



# Carol's Club

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Created by Carol Gray for Members*

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## Friendship Is Like That: The FriendShip

*A strategy to help children - especially girls - ages 8-12 - understand  
the unpredictable and often confusing seas of friendship.*

*I've often thought it a blessing that we only have to grow up once.*

- Carol Gray (and likely many other people, too).

Before we get started, I want to thank you for your communications with me and your requests. Club Members motivate me to retrieve and revive some of the best ideas from the past or create new ones to chart the future direction of Social Stories. You are an inspiration to me. Thank you for being a part of Carol's Club.

Two weeks ago, I posted "Friendship Is Like That: Social Stories about How Friendships Change" in the ClubHouse. Immediately two Club members contacted me asking if, in addition to Social Stories, I have any strategies to help children with autism understand friendship, or to teach the concepts and skills that support healthy, positive friendships. Two strategies came to mind, "The FriendShip" and "The Classmate Catalog." Considering Valentine's Day is right around the corner, it seems fitting to share both of them with you. We'll start with The FriendShip and follow-up with a description of The Classmate Catalog on February 26, 2018.

A case example is the best way to describe The FriendShip. A young lady, Laura, and I discovered it together. We filled in details as we went along. Not a lot of forethought as to our course. The FriendShip goes where you need it to go. It's different for each client. It's an open-ended activity that requires caregivers to follow the lead of the Captain, who is a

child, adolescent, or even an adult. To the best extent possible, the goal is for the Captain to safely and confidently learn to navigate his or her social seas.

### Laura's FriendShip

I worked with Laura for eight years, from age six to fourteen. She was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome; intelligent and expressive with a determined personality. Starting at about nine years of age, friends became critical to Laura; an essential top priority and also a source of frequent frustration. Laura had two good friends when I first met her, and she wanted more.

I worked with Laura for an hour each Tuesday after school. I listened as Laura reported on her friends; her happiness numerically measured by the number of recent invitations. If she had slept over at someone's house the weekend prior or a sleep-over was scheduled for the one to come, all was well. The same was true of having lunch between friends in the cafeteria or a friend on the playground. From where I sat each week, I suspected Laura's friends outnumbered her genuine friendships.

One of my first suggestions to Laura's parents was to enroll Laura in a team sport where members perform individually, like gymnastics, track, golf, or bowling. They signed her up for swimming. Laura placed well in local and

state competitions. Swimming worked for Laura - she had teammates that I came to know well through Laura's weekly reports.

In addition to swimming, Laura participated in theatre. Her school district had a theatre program with a dynamic and sensitive director. Laura excelled there, also. She played several roles in a variety of school plays, where her musical talents became apparent.

Theatre and swimming created opportunities for friendships and Laura met several new peers. To Laura, they were all her friends. She would arrive at our sessions with an increasing number of stories and reports of friends that "...were confusing." . I'd listen to a series of stories about who did - or said - what.

After a brief time, I felt that I was beginning to identify potential friends and distinguish them from not-really friends who ranged from "poor fits" to social poison for Laura. I could see it. Laura could not. Occasionally we would draw pictures of what had occurred. Laura would be thrilled by a friend's kindness and inclusion one week, only to be disappointed and confused by just the opposite at our next session.

There was a bigger picture that I wanted Laura to see. If only there were friendship glasses that could discern intent and motivation in others! Or It would be nice to give Laura two lists - 1. Genuine Friends and

2. Acquaintances - and send her on her way. I knew it wasn't my role and I knew it wouldn't work. It was my job to teach Laura to make those judgments on her own before she became an adolescent and young adult.

I wanted a strategy to help Laura discover her real friends (and those with friend potential) and distinguish them from the teammates and co-stars who would never be on her team or a trustworthy part of her social stage. It had to be something systematic that we could complete at each session. It had to be something that would provide tangible evidence, that would build the concepts and skills necessary to navigate a comfortable and safe route through middle school. Enter The FriendShip.



Laura's FriendShip was the first. It began as simple concentric circles drawn on stiff white fiberboard. If I had known that Laura would eventually name it The FriendShip, we would have drawn a simple aerial view outline in the shape of a ship, with three or four levels. I cut out brightly colored friends with Velcro backs that would allow Laura to move them from one circle to another. Laura decorated the board and identified each friend with their name using sticker letters... and glitter. Lots of glitter.

We talked about friends and the importance of feeling safe and comfortable with them. We placed Laura in the center of the circles. On the first circle, we placed friends who had been the most comfortable, not at all confusing, during the previous week. On the second circle, we placed friends who were fun but occasionally said or did things that were confusing. Laura reserved the outermost circle for friends that, while fun now and then, were often unexpectedly unkind. With all of the girls placed, we took their picture and printed it out. Below the picture, we wrote the date, followed by brief notes explaining friend placements on the circles.

Laura decided that The FriendShip needed to be our first activity each week. She'd arrive, hop up the stairs to The FriendShip, and move each girl to their respective circle. With her attention glued to the whiteboard and glittery peers, Laura was narrator to the interactions of the previous week. Talking more to her shiny friends than to me, Laura explained what each of them had done right or wrong in her eyes, and rewarded or disciplined each with their circle placement. Then we'd take a photo, print it out, date it, add a few

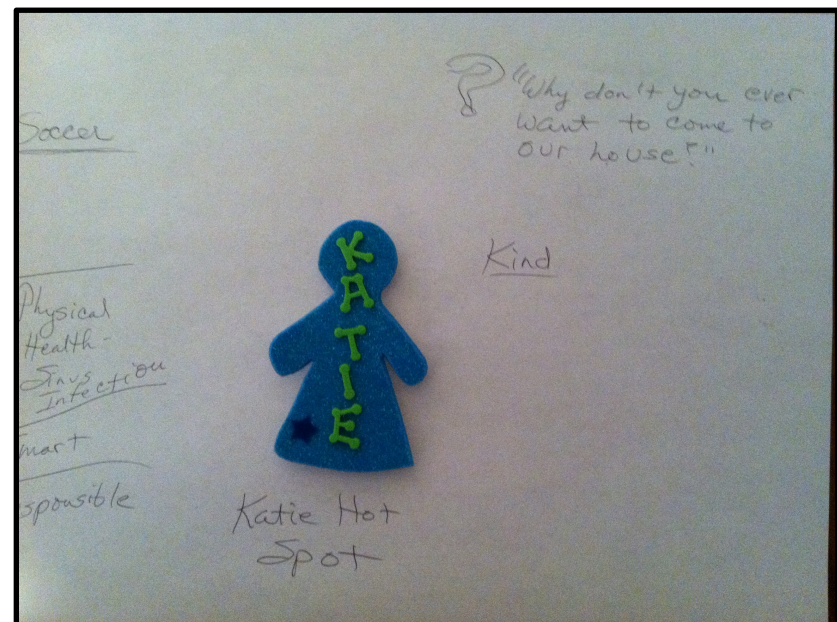
notes, and post it on the wall to the right of last week's FriendShip. The procedure was the same every week.

"The Friendship" increasingly consumed session time. There was so much to do! Laura would place each friend on a circle as always but began checking their recent past as well. She would stop, step back, and refer to the line-up of FriendShips on the wall to check on a friend's history. For example, one of Laura's friends, Haven, was in her closest circle week after week. Haven never moved. Another friend, Taylor, was often on the first circle, too, with rare visits to circle two. Laura began to refer to them as close friends, because they were almost always on the top deck of the ship, closest to her.

Most girls were second circle residents with occasional visits to the third. They were often at the same sleepovers or birthday parties, slipping to third circle placement due to statements or gestures that Laura may have misinterpreted or misunderstood. Other times, their mistakes were kids-growing-up sort of errors. Laura liked them and wanted them around. She began to refer to them as her "fun but not close" friends.

Two girls, Katie and Alaina, were circle hoppers; flipping all over that ship! First circle, third circle, second circle, second circle, first circle, third circle. I became fascinated by Katie and Alaina. Laura's conversations with them were by far the most animated. They consumed most of our time and attention on the ship - sometimes the entire hour.

One day, Laura arrived for our session quite upset. Laura flew up the steps, lifted Katie off the board, turned to me and firmly announced, "I'm throwing Katie overboard!" I wasn't expecting that. I asked Laura for a moment to think. We had never done anything that might harm one of the girls. "Laura, I can't let you do that..." I knew my comment wouldn't be well received. It wasn't. I added, "I can't let you do that...not without a life raft." I grabbed a piece of paper. "Put Katie out here, in the ocean, on this life raft."



Katie was on Laura's "Hot Spot." Laura was unhappy that Katie had never come over to play. Laura had been to Katie's house once for a sleepover and another time with the swim team. Laura would ask Katie at school if she

wanted to come over, Katie would say “yes,” and refuse when Laura called to arrange a day and time. Frustrating. The tipping point was when Katie finally agreed on a day and time and failed to show up. That’s what landed Katie in the life raft amid rough seas. We interviewed Katie and then, for safety, Laura agreed to return her to the ship’s lowest deck, circle three.

The life raft became a regular part of our FriendShip activities. Each week one or two would be thrown overboard and interviewed. Katie and Alaina were life raft regulars. I could depend on them for intriguing session content.

After several months, Laura referred to Katie and Alaina as her “life jacket friends.” In other words, Laura decided she needed to wear a life jacket around them. Enter the life jacket.

It was Laura’s life jacket and she had a series of rules related to its use. Instead of throwing a friend overboard for an interview, Laura would put on the life jacket. Eventually, it was a real one from my cottage. Laura would put it on and we’d talk about Katie and Alaina - with them safely on the ship. Bottom line, Katie and Alaina were desirable as friends because they were very popular with access to many activities. Laura kept trying to befriend them in hopes of popularity by association. The life jacket helped Laura relax and keep herself safe (instead of looking out for Alaina’s and Katie’s safety on the life raft). Gradually Laura turned to her closest friends and the fun group of girls in circle two to fill her social calendar. If Alaina and Katie

happened to show up there, no problem. Laura would put on her imaginary life jacket and orient toward her first and second circle friends.



Laura navigated her FriendShip for five years. She discovered and applied valuable friendship concepts and skills; not everything she needs to know but a strong start in the right direction.



I have used the FriendShip twice since Laura. Each ship reflects the personality of its Captain in design (sometimes glitter is not required or even considered desirable!) and session content. For example, Rebecca, age twelve, had a quiet personality. Rebecca wanted friends desperately but was anxious about trying new activities (that she referred to as Ports of Call.). Her Ship began without any friends. We'd sail by Ports of Call and talk about them, but not stop. I wrote a few Social Stories to describe those that seemed to spark interest. After about six weeks, Rebecca decided to join a new chess club. That's where Jenae boarded Rebecca's FriendShip.

I last saw Laura last June when she graduated from high school. Currently, she is in the second semester of her freshman year at a local university. I think of her often - especially in the summer when I hang up her life jacket at our cottage. I hope that she is doing well.