-face interactions sometimes feel overwhelming. It can open the doors to meeting others, making friends and finding community.

Online can be a space for individuals to hang out with others who share similar interests (like playing games together), express themselves through blogging, art, or making videos, casual flirting and just spend time in a safe, welcoming environment. Another great thing about connecting online is that it allows individuals to communicate in the way that works best for them. Whether that's through text, images, video calls, voice notes or AAC (augmentative and alternative communication), it provides additional time to think and process before responding.

Tips for building a safe online community and risks to look out for:

- There are many accessibility tools available for you to use (dark mode, closed captions, contrast modifiers to make it easier to read text, voice-to-text and text-to-voice tools, zoom settings to increase/decrease size, etc.) Here are examples of downloadable apps and extensions you can add to your browser:
 - [High Contrast - Microsoft Edge Addons](#)
 - [VoiceTypewriter Dictation Software - Type With Your Voice](#)
- Posting on social media can be a source of pressure and overwhelm. You can consider turning off comments, disabling public 'likes' count or keeping your account private to prioritize your well-being and peace of mind.
- Join moderated groups that have clear rules against harmful speech and behaviours, such as bullying, threats and hatred against others or groups of people. Moderators will manage harmful behaviour and ensure it is removed from the group.
- Not all information found online is accurate or relevant. It's important to think critically about what you see, even if it comes from someone you like or admire. Be aware of AI bots or adapted content.



- Sometimes, information shared online can also be harmful toward certain groups of people (e.g., racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic or politically abusive). If you notice this kind of behaviour, it's a strong sign that the online space or group is unsafe and best avoided.
- Social media is a very public space. While it can help you build community and connect with others, information you share can sometimes reach people who are untrustworthy or not part of your close circle. It's important to protect your personal information (e.g., your full name, address, family's address, social insurance number or financial details). Doing so helps prevent real-life problems such as identity theft, fraud and threats to your and your family's safety.
- Maintain clear boundaries. You can block/mute people or groups who make you feel uncomfortable. Certain social media platforms also allow you to mute various words and sentences.
- A promising sign you've found positive online communities is that you feel relaxed and positive after logging off, not drained or anxious. That said, any kind of social interaction might make you feel drained, and that is okay. Set the boundaries that are right for you!
- Consider setting reminders or timers to help manage your time on social media. It's important to balance your online activities with other in-person responsibilities and needs, such as self-care and hygiene, eating, spending time with friends, family, or pets and attending school or work.

For more information on online safety, see the link [Online Safety and You from Autism Ontario](#).

Inclusive Online and In-Person Communities:

- [Find a Region | Autism Ontario](#)
- <https://www.kaboose.app/>
- <https://www.hikiapp.com/>
- <https://discord.com/>
- <https://www.meetup.com/>
- [Facebook](#)
- <https://uneepi.com/>
- <https://www.mattr.social/>
- Many local organizations support autistic adults to connect, and depending on your needs, you might be able to connect with people with specific interests, such as gaming. As well, many 2SLGBTQIA+ organizations either have specific groups or chats or are neuro-affirming.

Transitioning Online Friends to In-Person

Questions to ask:

- ❓ Does this friend live in my city? Is it possible to meet them in person?
- ❓ Do they want to meet in person?
- ❓ What are some things we could do together?
- ❓ How do I make the first meeting safe?
- ❓ What is their intention, and my intention? Is this person interested in a friendship, or is there a possibility for more?
- ❓ If you are part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community and are looking for someone to date, you may want to specifically meet people in these spaces.



Friendship, Dating and Safety

[This link](#) outlines safety in friendships and how to navigate difficult social situations. The same rules can apply for meeting new people in person as they do for going on a date.

Here are some other tips you can explore and use to ensure your safety:

- Meet in a public space like a coffee shop or gaming space
- Share your location with your family or a trusted friend, and consider turning on location on your phone
- Consider bringing a friend
- Have an exit strategy if you feel uncomfortable—for example, have a friend plan to call you and pretend to ask for help, so you can say you have to leave.



Building and Maintaining Healthy Relationships

Friendships can look different for everyone. Some people have a big group of friends they hang out with often; others prefer one or two close friends they can trust. What matters most isn't how many friends you have, but that your friendships feel safe, respectful and authentic.

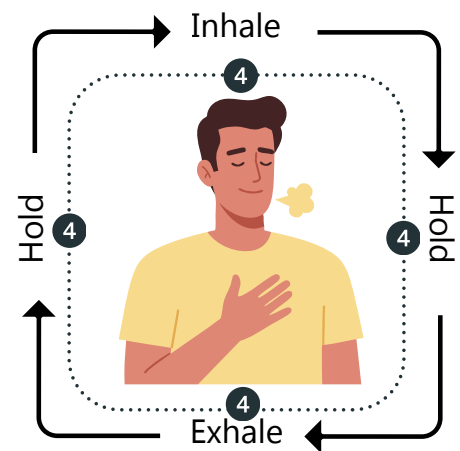
Making and keeping friends can take time and practice, especially if social situations feel unpredictable or overwhelming. All this social time can cause anxiety, so do not forget to take care of yourself.

- Practice breathing exercises such as box breathing
- Repeat a mantra to yourself, "I can do this"
- Bring a fidget or something that helps keep you calm

Understanding Boundaries and Consent

It's important to know your own preferences and your friends' preferences to navigate the friendship or relationship. This can include:

- Needing some time to yourself after having a social experience, like long conversations or meeting someone new
- Being uncomfortable with certain jokes and words
- Preferring clear, direct communication instead of sarcasm
- Preferring the use of tone indicators, like j/ to indicate one is joking
- Preferring texting or calling
- Needing a few minutes or a few hours to respond due to other commitments, needing a break, processing time or other reasons.
- Working to communicate boundaries, needs and preferences.



Being honest and communicating your boundaries can help avoid miscommunications and tension in your interactions with others. For example, you can say, "I need some alone time right now. Can we speak another time?" Similarly, if your friend needs space, it doesn't necessarily mean they don't care; it might help them be more comfortable in the friendship or relationship, too.

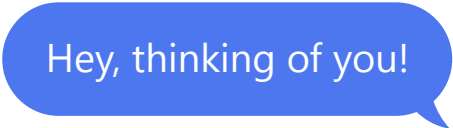
Remember, it's okay to say no!

It is very important to understand consent and to set healthy boundaries, especially if you are interested in getting into a sexual relationship with someone.

Keeping Relationships Strong

Once you've met someone you enjoy spending time with and share interests with, it's nice to find simple ways to stay in touch and keep the friendship growing. This doesn't require talking every day, everyone has different energy levels, schedules and comfort zones.

- You can send a quick message like: "Hey, how has your week been?", "Did you see the new movie coming out?", "Hey, I'm thinking of you".
- Share your interests with them, like a video you found funny, a meme, a picture of your activity or an experience you had that day.
- Set up regular hangouts, game nights, calls and other activities based on your shared interests.
 - Remembering to reach out to friends or dating partners can be a source of pressure. An option to help lighten the load of remembering to reach out is to set up a 'friendship calendar' or reminders to reach out to one friend on a specific day, if you want to.



Hey, thinking of you!

Handling Misunderstandings and Healthy Communication

Conflicts can sometimes arise in social relationships. It is important to learn how to manage them in order to maintain a healthy relationship.

- 1 Take a break from the interaction
 - Sometimes, trying to solve a misunderstanding can feel intense. If you notice signs that you are starting to feel overwhelmed, like feeling shaky, tired or needing to leave, it's okay to pause and come back later. Give yourself time to think about what happened and how you feel. You can use calming strategies such as taking deep breaths, using fidgets, a weighted blanket, swinging or other calming strategies that work for you.
 - Prioritize taking care of yourself in times of need so you can communicate better.

2 Check your understanding

- We sometimes interpret a situation differently from how it actually happened or how our friend intended it. Try to avoid assumptions by double-checking your understanding with a friend first.
 - i. You can ask them what they meant, e.g., “When you said __, did you mean __?”
 - ii. You can also ask to talk about the situation. Use the method of communication that is easiest for you in the moment—if speaking in person would be a barrier to your communication, you can also text or write it down. Writing is often a great option if you benefit from additional time to process your words.

3 Share your feelings

- When you’re ready, explain your feelings to the other person using “I” statements. For example: “I felt hurt when you didn’t answer my message,” or “I felt left out when plans changed without me knowing.”
- This helps the other person understand your point of view without feeling blamed.
- It’s okay to communicate your needs clearly! For example: “Next time, could you let me know if plans change?” or “It helps me when people are direct about how they feel.”

**4** Listen to the other person

- The other person might have had a different perspective or didn’t realize how their actions affected you. Try to listen to what they say without interrupting. You can ask questions if something isn’t clear.

5 Talk about how you can both avoid similar misunderstandings in the future. You could:

- Set clear ways to communicate (like calling instead of texting)
- Agree to check in with each other if something feels uncomfortable
- Write down what works best for each of you

Dating and Relationships

The reality is, many of the steps you take to make friends are similar to those involved in dating. However, there are some important differences to keep in mind.

- What is your intention, and that of the person you meet?
- How do you know this is more than a friend? Signs and feelings to look for:
 - Showing interest in your special interests
 - Reducing Masking
 - Using social energy to spend time with you
 - Showing signs of nervousness
 - Asking questions about past relationships or interests
 - Asking directly! Remember, you can do the same. Do not be afraid to put yourself out there.

Additional Dating and Relationship Resources

Things to keep in mind when dating

- [Autism and Sexuality](#)
- [Dating Tips for Autistic Teens and Young Adults](#)
- [Dating tips for autistic adults | Autism Speaks](#)

Navigating relationships

- [Sex-ed for Advocates - Research Autism](#)
- [Relationships 101 | All About Teenage Relationships](#)
- [Healthy Relationships For Teens | Tips & Advice to Help You](#)
- [Cheating & Breakups | What to Do When Your Relationship Ends](#)

Consent and communication

- [Relationship Communication Skills For Teenagers](#)