

## Strategies for Navigating Social Networks Super Highway

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### Tips For adolescents & young adults

#### Maintaining an online presence

- **Follow your interests.** Choosing social networking websites that you find interesting is important as it allows you to interact with individuals with similar passions.
- **Be reliable.** Consistent participation/engagement with online networks is important, especially if your interest is in developing new connections or building social relationships.
- **Be active.** Participating in online groups may require an initial time commitment to familiarize yourself with the etiquette and learn the nuances that make the group interesting.
- **Think before you post.** Be sure to practice being respectful when communicating in chat groups. Once you post something online, it is there permanently
- **Be cautious when sharing personal information.** Not everyone online is who they say they are. It is always a good idea to consult with someone you trust (e.g., parents or sibling) before sharing personal information online.
- **Take time to learn about group members.** For the first few weeks, remember to apply the 70/30 rule: 70% of what you say/post should be focused on responding to post/comments from members in the chatroom (paying particular attention to member's interests to see if they align well with your own), and 30% should be focused on sharing some of your interests.

#### Networking at school

- **Identify a peer group of interest.** Every school has a variety of different groups (e.g., gamer, comic book/anime, Drama, sports club, etc.) that can offer opportunities to expand your social network. It will be important for you to consider researching a group that matches your interests.
- **Share your ideas with others.** Every great idea starts with someone sharing it with others. If there is a group that you'd like to start at your school, consider sharing your ideas with a teacher who should be able to provide you with information and support (e.g., booking space in the school and sharing your idea with other students) on how to get started.
- **Develop strategies to reduce anxiety.** Building social networks at school can sometimes invoke anxiety and cause you to have nervous thoughts. It will be important to develop 1-2 strategies that will help to calm your anxiety when engaging with peers.
- **Practice will make you better.** It will be important for you to seek out opportunities to practice connecting with peers in order to refine/improve conversation skills and to help to reduce anxiety over time

### Networking in the community

- **Research what is available.** It is always good to review what events are being offered in your community to determine if any match your interests.
- **Assess potential barriers/solutions.** It is important to learn about any barrier (e.g., cost, distance, etc.) that could limit your ability to engage in networking. With this information, you can proactively plan to improve your chances of connecting with individuals with similar interests.
- **Avoid becoming a conversation narcissist.** The key to good conversations is not in always talking, but in good listening. Listen more than you talk provides opportunities to learn more about the other individual and increases the chances of identifying common interests that you can use to develop a deeper connection. (Remember to practice the 70/30 rule).
- **Practice being a positive influence.** Research shows that people prefer to be around individuals who have a positive attitude and who are good influences. Maintaining a positive attitude when developing a social network will greatly increase your ability to connect with others.

### Tips for Parents

- **Take time to observe and understand how your child socializes.** It is important as parents to learn what your child's 'social strengths' and areas for growth are. Depending on what behavior you see, you can then decide where to focus your attention, what social skills need building and how you can contribute. For example, if your child finds it challenging to start conversations with their peers, you can offer to help them practice at home.
- **Skip 'small talk' and focus on *Trading Information*.** Getting children to engage in small talk can often be confusing and cause anxiety. Instead, have them practice trading information. For example, having your child ask the another person about their interests or hobbies and then sharing something related about themselves (e.g., their interest/hobbies).
- **Help your child with identifying/developing their interests.** Discuss what topics may be of interest for your child. It would be helpful to explore different options/ideas until the youth finds a topic that comes naturally. This makes it easier to share with their peers.
- **Modelling positive social behaviours is very effective.** Children often learn by example and parents can be powerful role models in demonstrating prosocial behaviours. Work with your child to find time to practice social skills (e.g., talking while maintaining eye contact,) so that they will feel more comfortable socializing in different situations.
- **Eye Contact.** Individuals with autism may find it difficult to make eye contact. Looking into another person's eyes may be overwhelming, it may be confusing (e.g. they do not understand non-verbal communication), and/or it seems unnecessary. One trick to teach them is to look between the other person's eyes or on a spot slightly above their eyes.
- **Encouragement goes a long way.** It is important to encourage your child to pursue recreational activities. This will help them to feel more comfortable within social situations over time.

- **Help your child understand what is appropriate to share.** Discuss with your child what topics are appropriate to share on their own, and what needs to be approved by you first.
- **Discourage engagement with trolls/cyberbullies.** Emphasize that they can ignore or report any interaction that does not feel safe or kind. Encourage your child to access groups that actively protect members from harmful comments through restrictions and guidelines.

Additional resources for parents:

Autism Online Groups: [www.community.autism.org.uk](http://www.community.autism.org.uk)

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