



JENISON JOURNAL

AUTISM

Creative Ideas
in Practice

Formerly **THE MORNING NEWS** Jenison Public Schools, Jenison, MI Vol. 14 #3





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Jenison Public Schools, Jenison, Michigan USA

Fall 2002 Volume 14 Number 3

...on the horizon is FRIENDSHIP

About our cover: Our cover photo was taken on an elementary school playground by Carol Gray. She was in the process of writing a Social Story describing recess activities for a kindergarten student with autism. To illustrate the Story, Carol took photographs of children engaged in a wide variety of recess activities - for example, the sand box, monkey bars, and swings. The impromptu soccer team approached Carol and asked why she had not taken their photo. She indicated that it would be "impossible" to fit them into a single photo, as they were all spread out across the make-shift soccer field. To prove her wrong, the boys demonstrated how they could fit into a single frame - and Carol snapped the picture.



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Jenison Public Schools publishes the *Jenison Autism Journal* as a public service to encourage the free exchange of information and ideas. Articles appearing in *Jenison Autism Journal* do not necessarily reflect the official position of Jenison Public Schools and their publication does not constitute an endorsement of views which may be expressed.

Editor: Carol Gray Design Editor: Sue Jonker Karen Lind: Editor, Pen Pal Registry Logo: Janet Williams

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Welcome to the ~~MORNING NEWS~~ Jenison Autism Journal

- Carol Gray, Editor

Welcome! In response to comments that the name, *THE MORNING NEWS* didn't adequately represent what our journal is all about, we return to the new school year as the *Jenison Autism Journal: Creative Ideas in Practice*. To celebrate, this issue is several pages longer than usual. Keeping with our coverage of challenging topics, our theme for this fall 2002 issue is friendship and autism spectrum disorders (ASD).

The issue opens with *The Profile of Friendship in Asperger's Syndrome*, an article by Dr. Tony Attwood, excerpted from a new book in press. This article explores the various stages of friendship as children with Asperger's Syndrome grow.

Equipped with information regarding these unique challenges to friendship, the issue continues with a review of a new book, *The Friendship Factor*, by Kenneth H. Rubin, PhD with Andrea Thompson. Dr. Rubin's book explores the changing developmental profile of childhood friendship, its important role, with practical advice for parents. This review explores how Dr. Rubin's work can benefit all children, including those with autism spectrum disorders.

The following article, *Friendship on the Horizon: Can Social Stories Pave the Road?* demonstrates how concepts from *The Friendship Factor* may be translated into Social Stories. Based on Dr. Rubin's description of four basic steps that children follow when joining play activities (watch, listen, move closer, ease in), this article shares Social Stories and strategies that may be used to teach group entry skills to children with ASD.

Friendship on the Horizon contains an appendix, a collection of Social Stories that encourage children to *watch, listen, move closer, and ease in* when joining a group. Printed on perforated paper to allow for easy removal and placement in protective plastic sleeves, the Stories are ready to be creatively used in a home or instructional setting.

Expanding on our friendship theme is an article by Judy Williams, an elementary school counselor at Jenison Public Schools. Her article, *Empowering Children for Peaceful Playgrounds* describes a new program that provides structured games and activities to take some of the social guesswork out of recess.

Before heading out to join others at play, it's important to tie your shoes! This can be a real challenge for little people with ASD. Here's a review by a mother, Laurel Hoekman, of a resource-to-the-rescue.

Keeping in accordance with a very friendly *MORNING NEWS* tradition, the fall 2002 issue closes with the first *Jenison Autism Journal Pen Pal Registry*. Students with autism spectrum disorders are extended this continuing invitation to look through the registry for a new pen pal, or to register as a pen pal for a future issue. To date, thousands of students have participated in this fun and friendly section of our journal.

Welcome to this issue of the Jenison Autism Journal. Share it with a friend.





The Profile of Friendship Skills in Asperger's Syndrome

- Dr. Tony Attwood,
Clinical Psychologist, M.Sc., Ph.D., MAPS., AFBPsS



Editor's note: Dr. Tony Attwood is a clinical psychologist who has specialized in the area of autism for over 25 years. This experience covers the full range of expression along the autism spectrum from those who are profoundly disabled to university professors. Dr. Attwood has published several papers, chapters, and two books. His book, Asperger's Syndrome: A Guide for Parents and Professionals (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and Philadelphia, 1998) is considered a classic in the field, assisting parents and professionals throughout the world in their efforts to assist people with Asperger's Syndrome. Dr. Attwood presents several workshops internationally each year.

This article is an excerpt taken from a chapter in press. The reader is advised that it is taken from a chapter where other issues and interventions surrounding friendship and people with Asperger's Syndrome are covered in detail. Here, Dr. Attwood discusses the changing profile of friendship skills as people with Asperger's Syndrome grow, identifying many of the most common challenges they face. The staff of the Jenison Autism Journal wish to thank Dr. Attwood for permission to print this article from a draft-in-progress, as he has so graciously done many times in past issues. His work is an important and continuing guide for parents and professionals. Illustrations by Nova Development (1997-1998).

When we observe and examine the social play and friendship skills of children with Asperger's Syndrome, we first assess whether there is a delay in the conceptual stage of friendship. The child may have an overall intellectual ability within the normal range, but their conception of friendship resembles a much younger child. Indeed the natural choice of companion or friend may be someone from within their level of friendship maturity and be considerably younger than their chronological age. However, it is not simply a matter of developmental delay. While the diagnostic criteria in DSM IV, the primary diagnostic text, includes the criterion *failure to develop peer relationships appropriate to developmental level* it includes reference to a *qualitative impairment in social interaction*. Thus there are aspects that are conspicuously unusual for any of the stages. The diagnostic criteria refer to qualitative impairments in behaviour to regulate the interaction and a lack of social or emotional reciprocity. What are qualitative differences at each stage from the perspective of the child with Asperger's Syndrome and their peers?

Stage 1 The child with Asperger's Syndrome can be genuinely pleased to be left alone enjoying solitude; or their preference can be to interact with adults. The author's sister-in-law has Asperger's Syndrome and she recalls that, "...as a child, a teenager, and a young adult, I seldom got along well with my peers, preferring the company of older adults. Probably because they are likely to be more mellow in temperament and of course quieter." The child's motivation may not be to engage in social play, but to learn. Adults (and books) provide information about the world. Their peers may have little knowledge on the topic that they find interesting.



There can be a difference in perception and priorities. The child with Asperger's Syndrome can walk into a room and focus on the toys to play with rather than potential friends. Observation indicates that the child's play is constructive, but not interactive. The child's "friends" are objects. My sister-in-law recalls, "...it's easy to bestow love onto objects rather than people because although they can't love back they can't rebuke either. It is a very safe form of idolisation where no-one can get hurt."

To the child with Asperger's Syndrome social play, at this stage, can be quite unpleasant. They have difficulty coping with the noise, interruptions, new ideas of their peers and apparent chaos. They may be more tolerant and interactive in a room with just one playmate.

Children with Asperger's Syndrome have a clear end product in mind when playing with toys, but may fail to effectively communicate this to the other child, or tolerate or incorporate their suggestions, which would produce an unanticipated outcome. The child with Asperger's Syndrome wants predictability while their peers want spontaneity and variety. A description is perhaps the "Frank Sinatra approach"-My Way. The child becomes very agitated and possibly aggressive when thwarted by having to change their ideas or play to accommodate the intentions or preferences of the other child. Liane Holliday-Willey explains in her autobiography, *Pretending to Be Normal* (1999), "...the fun came from setting up and arranging things. Maybe this desire to organise things rather than play with things, is the reason I never had a great interest in my peers. They always wanted to use the things I had so carefully arranged. They would want to rearrange and redo. They did not let me control the environment" (p. 19).

The child has a clear determination to control the activity. The concepts of sharing, waiting and turn taking are not apparent in their play with peers at this stage, but it may be apparent in their interactions with adults. Their play can be considered as self-centred rather than selfish, with social play avoided to maintain control. As one young lady said, "My friends don't let me do what I want to do." They tend not to see themselves as part of a group but as an individual who prefers to relate to adults. Other children are considered as bewildering, ignorant or a nuisance. The bewilderment is due to difficulties reading the social cues of their peers. They may not read the social expressions and body language to indicate feelings that would be intuitively recognised by much younger typical children. Other children instantly recognise overt and subtle signs of anger, fear, delight and disgust, yet these signals may not be perceived or considered as factors to modify the interaction by the child with Asperger's Syndrome.

Children with Asperger's Syndrome clearly have difficulty knowing how to socialise with their peers. Their frustration can lead to aggression but it can also lead to anxiety. This can be so severe that the child develops elective mutism at school or school refusal. Programs to encourage friendship skills should be part of treatment programs for anger and anxiety management.

One of the characteristics of Asperger's Syndrome is to have a literal interpretation of the comment or request of other children. A girl with Asperger's Syndrome came home from school extremely agitated and told her mother they must pack all their belongings and move house immediately. When her mother asked why, she said that at school, a boy said, "I'm going to marry you."

When other children approach the child with Asperger's Syndrome, they see a child who does not look any different in terms of size and facial characteristics. They may be engaged in complex constructive play but when approached they may not offer the expected welcome or inclusion in the activity. The child with Asperger's Syndrome is perceived as bossy, sounding and behaving more like a teacher than a friend. Other children's attempts to become a friend "fall on deaf ears" and they may be inclined to move on and play with someone more responsive and less insular or dictatorial. The child with Asperger's Syndrome therefore misses an opportunity to use and develop the maturity of their friendship skills.

Stage 2 In stage 1 the child with Asperger's Syndrome may have limited motivation to play with other children and develop friendships. In stage 2 they can actively want to join in but lack specific abilities. They want to interact harmoniously but are not sure what to do. Sometimes they become acutely aware of a lack of friendship and become quite distressed if their naive attempts at social interaction are unsuccessful. They can develop compensatory mechanisms that range from denial and arrogance to low self-esteem and withdrawal.



Their initial myopic optimism for friendship can also turn to paranoia, especially if they fail to make the distinction between accidental and intentional acts. The research on Asperger's Syndrome has established a difficulty with Theory of Mind tasks; that is conceptualising the thoughts, feelings, knowledge and beliefs of others. Other children may recognize from the context and often knowledge of the character of the other person

whether the comment or action had benevolent or malicious intention. For example other children know when someone is teasing with friendly or unfriendly intentions. This knowledge may not be available to the child with Asperger's Syndrome.

The author has noted that such children can have limited ability for character judgements. Other children will know which children are not good role models and should be avoided. The child with Asperger's Syndrome can be somewhat naïve in character judgements and prone to be attracted to and imitate children who may not demonstrate good friendship skills.

Another aspect of this stage is a tendency to be possessive in friendships with an intensity that can eventually be intolerable to their chosen friend. They may not understand that the friend is a free agent who sometimes wants to play with other children and may refuse an invitation to play. When these situations occur the child with Asperger's Syndrome may refuse any further contact with the person whom they perceive as having broken the rigid social rule that a friend will always play with you. A child with Asperger's Syndrome said, "He can't play with me one day and then other friends another day - that wouldn't be a true friend."

They may also be intolerant of their friend's errors and quick to criticise but conversely, hate being criticised themselves. Other children are starting to learn to "think it not say it" so as not to hurt their friends feelings. At this stage, the concept of a "white lie" is a feature of friendship, but children with Asperger's Syndrome seek honesty and truth as more important than someone's feelings. They can be unaware of why their honest comment made their friend upset.

Children at this stage are playing more complex interactive games and children with Asperger's Syndrome can become exceptionally emotional if they lose. Their concept of being fair is somewhat egocentric. They may always want to win or be first, not necessarily for dominance but to know the outcome. The person hates surprises or the unknown. In competitive games, of unknown outcome, the child wants certainty.

When one considers the friendship profile of the child with Asperger's Syndrome at this stage, they are unusual in comparison to their peers in having fewer friends and often not seeking contact with friends out of school hours. Contact may be organised by parents rather than arranged spontaneously by the child.

In their attempts to make friends, the child's intentions can be misinterpreted. The author's sister-in-law explains that as a child she was "longing to make friends, when someone complimented a drawing I had done, I started giving people drawings until someone accused me of bragging - a rebuke I never forgot. I was only trying to win friendship". They are also vulnerable to exploitation, prepared to comply with requests that other children would recognise as inappropriate. They may tolerate being tormented just to have company. Sometimes they may fail to recognise that the other children are not displaying signs of friendship and are quite resistant to the suggestion that their "associates" are not genuine friends in their attitude and actions.

From the perspective of their peers, the child with Asperger's Syndrome can be unusual in other ways. In stage 2, children are starting to talk more to each other while they are playing. The choice of conversational topic can be quite unusual for the child with Asperger's Syndrome who may want to play or talk almost exclusively on some aspect of their special interest. There is a lack of reciprocity in the choice of activity or topic of conversation. They can also appear to be ill mannered or ungracious and somewhat autocratic. It is at this stage that empathy becomes recognised as an aspect of friendship and the typical child can expect words or gestures of compassion, compliments and offers of help. Observation of children with Asperger's Syndrome suggests that they may not recognise the cues or know how to respond. Their friend may perceive them as uncaring.



Stage 3 The child's problems in peer relationship can be re-enacted at home, taking on the role of antagonist with younger siblings. They may appear to be a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in behaving calmly and sociably with their peers at school but extremely autocratic and intolerant when interacting with their family. There can also be a vehement denial that they have any difficulties. When the subject of friendship is brought up at home or school the child is adamant that they have similar friendships to their peers. We do not know if this is a reflection of their lack of an accurate

perception of the nature of their peer's friendships or an attempt to convince themselves, more than others that they are successful. This denial or arrogance can be impenetrable.

Another reaction was explained by the author's sister-in-law, "The fact is, no one likes others to know their weaknesses, but with an affliction like mine, it's impossible to always avoid making a fool of yourself or looking indignant/undignified. Because I never know when the next 'fall' is going to occur, I avoid climbing up onto a "confidence horse" so to speak." At this stage the child with Asperger's Syndrome may be socially withdrawn and clinically depressed as a reaction to their insight into their difficulties with friendship. Socialising with their peers can also be exhausting. Stephen comments, "It takes all my brain power to be a friend."

During stage 3, friends are learning to constructively manage conflict, but experience has shown that children with Asperger's Syndrome have considerable difficulty with the subtle arts of persuasion, negotiation, knowing when to back down, trying another way, admitting making a mistake and making personal sacrifices for the sake of friendship. These interpersonal management skills require a comprehensive understanding of another person's thoughts and feelings. This aspect of stage 3 can be quite elusive for the person with Asperger's Syndrome.

Peers expect an allegiance to the group. For the child with Asperger's Syndrome, their allegiance is to the rules. They can be perceived as the class policeman, not a popular role with their peers. As regards to the choice of a friend, there is an expectation among their peers of choosing someone of the same sex, age and values; social conventions not readily recognised by the child with Asperger's Syndrome. He may have several friends, including girls who are kind and sociable. The friend may be considerably younger or older, or from a different cultural background. Their choice of friend may cause them to be ridiculed, as their peer group may not value their chosen friend.

From the perspective of their peers, the child with Asperger's Syndrome is "poor" in terms of the currency of friendship. S/he may not wear fashionable clothes or be interested in the popular television programs or merchandise. In return, the child with Asperger's Syndrome perceives peers as having

limited currency for his or her culture, namely knowledge. Peta, a girl who has an encyclopaedic knowledge of the weather finds other girls her age boring, as they only want to talk about magazines and make up. She wants to talk about meteorology, which is perceived as equally boring by her peers.



Stage 4 For typical teenagers this stage begins in high school and continues throughout the adult years. The difficulties encountered by someone with Asperger's Syndrome include the practical issues of finding someone with the same interests, experiences and thought processes. They can express strong feelings of loneliness and yearning to have a genuine friend. One young adult said, "It's not that I'm antisocial, it's that I don't meet many people that I like." Another characteristic can be a lack of personal hygiene and an eccentric personal appearance, which obviously has an effect on other people's perception of them. During this stage there should be an ability and fluency with self-disclosure and the concept of self. As Geoff describes, "When there is a social conversation it's like a different language." There can be real difficulty in knowing what to say and the translation and communication of the social language.

The author's experience of psychotherapy with young adults with Asperger's Syndrome indicates considerable difficulty with the concept of self and introspection. A difficulty conceptualising the thoughts and feelings of others (Theory of Mind skills) can include a difficulty verbalising their own thoughts and feelings. The different way of thinking can include an advanced method of visualisation that means in educational terms, a picture is worth a thousand words. However, as Daniel described, in his mind he has a picture but not the thousand words. The person with Asperger's Syndrome does experience emotions that would be relevant to include in a conversation, but not the vocabulary or eloquence to convey those feelings using speech.

At this stage the person with Asperger's Syndrome can become acutely aware of their problems and errors in social interaction. This can lead to anxiety and a genuine social phobia. They may seek excessive reassurance that their intention was understood and dwell on potential social errors. One young lady commented, "The worst thing about disappointing yourself is that you never forgive yourself fully."

The person can be gullible and vulnerable with regard to the misinterpretation of signals and intentions. A friendly remark or gesture may be perceived as meaning more than was intended. A friendly smile or touch during conversation could be perceived as indicating the person would like to progress to a more intimate relationship. Others would know that such actions or gestures were simply signs of an effusive personality. The person with Asperger's Syndrome can misinterpret the actions and develop an emotional attachment that progresses to a special interest in that person which may then be mis-perceived by the other as an infatuation. There can also be desperation to be included in a group, but this can be a group whose values and lifestyle can lead the person to be in conflict with the law. They can act the part, and wear the costume of a marginalised group. Members of that group realise they are not the genuine article and encourage them to break their strict adherence to their moral and legal code, knowing they are not "street wise" and more likely to be caught by the authorities.

When a friendship becomes a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship there can be a misinterpretation of the other person's feelings and body language. A young man with Asperger's Syndrome, Corey, had a girlfriend; but the relationship with the girl had ended. His mother was concerned that Corey was not reading the signals and compounding the situation by buying her expensive presents. When I explored

Corey's perception of his girlfriend's body language, he described someone who expressed the subtle signs of embarrassment. When I asked him how he thought she was feeling, he said "...sad...that's why I buy her presents, to cheer her up."

If people with Asperger's Syndrome are unsuccessful in finding a friend, they may develop a friendship with animals that accept them for who they are, whose feelings are more easily understood and unlikely to take offence. Their substitute friends and "family" can be a menagerie of animals.

At some point they may meet someone who shares some of the characteristics of Asperger's Syndrome. At last they have a friend from their own culture who understands! They are a member of their natural peer group and friendships with other individuals with Asperger's Syndrome can be remarkably successful and durable.

To the typical young adult, the person with Asperger's Syndrome can appear to be quite eccentric, requiring considerable patience and understanding. However, in return this person can be a valued friend, renowned for their knowledge, integrity and loyalty. My sister-in-law explains, "Because of the way I talk and my dislike of things that are loud, people don't always accept me or often judge me before even knowing me. If people with Asperger's find it hard to integrate into society and socialise, it could have a lot to do with discrimination on the part of others." With mutual understanding there can be genuine, reciprocal friendships, free of ignorance and discrimination.

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Nova Development (1997-1998). Art Explosion. Calabasas, CA: Nova Development Corporation.



Your help is needed with:
**The Complete Social Story
Reference & Resource Guide**

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Frequently parents and professionals contact our office in the effectiveness of respond to inquiries.

If you know of any articles, etc., although added to a master list.



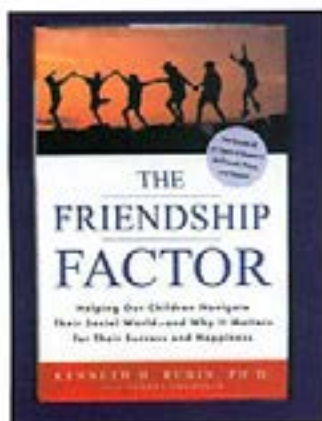
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spectrum disorders
of studies on the
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also welcome copies of the
Your contributions will be
a future issue of *The Jenison Autism Journal*.

In addition, we would like to include in the guide commercially available children's literature that meet the defining criteria of a Social Story (or come very close!). There are a growing number of children's books that accurately describe social situations from a first or third person perspective. Should you encounter any of these resources, regardless of the topic, please forward to us a complete reference.

Each person submitting information to us will receive a complimentary back issue of this newsletter. Indicate your choice if one is preferred. Please enclose your name and address. **Thank you in advance.**



The Friendship Factor: A Review

Carol Gray

Director, The Gray Center for Social Learning and Understanding
and Consultant to Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders,
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The Friendship Factor: Helping Our Children Navigate Their Social World – and Why It Matters for Their Success and Happiness

by Kenneth H. Rubin, PhD, with Andrea Thompson

A Skylight Press Book, Viking, published by Penguin Putnam Inc.,

375 Hudson Street, New York, New York, 10014 U.S.A.

ISBN 0-670-03018-X

The silhouette of children on the cover of *The Friendship Factor*, by Kenneth H. Rubin, PhD, reminds me of the cut-outs I used to make from black construction paper; a string of child shapes linked at the hands. Because they were cut after making several folds in the paper, the result was a series of *identical* child shapes. This book could not have a more fitting cover; sharing the results of over two decades of research on the changing “social silhouette” of childhood. In contrast to my cut-outs of childhood, each child in the cover photo has a unique profile, testament to the factors that have an impact upon each child’s social and emotional development. Beginning with a brief overview of this important new book, this review explores the applicability of *The Friendship Factor* to those working with children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD); children whose “social silhouettes” may be among the most unique and challenging, and whose quest for a friend may be the most difficult.

Dr. Kenneth Rubin is the Director of the Center for Children, Relationships, and Culture at the University of Maryland, and is internationally respected for his research in child development. *The Friendship Factor* is a practical, reader-friendly guide to the social connections of childhood, sharing the results of years of study. Along with other researchers his earlier studies “...bore out one of the leading theories of the time, the thesis that being with other children, and engaging in play and pretend games with them, seemed to promote a young child’s ability to think and act socially” (p. 8). An ongoing Friendship Study has explored several questions surrounding friendship, including its roots, role, and impact on child development. On these pages is a research-based and insightful tour of childhood friendship – from the exploration of a young child’s biologically-based temperament, to the descriptions of interesting child laboratory studies, to adolescence, all with consideration of the important influences of peers and parents on human development. All in all, it’s a tour with an important purpose; providing parents with the tools they need to help their own child develop social and emotional competence.

Although I reacted to *The Friendship Factor* as a parent first, responding as a professional was never far behind. In many ways, when it comes to the challenges of growing up among others, all children share striking similarities. From the common threads that struck me as I read passages in the book, to those that emerged from between the lines, I found a wonderful resource throughout for those working on behalf of children with autism spectrum disorders, for these reasons:

1. *Children with ASD are children; this book is about them, too.* Those of us working on behalf of children with ASD risk a danger of clouding recognition of a child’s temperament and personality. In the dust of our trails to gather information about autism, we have a tendency to attribute too much of what we observe in a child’s responses to his or her disorder; awarding autism undeserved and inflated influence. While reading Dr. Rubin’s descriptions of inborn social temperaments of the children in his research, I was reminded that many of the behaviors “in autism” that captivate our concern - or cause us to celebrate

• are not due to “the autism factor” at all. My experience has suggested that, more realistically, autism may be responsible only for the frequency or intensity of a child’s response. Thus, Dr. Rubin’s advice to parents, specifically his tailoring of social guidance in response to a child’s personality and temperament - is *absolutely applicable* to those of us working with children with ASD. Though we may need to modify here and there with consideration of the disorder, The Friendship Factor provides wonderful possibilities for us to explore.

2. *The face of friendship changes as children grow; knowing the details of how and why brings improved accuracy to our efforts to teach social concepts and skills to children with ASD.* The last fifteen years have introduced a wealth of strategies to build meaning into our communication with children with ASD. We have new tools and formats to make social information understandable. Social understanding groups are being formed. This has created a need for resources to guide the development of that which, in many cases, is an “intuitive curriculum” most people were never formally taught. The Friendship Factor holds a wealth of new topics for us, elements of a potentially teachable curriculum. For example, Dr. Rubin describes four steps children follow to join an activity – *watch, listen, move closer, ease in* (p. 120). This information can be translated into a series of Social Stories for children with ASD (Gray, 2002). Similarly, the discussion of popularity in The Friendship Factor may be translated into a Social Article for adolescents with ASD. In addition, improving our understanding of the many factors that impact a child’s social success expands the potential of instructional strategies like Comic Strip Conversations (Gray, 1994), that help children explore intent, emotion, and context in communication. Instead of working from what parents and professionals *may believe* to be true, or drawing from personal experience, they can now reach for The Friendship Factor to add accuracy and detail to their efforts.

3. *Understanding friendship at each age helps us to share information about autism with peers that is tailored to their own social needs.* Above all else, autism is a social-communication disorder not marked by physical abnormalities. Instead it makes itself known through unique behaviors and atypical responses to the environment. Understandably, typical children are puzzled. Their teachers search for resources to share information about autism, to help them understand why Ryan doesn’t always respond to their greeting, or why Angela insists on turning off the light as they exit the classroom. Prerequisite to knowing what to share, or how to say it, is understanding the social needs at each age. At what age do children notice children on the social periphery, and how do they interpret that? What about adolescence, peer acceptance, and ‘being different’? Is there anything we should know that might help to include our student with ASD? The Friendship Factor provides important clues to teachers sensitive to tailoring social information for the audience at hand.

Today, my copy of The Friendship Factor is a wonderful mess - sticky notes everywhere, with highlighted passages and notes in the margins! I have found something I can use on every page - the elements of a teachable social curriculum. To teach children with autism spectrum disorders, we began by exploring how they learn. To teach the skills of friendship, we must begin by understanding its changing profile throughout childhood. We have the opportunity to merge important knowledge, from both sides of the social equation, to improve the social experiences of children with autism spectrum disorders, and teach the social concepts and skills that may lead to opportunities for friendship. We have all we need to begin to factor friendship into the lives of children with ASD, placing the silhouettes of others alongside their own.

Thank you, Dr. Rubin, for an incredible new resource, and a wonderful book store discovery!

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FRIENDSHIP on the Horizon: Can Social Stories Pave the Road?

- Carol Gray, Director, The Gray Center for Social Learning & Understanding and Consultant to Students with ASD, Jenison Public Schools, Jenison, Michigan

Acknowledgement: The author wishes to thank Mr. Brian Gray, Ms. Laurel Hoekman, Ms. Sue Jonker, Ms. Karen Lind, Dr. Kenneth Rubin, and Ms. Elaine Yagiela for their helpful review and feedback on a draft of this article and Stories in the appendix. Their ideas, insight, and patience are sincerely appreciated. Illustrations by Art Explosion, Nova Development (1997-1998).

Following a disastrous trip to the grocery store, a mom wrote a Social Story to help her son, Bennett, understand the check-out procedure. Her Story patiently described the rationale, routines, and people that comprise the process of paying for groceries. During the next trip to the store, Bennett was calm and comfortable; a happy participant in the check-out line. Thrilled with the result, Bennett's mom returned home to write another Story to help Bennett join others in a play activity. Type... delete. Type... delete. Type... delete. Mom knew the people and procedures of "grocery store" like the back of her hand, but addressing this new topic caused eye-crossing confusion. As parents and professionals write Social Stories about the concepts and skills that drive friendship, frustration can result. Social Stories have provided an effective format for sharing information with children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD), but when it comes to friendship skills, we need more information. This article seeks to increase the frequency with which young children with ASD receive an affirmative reply to, "Can I play?" using new information from *The Friendship Factor*, by Kenneth H. Rubin (2002), to create Social Stories that help to pave the way.

For several years, Social Stories (Gray & Garand, 1993) have been used to teach concepts and skills to children with ASD. Since their development in 1991, the Social Story Guidelines have defined how information is presented, ensuring that the format, text, and illustrations are "autism friendly". Above all else, a Social Story is accurate; even if interpreted literally the meaning is not altered. Social Stories share ideas that others mistakenly assume "everyone knows", replacing the missing pieces in a child's understanding of an event, concept, or skill. They have addressed topics ranging from self-care and classroom routines to explaining why flags move randomly in the wind. Like Bennett's Story, the result is frequently an improvement in the child's responses, and many believe, his or her understanding of the topic. Social Stories have helped countless children and adults with ASD, earning the respect of professionals and the enthusiastic affection and gratitude of parents.

Friendships and relationships are a critical part of human development, the canvas where children learn problem solving skills, emotional regulation, and right versus wrong. As they grow, this "social mural" becomes more advanced with the continual addition of social detail and maturing insight. From the time a child is first diagnosed, often in the preschool years, parents seek help to teach their child the social concepts and skills needed to work and play alongside others. There are programs designed to teach these important social concepts to young children with ASD, providing critical instructional resources for parents and professionals (a few are listed in *Additional Resources*). Frequently, Social Stories are used to complement the goals and objectives of these programs, providing meaning and personalized application to social information.

Many children with ASD are establishing connections and relationships with others, and *they can*, in many cases, master the component skills that provide the outline for social inclusion. Parents and professionals are increasingly curious about the lessons within *friendship*. Enter a new resource to provide the outline, the insights, the concepts (waiting to be translated into Social Stories), to complement the efforts of parents and programs of professionals.

The Friendship Factor (Rubin, 2002) is a wonderful new "user friendly" summary of the findings of child development research and specifically, a longitudinal friendship study. The author, Dr. Kenneth Rubin, Director of the Center for Children, Relationships, and Culture at the University of Maryland, shares a fascinating look at the mysteries, challenges, and achievements of childhood friendship. Through glimpses into laboratory studies, excerpts and quotes from children and parents, and a description of the dynamic social profile of friendship from toddler to adolescent, The Friendship Factor translates research into practical application. Each step of the way, advice is offered to parents so they can put the information to work within the walls of their home, to benefit their own children.

What is *friendship*, and what is its relationship to social skills? According to Dr. Rubin, "A friendship is a reciprocal, voluntary affair. No external force such as a mom or dad, nor any fixed circumstance, decreed that these two should be pals" (p. 37). That being said, we've learned that we can teach the elemental skills that create the *opportunity* for friendship. In the past, Social Stories have helped parents and professionals introduce much of this information to children with ASD. Now, equipped with an updated and research-based understanding, we can use Social Stories as a part of a comprehensive program to teach the skills that lead to, and support, friendship.

Joining a Play Activity Spring Break of this year provided my first opportunity to read The Friendship Factor. Like many of my favorite vacations, I found time to sit and read alongside my husband on a Florida beach. One morning I was reading about the four steps that children typically follow to join a "group activity: 1) watch, 2) listen, 3) move closer, and 4) ease in" (Rubin, p. 120).

Looking up for a moment, I realized that what I had just read was happening a few feet away. A group of four children were playing near the water. Two of the children, a girl and a boy about eight years old, were building in the sand. About three feet from them was a toddler pushing a yellow plastic truck across the sand and - with every sweep of the tide - through the water. Playing near the other two, the toddler was fascinated by his own activity. Two dads were standing and chatting nearby, with a mom on a beach towel further inland. It was the fourth child, I'll call him David, awkwardly on the periphery of *We're Digging Together, Inc.*, who held my attention. I recognized David's predicament from the pages of The Friendship Factor. Apparently he is not alone:

Breaking the ice can be a tough challenge for kids of all ages. Some children push their way in, while others hover on the outskirts, making no positive moves to establish contact and simply waiting to be included - and thus usually staying out, unless some exceptionally kind and generous child in the group extends a welcoming gesture" (p. 118).

I watched David repeatedly follow three of the four steps to group entry. He *watched* those digging in the sand, *listened* to what they said, and *moved closer*. He stayed for an awkward few seconds, then retreated to his original position while glancing toward the group. Again David moved, this time a little closer. Suddenly, he made a second retreat, as if repelled by an invisible barrier. A few socially tentative seconds passed before he made his third - and final - attempt to join the group. Aware of his son's repetitive approaches, David's father reached out, placed one hand on each of his son's shoulders, and pulled him back. Dad directed David to join Mom. Mom followed Dad's lead, calling to her son to join her on the beach towel.

**For the purposes of this article, "group" refers to joining one or more children currently engaged in an activity.*

Dr. Rubin discusses how learning to merge successfully into a play activity is a critical social skill. It is demonstrated by a socially competent child in the preschool years, but to varying degrees for all children, remains an "...inescapable challenge" throughout a child's school career. Parents play an important role in teaching the skills of group entry:

The message is clear: a young child will benefit from a parent's sensitive help and intervention in this matter of entering a group. It is an essential skill for children to acquire, both because its absence is a predictor of peer rejection and because mastering of peer-group entry assuredly helps youngsters feel better about themselves and their own social competencies" (p. 120).

As I continued to read on the beach, children with autism spectrum disorders came to mind. Those who try to enter groups often *break* into - rather than *easing into* - the activity. They arrive with the subtlety of the familiar "bull in a china shop". With their own agenda front and center, and their challenges in quickly deciphering the goals of others or understanding their relevance, children with ASD can make an ill-advised intrusive first impression. Dr. Tony Attwood, an international expert in the field of autism spectrum disorders and author of *Asperger's Syndrome: A Guide for Parents and Professionals* (1998), has long talked of the importance of the component skills of friendship. In reference to group entry skills, he indicates that "...children (with Asperger's Syndrome) need to learn the cues to join a group of children without causing disruption or annoyance" (Attwood, 2002). The findings of Dr. Rubin's research echoes this concern. "When we observe kids at play in our lab studies, we note that it's almost always a bad idea for one child to disrupt or radically alter a group activity that is already under way" (Rubin, 2002). Thus, abruptly arriving with an announcement that there's a better way to draw that dinosaur, or insisting that the doll house isn't supposed to be played with that way, is to risk successful entry into the activity.

Information impacts observation, and observation drives discovery. David's dilemma at the beach captured my thoughts throughout the day. Learning how children watch, listen, move closer, and ease in, I was able to identify that David was "stuck" on the fourth step, failing to ease in. The reason for this was not entirely clear. Did he understand what to do? Was it emotion and shyness that got in the way? Children with ASD often do not have the *social information* they need; information that may seem readily apparent to their typical peers. They may also be significantly challenged in emotion regulation. Reading Dr. Rubin's discussion of group entry skills - and merging it with what we know about children with ASD - resulted in the exploration of a new idea. I began translating Dr. Rubin's insights regarding group entry into a collection of Social Stories.

The Social Story Sets in the *Perforated Appendix The Perforated Appendix contains Social Stories that collectively describe how to join an activity. The reader is encouraged to review these Stories first, and then return to this section for a discussion of their goal, content and characters, and format.

The Goal The goal of the Stories is three-fold; to: 1) introduce and describe the four basic steps of group entry, 2) build Mom, Dad, and Teacher into the process of learning this skill, and 3) increase the frequency with which a child with ASD successfully joins an activity. Wonderful resources are available to guide the development of individual goals and objectives (listed in the *Additional Resources* section at the close of this article).

The Stories address important details related to group entry. For example, one of the Social Stories that introduce how children can learn to watch, listen, move closer, and ease in, addresses the reality that these efforts *may not* always be successful. Mentioned throughout the collection of Stories, Mom, Dad, and professionals are built-in as partners in learning, creating a team approach to social discovery. These

* Not a medical term ☺; refers to the perforated pages following this article on which the appendix appears.

frequent references to adults represent their sky's-the-limit role in bringing these Stories to life (see *The Important Role of Parents and Professionals: Reviewing a Social Story with a Young Child*, later in this article). Ultimately, the Stories provide a springboard for developing a comprehensive strategy to teach "joining in".

Content & Characters To describe the steps to group entry, the Stories follow David, the main character, as he watches, listens, moves closer, and eases in to an activity with Harry. Fictional characters are not new to Social Stories, having been used previously in *Gray's Guide to Compliments* (Gray, 1999). They can serve an important role. A fictional character can "dive into new social waters" first, allowing the reader to safely learn from his experience. A word of caution: Social Stories that use fictional characters and situations may be too difficult for some children with autism. If a child is not yet able to make the connections between the text, illustrations, and his/her own experience, the Story may be confusing – and/or the meaning lost. To gain benefit from a Story, these children will need a more traditional Social Story, written completely from a first person perspective with the child as the central character. This may be accomplished with minor revisions to the text, and the addition of personal photographs.

The Stories employ definitive graphics (road signs), color, and repetition to clarify and enhance important information. The use of road signs is taken from an activity Dr. Tony Attwood used with one of his adolescent social understanding groups (Attwood, 2002), where students translated several social concepts and situations into their "road sign" equivalents. A color is assigned to each of the four steps of group entry (red, blue, green, and purple, respectively). These terms consistently appear in boldface in their assigned color, matching the color of their corresponding road sign. Throughout the titles and text, repetition is used to reinforce the somewhat rhythmical four steps to group entry: watch, listen, move closer, ease in.

Story Format The Stories in the Perforated Appendix are organized into *Social Story Sets*: a group of very short Stories that address a single topic. One set introduces the topic of learning group entry skills, the next four Sets describe how to 1) watch, 2) listen, 3) move closer, and 4) ease in respectively, with the final set summarizing key concepts. The advantages of using a Social Story Set are:

- *They accommodate for differing attention and ability levels.* Many young children with ASD can attend only for short periods of time. Each Story in a Set is brief, making it possible to review within a few moments. For children with longer attention spans, a parent/professional has the flexibility to review two, three, or several Stories in one sitting.
- *They present one new concept per Story, while allowing for the inclusion of details.* Children with ASD learn new concepts one step at a time. They also benefit from the description of social details that they may miss on their own. A Social Story Set allows an author to describe many details – one per Story – while also keeping each Story short.
- *They make it possible to reinforce key concepts as new ones are shared.* In learning a new social concept, children with ASD benefit from frequent repetition. Within each set of Stories, one Story can be used to summarize information before a new idea is introduced. This builds in systematic review.

The Stories are designed to be placed in a narrow notebook with a clear plastic cover. Children can decorate a page to insert as the cover. The pages are numbered from 1-10, separate from the surrounding page numbers of this issue, and perforated to make them easy to remove. Punching holes in these pages is not recommended, as it is likely to invade the text or illustrations. Instead, the Stories can be inserted into clear plastic sheet protectors that already have holes in the margin (available at most office supply stores). Occasionally the child-adult team is required to write answers to questions in the Stories. The pages may be removed from the plastic sleeves to write directly on the paper, or answers may be written on the plastic and, for future use by another child, wiped clean.

On page 7 of the Perforated Appendix the main character, David, moves closer to Harry. The child and adult reviewing the Story move David across the page. To make this possible, a "David" on card stock appears on the inside front cover of this issue. He may be cut out, or copied and cut to preserve the cover of this journal. In this way, a child and adult can practice step 3 (move closer) by actually moving David and stopping a comfortable distance from Harry.

The Important Role of Parents and Professionals Social Stories are best when parents and professionals work as a team to develop a plan to introduce, review, and reinforce the information. This plan will involve direct instruction, guidance in natural settings, and the use of related materials. This section contains: 1) suggestions for sharing a Social Story with a young child, 2) ideas to enhance the meaning of the Stories in the Perforated Appendix, and 3) strategies to coach young children in the skills they will need to successfully enter a group activity.

Reviewing a Social Story with a Young Child A young child brings early cognitive abilities and a finite attention span to a Social Story. It's possible to capture a young child's attention - *just not for long*. A child's attention is a resource in short supply - increasing it's value!

To make the most of a child's attention:

- 1) Select a time when the child is calm, not focused on another activity
- 2) Introduce the Story with a simple statement, "I have a (Social) Story for us to read together..."
- 3) Review the Story in a comfortable setting with a positive, friendly attitude
- 4) Sit at the child's side and slightly back, with attention focused on the Story
- 5) Work as a team, supporting the child's comprehension and application of new information

Regardless of the best efforts from all parties, success is never guaranteed. Due to a variety of possible factors, review of a Social Story may look more like placing an order at a drive-through window, with short moments of attention at different locations. It may help to shorten the Story, personalize the text, incorporate a child's interests into a Story, or postpone review for another time. Thinking creatively, the alteration of just a few factors may move the drive-through traffic inside, where a more focused review is possible.

Enhancing the Stories Like the hub of a wheel, the Social Stories in the Perforated Appendix are designed to be at the center of a comprehensive effort to teach group entry concepts/skills. For example:

- 1) Though the Stories appear in sets, each Story shares a concept important to successful group entry. Collectively they form the backbone of a group entry curriculum.
- 2) A single Story may introduce an entire lesson. Frequent checks for comprehension and relating a child's experience to the text and illustrations reinforces the meaning of each Story. Family photos can help a child make these connections.
- 3) Related resources help to provide additional examples to encourage generalization of a child's understanding to a larger social context. Increasingly, children's literature contains accurate social information that supports friendship skills. Some examples: *Different Just Like Me* (Mitchell, 1999), *What to Expect at a Play Date* (Murkoff, 2001), and *Friendship: From Your Old Friends to Your New Friends* (Barron's Educational Series, 2001).
- 4) All children can benefit from information about how to join an activity. A parent-professional team may elect to use role plays, art projects, and/or structured games at recess (Williams, 2002).

Coaching Group Entry Skills The Perforated Appendix Social Stories and activities form the backdrop of a personalized group-entry curriculum. The daily home and school routines, activities, and interactions fill the stage. It is here where text and illustrations translate into live action; where the main characters have real names, young personalities, and a variety of temperaments. A few feet away there are children at play - and there is a child who wants to join in. What can parents and professionals do?

Careful observation is an excellent place to start. A parent or professional can identify where a child is struggling in the process of watching, listening, moving closer, and easing in. In *The Friendship Factor*, Dr. Rubin describes the efforts of Mark, age 7, who tries to join two boys playing at the park. The boys are standing on a tire swing, rocking it from side to side. In an effort to join in, Mark imitates their activity on a nearby swing. His mom is watching, and recognizes that this is typical of her son's efforts to join others - and rarely effective. Dr. Rubin notes that, "Running next to or 'acting like' other kids generally isn't a good group-entry strategy" (p. 120). Mom encourages Mark to "...move a little closer to the group, stand next to its members for a little while and watch, and then talk: ... 'Can I play?' or 'That looks like fun, can I try it?'" (p. 121). Mom's observations and subsequent coaching help Mark to learn and apply a new skill, one that helps to create new social opportunities.

Dr. Rubin's advice to parents is applicable to children with ASD, especially when merged with the work of Dr. Tony Attwood. Dr. Attwood encourages parents to recruit the cooperation of typical peers, asking them to "freeze the action" in their play, to allow a child to observe the important cues of entry first hand:

An activity can be to brainstorm with the child the entry cues, such as someone giving a welcoming gesture or facial expression, a pause in the activity or conversation or an appropriate act such as returning the ball. These 'acts' of the social 'play' can be 'rehearsed' by identifying a few children who are keen to help the friendship skills of the child with Asperger's Syndrome. They can be informed that he or she is learning the cues and rules for joining in their play. The child (with Asperger's syndrome) will be trying to join in (under the guidance of an adult) and to recognize the relevant cue. When this occurs they can help the child with Asperger's Syndrome to identify the cue and intellectually process the response by momentarily freezing their actions thereby isolating the cue. This gives the child time to identify the cue (which can be pointed out by the adult) and to decide what to say or do in response, perhaps with a prompt and encouragement from the adult. Their response and the entry are then successfully completed. The procedure of identifying the cues in contrived settings and practising appropriate responses (rehearsal) can be used for many friendship skills. The adult acts as a mentor or stage director, giving guidance and encouragement. It is important that the attitude from adults is one of discovery and guidance so that the child with Asperger's Syndrome does not perceive the activity as being critical of their ability and a public recognition of their social errors. (Attwood in press, 2002)

Coaching is an excellent way to describe the parent-professional role in teaching group entry skills. A coach knows the last game isn't the final game; there is always next season. It's important to take stock of the bigger picture, to recognize that in response to the changing social landscape, instruction in group entry skills will be a continuing effort that extends throughout childhood and adolescence. After all, saying, "Can I play?" works well in pre-school, but is a disaster in a high school hallway or cafeteria. As they grow, children with ASD will require updated information to fit both *their* current experience, and the social profile of their peers. Learning these skills is a dynamic parent-child-professional project, completed one step at a time with tailoring as a child matures.

Other Considerations In the process of writing this article, other considerations regarding group entry skills became apparent. It's important to acknowledge the many other factors related to the success of a child's attempt at group entry; not the least of which are the needs and responses of children on the receiving end of, "May I play?" Teaching *children* to merge with *children* requires parents and professionals to be available and willing to provide guidance. Typical children need information about their included classmate with ASD. *The Sixth Sense II* (Gray, 2002), helps parents/professionals explain why some children display unique behaviors, why some children may be socially hesitant or awkward, and how to respond. Working among a living canvas of children - a lively, inventive, and viable collection of newer people not renowned for predictability or social guarantees - requires a comprehensive merging of research, respect, and creativity.

The Next Step At any age, friendship holds an opportunity for social and emotional learning. It is a dynamic curriculum full of lessons about work and play, love and conflict, problems and solutions. Access to this opportunity is achieved through the mastery of concepts and skills; Dr. Rubin's work clarifies those that are important at each age. He provides an outline for those who work alongside children with ASD. In addition to group entry skills, there are other topics that Social Stories can address. Similarly, Social Articles can translate the social topics that impact children in later childhood and adolescence. With the topics clarified by research on the typical side of the social equation, we can enhance our efforts to teach children with ASD the concepts and skills that support friendship.

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paste photo

I Am Learning to Play with Others

My name is _____. I am learning to play with others.

Sometimes I see other children playing. I may want to play with them. There are 4 steps that may help me join other children at play. Many children follow these steps: **1) watch, 2) listen, 3) move closer, and 4) ease in.**

I Might Join the Activity

This is a drawing of David. David is learning to **watch, listen, move closer, and ease in.** He is learning how to join other children at play.

David *might* join the activity. Sometimes, David may follow the four steps and join the activity. Sometimes, David may follow the four steps and not join the activity.

If I learn how to **watch, listen, move closer, and ease in**, I _____ join the activity.



Adults who can help me are:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Adults Can Help

Adults are children who grew up. My mom, dad, and teacher are adults. They remember what it is like to be a child. Adults can help children learn to **watch, listen, move closer, and ease in.**

Step 1 is **WATCH**



What does **watch** mean?

Step 1 to joining children at play is to **watch** what the children do.

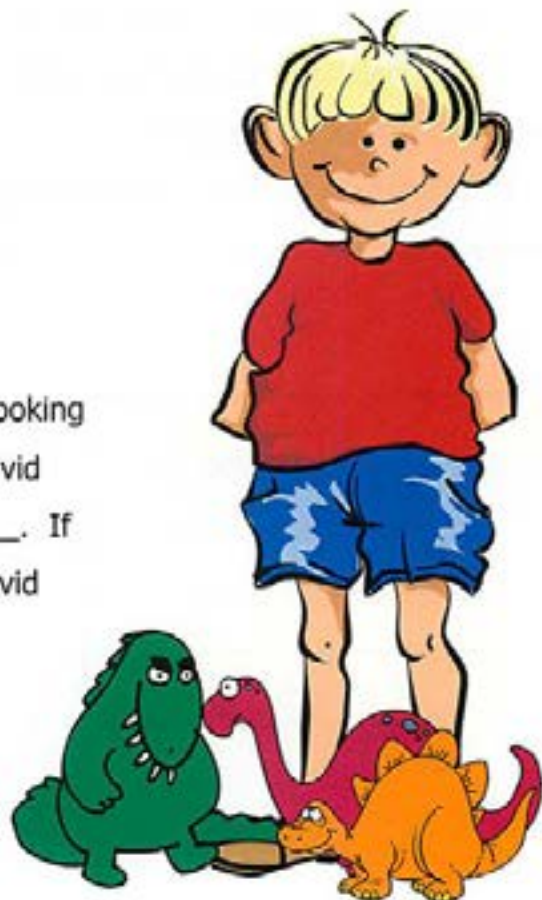
We use our eyes to **watch**.

Watch means to look carefully. Children who **watch** stop for a moment to look and think. To **watch** other children, I may try to stop for a moment and look quietly.

Adults may help me practice **watching** other children.

**David is learning
about the 4 steps, too.**

Some children like to play with dinosaurs. Looking at this drawing of David, we might think that David likes to play with _____. If we were to **watch** David play, we might see David play with _____.





What is Harry doing?

This is Harrison. He likes to be called Harry. This is okay. David is **watching** Harry ride in a toy car. David tries to guess what Harry is doing. We can look at the picture and try to guess what Harry is doing, too.

Harry is pedaling the car and smiling. David thinks playing with the toy car looks fun. Maybe David and Harry can play together.

Step 1 to joining Harry's activity is to **watch**. David keeps **watching** what Harry is doing.

Step 1 is **WATCH**
Step 2 is **LISTEN**



What does **listen** mean?

Step 2 to joining an activity is to **listen**. **Listen** means to decide to hear something or someone.

Sometimes, people **listen** to music. Sometimes, people **listen** to television. Sometimes, people **listen** to what other people say.

David **listens** with his ears.

David has one ear on each side of his head. Sometimes, David uses them to **listen**. We can try to find David's ears in the drawing.

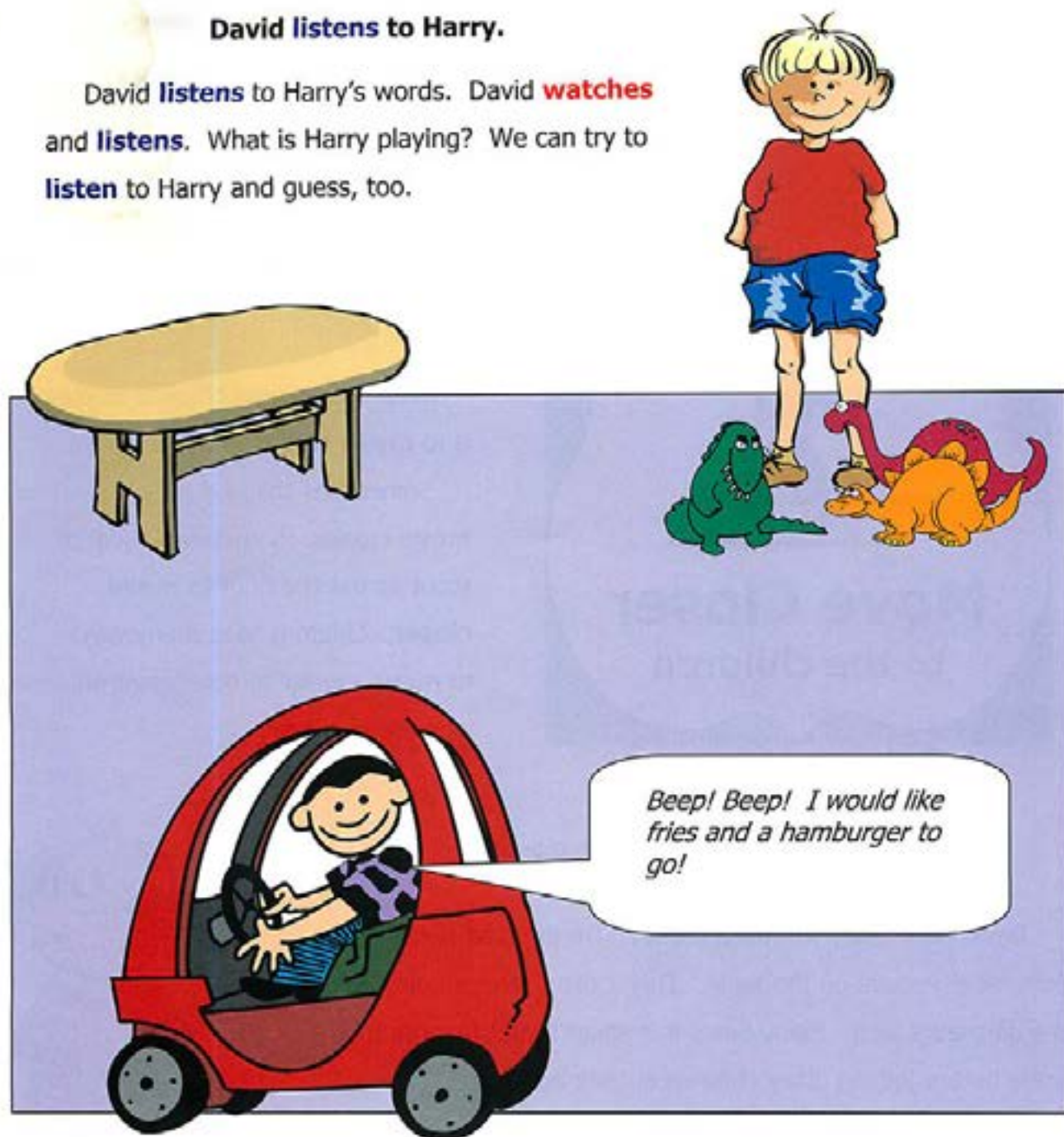
I have one ear on each side of my head, too. Sometimes, I use my ears to **listen**.

Step 1 is **watch**. Step 2 is **listen**.



David **listens** to Harry.

David **listens** to Harry's words. David **watches** and **listens**. What is Harry playing? We can try to **listen** to Harry and guess, too.



What is Harry doing? Our guess is _____.

David watches Harry riding in the toy car. He **listens** to Harry ask for fries and a hamburger to-go. David looks but cannot really see any fries or hamburgers anywhere. David guesses that Harry is *pretending* to order food at the drive-thru restaurant. Sometimes, children *pretend* when they play. That is what Harry is doing.

Step 1 is **WATCH**, Step 2 is **LISTEN**
STEP 3 is MOVE CLOSER



What does move closer mean?

Step 3 to joining children at play is to **move closer** to the children.

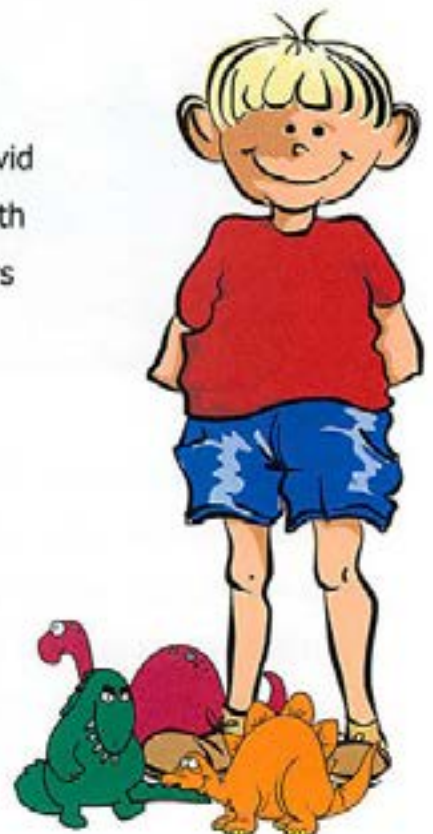
Sometimes children walk to **move closer**. Sometimes children scoot across the floor to **move closer**. Children have many ways to **move closer** to other children who are playing.

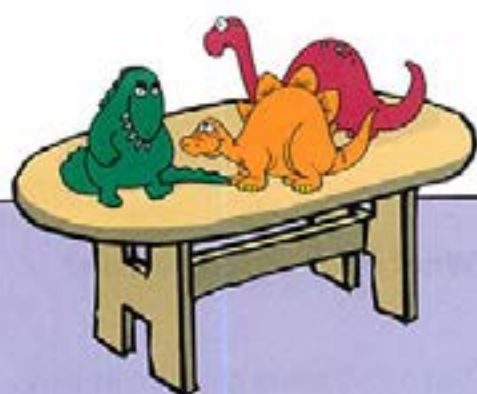
David is learning to move closer.

David gets ready to **move closer**. On the next page, David puts his dinosaurs on the table. This is okay. He can play with the dinosaurs later. Many times it is smart to put favorite toys aside before joining other children at their activity.

We have a cut-out of David. We can try to move David slowly from the table to Harry. It is important to stop a comfortable distance from Harry. On page 7 we can write "Xs" to mark comfortable places for David to stop.

There are no "Xs" in real life. A comfortable distance for children is about one arm's length. Adults can show me more about comfortable distance.





Step 1 is **WATCH**, Step 2 is **LISTEN**, STEP 3 is **MOVE CLOSER**,
Step 4 is **EASE IN**



What does ease in mean?

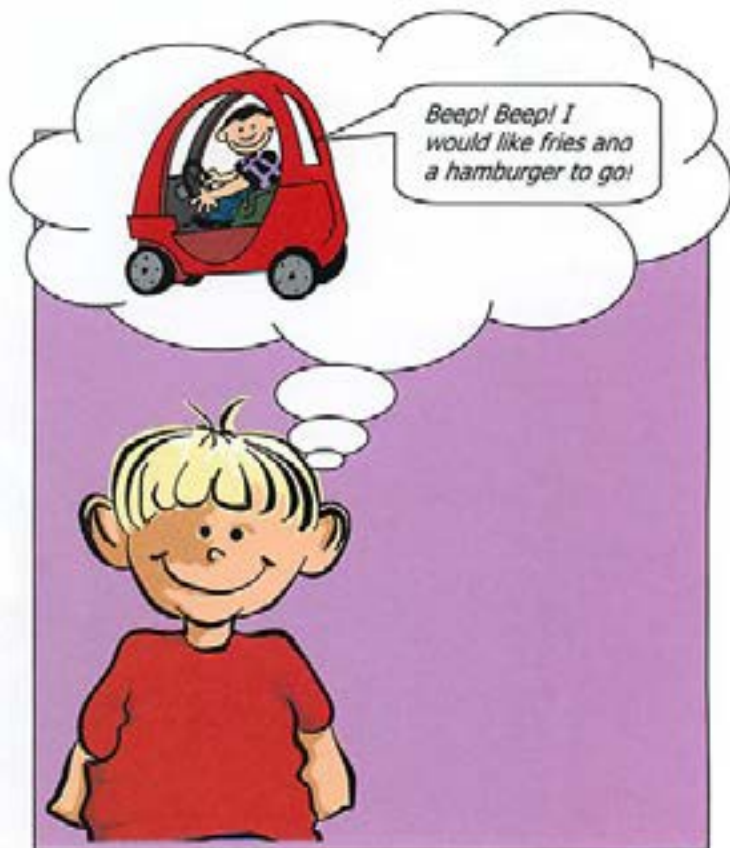
Step 4 to joining children at play is to **ease in** to the activity.

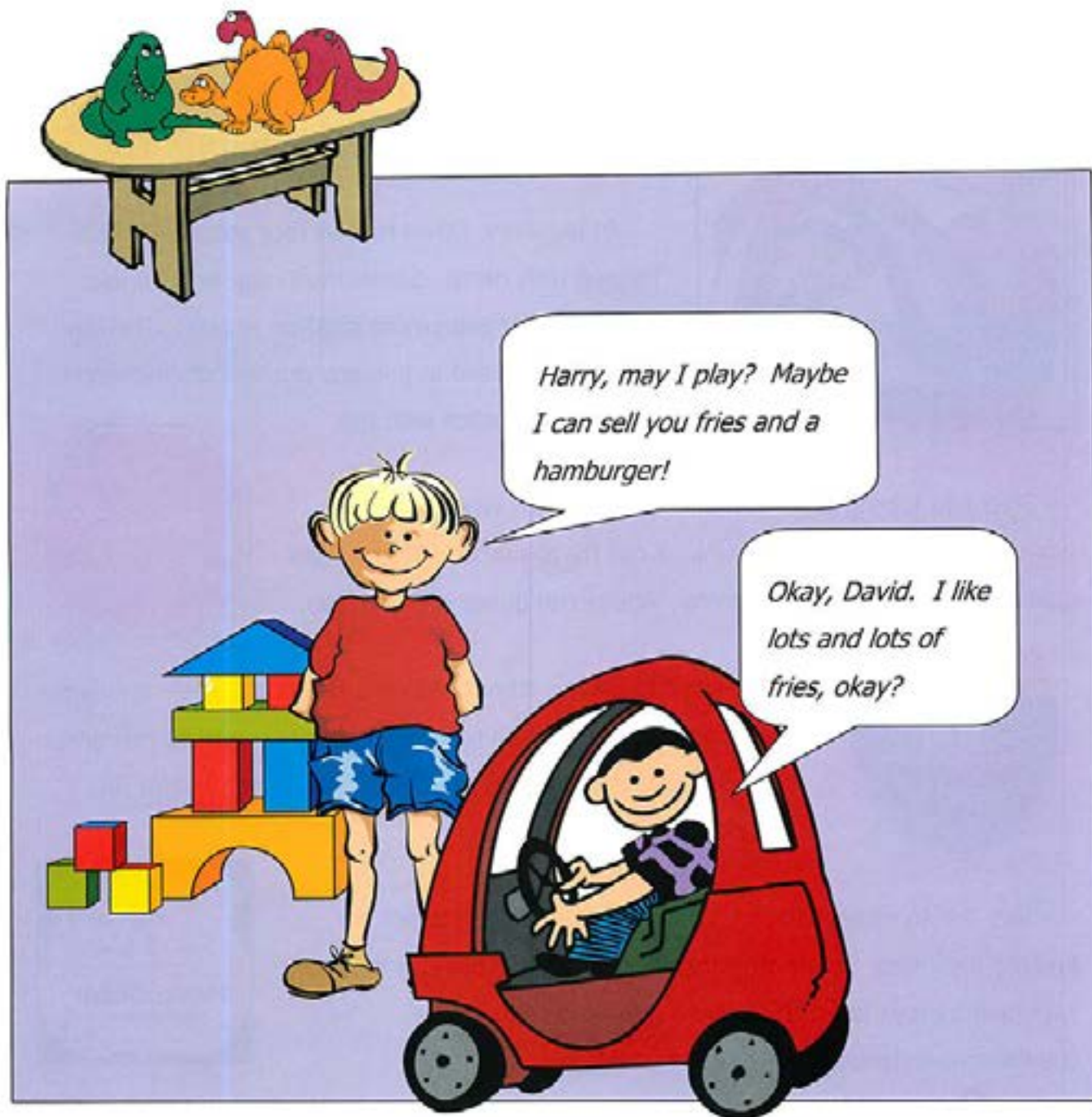
Sometimes, moms and dads **ease in** when they drive cars. They try to enter a highway smoothly. They go the same direction as everyone else. This is very smart.

David is ready to ease in.

David thinks about Harry and the car. Harry is pretending to order food at the drive-thru. Maybe David can help.

David has an idea. He thinks Harry may need someone to sell pretend fries and a hamburger. Pretend fries and hamburgers can be ready very quickly. David smiles and gets ready to ask if he can play.





This time, **watching**, **listening**, **moving closer**, and **easing in** worked! David and Harry started to play together. David began to build a restaurant with blocks. Harry drove up now and then to order more fries. Then it was snack time and David and Harry ate REAL crackers and juice. Later, David took his dinosaurs home.



Watch – Listen – Move Closer – Ease In

In my story, David follows four steps to start playing with Harry. Sometime I may want to join two, three, or even more children at play. The four steps can be used to join any number of children. Adults can practice with me.

Step 1 to joining other children is to **watch**. When children **watch** they stop, look, and think. I can try to **watch**. Then, I can guess what the children are doing. Adults can guess with me, too.



Step 2 to joining other children is to **listen**. **Listen** means to decide to hear something or someone. **Listening** can give me clues to what children are doing. Adults can **listen** for clues with me.

Step 3 is to **move closer**. Often it is a good idea to put my favorite toys aside before **moving closer**. This is okay. I may play with favorite toys later. It is also a good choice to stop a comfortable distance from the other children.



Step 4 to joining an activity is to **ease in**. **Watching**, **listening**, and **moving closer** may give me clues to how I might **ease in**. Saying, "Can I play?" is a good place to start. Then I will try to follow the activity. Maybe, I can offer an idea to make it more fun.

I will try to **watch**, **listen**, **move closer**, and **ease in** to join other children at play. Mom, dad, or my teacher can practice with me. Sometimes it might work for me!



Empowering Children for Peaceful Playgrounds

- Judy Williams, M.S., L.P.C.

Editor's note: Judy Williams is an elementary school counselor for Jenison Public Schools. Judy has 22 years experience in education, with 15 of those in elementary counseling. She is a Nationally Certified School Specialist in Trauma and Loss, and has extensive training in peer violence prevention, intervention, and crisis response. She is the co-author of No Fishing Allowed, a new violence prevention program for elementary grades. Illustrations by Nova Development (1997-1998).

As schools nationwide have searched for strategies to provide safety for all children, much of the emphasis has been placed on intervention techniques. From video cameras and identification badges to fencing and metal detectors, administrators and teachers alike seek the best possible means by which to prevent another outbreak of school violence.

For those of us who have the distinct privilege of working with elementary students, preventative strategies hold tremendous promise. By training and embracing the energy of our youngest students, we unlock the potential of youth to be agents of peace. This article will highlight one school district's attempts to make the educational setting safe for all students through early education.

When asked their favorite subject in school, a common answer given by many children is "recess". For these children this represents a few minutes in the midst of a hectic, curriculum filled day to relax, play, let off energy and refuel for the next academic task. But for other children, recess is a stress inducing, conflict filled or lonely time of the day. As children become more dependent upon technological entertainment, the ability to play in an unstructured setting may decrease. Playgrounds can become breeding grounds for aggression, rejection and exclusion for some children. Many of the games that are played at recess are competitive in nature. These competitive games, though structured, can actually increase aggressive behavior (Embry, 1997).

Recognizing that all children have an unequivocal right to an emotionally and physically safe recess experience, an elementary Conflict Management program was instituted in the Jenison Public Schools in 1992. Each year, 200-300 students are trained and subsequently assist students in conflict resolution during recess. When conflicts are resolved through targeted approaches such as those employed by Conflict Managers, potentially violent situations are prevented (Dusenbury, Falco, Lake, Brannigan, Bosworth, 1997).

To further the violence prevention efforts of our district, the *No Fishing Allowed* program (Gray & Williams, 2001), was implemented in 2001. This program, funded by a Jenison Public Education Foundation grant, teaches bully violence prevention and intervention strategies in an assembly format to 4th grade students. Teachers of lower elementary students also benefit from

this program through a teacher manual and violence prevention library, so that these strategies can be introduced through existing curriculum and teachable moments. Unique to this program is its pre and post teaching component for special needs students.

Being introduced this year, again through a Jenison Public Education Foundation grant, is a program titled, *Peaceful Playgrounds* (Williams, 2002). This program augments the existing Conflict Management program by using the trained conflict managers as game instructors and coordinators for students in grades 1-3.

The rationale behind this program is two-fold. First, due to the success of our Conflict Management program, problems on the playgrounds have become less frequent, resulting in our trained students having fewer conflicts with which to work. Secondly, it has also been noted throughout the history of this program, that most conflicts occur on the lower elementary playgrounds (grades 1-3). These younger children have not yet developed the skills necessary to effectively resolve their disagreements. During imaginative play, many children of



this age will mimic their favorite superhero, often with the accompanying levels of violence portrayed in movies, cartoons and video games. Students seeking to gain power over others may find a less able classmate and act out aggressively toward that child. For less socially skilled children or those that have special needs, this can translate into a fearful experience.

This new program has its roots based in research. Studies have shown that when organized play activities are conducted on the playground, aggression drops by 50% (Murphy, Hutchinson, Bailey, 1983). During the first six weeks of school, when children are forming their playgroups and developing relationships, the Conflict Managers will teach a new game each week. By using morning and teacher announcements, students will be informed of the game of the week. Monday through Wednesday will be instructional days with a different grade level being taught each day. The last two days of the week will be devoted to coordinating these games with special attention being given to those students who are more socially hesitant. This program will be repeated during the last six weeks of school as this time period is generally more conflict filled. Students have tired of the same old activities and relationships with peers that were fresh and new in September have become worn and strained.

An additional value of this program is the ability of Conflict Managers to utilize their skills directly at the point of performance, intervening in potential conflicts as they occur between game participants. When students become the teachers, we are empowering them to provide a service to their school and their peers. This experience often results in increased leadership, self-

discipline and the ability to problem solve and make decisions. (Close, Lechman, 1997). Participating students learn concrete, usable means by which to settle their differences and see the benefits of such approaches immediately. As was noted in the teaching of a Life Skills curriculum at the first grade level during the 2001-02 school year, children as young as 6 years of age are eager to share their learning of peace making strategies with playmates, siblings and parents.

In the ten years that the Conflict Management program has been in existence, the number of peer conflicts referred to the principals has dropped substantially. With the addition of the *Peaceful Playgrounds* program, we hope to provide an inclusive, pro-social recess experience for all children. By harnessing the idealism of our youth and combining that with the work of devoted adult leaders, we hope that this dream will become reality in the Jenison Public Schools.

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Shoe-Tying Made Simple: A Review

Kelly Wilk, Occupational Therapist (2001). The School of Graphic Arts: Oxford, NC
A book review by Laurel Hoekman

As a parent, I pride myself on accomplishments such as teaching my children to tie their shoes. Having taught my first son two years ago, I know how difficult the process can be—especially for a child who struggles with eye-hand coordination—so I was not in a hurry to start over with my second son.



However, a five-year-old needs to learn to tie his shoes, so several months ago I began the difficult process of teaching him. I have had little to show for the new gray hairs I am sporting as a result of our emotional attempts. A timely discussion with Carol Gray yielded the suggestion that Nathan and I field test the book, **Shoe Tying Made Simple*.

At first, I was skeptical. Having survived "Shoe-Tying 101" with my first son, I knew that there is nothing magical about the process of learning to tie a shoe. Instead, it takes time, hard work, determination...and a few emotional outbursts. I did not believe that a book would add greatly to our success.

Nathan and I half-heartedly looked through the colorful book. He at first appeared eager to try, but balked at the special color-coded shoelaces that come with the book. There was no way he was going to use them in *his* shoes!

However, after studying the book further, I realized that the author recommends putting the laces in an oversized shoe, and that instruction begins with the shoe off, with the toe pointing toward the student. We set up the book using the "tripod" back, seated Nathan by the toe of the shoe (I put the laces in one of my shoes), and began reading the book aloud beginning at the section for "Dominant Right Hand" (there are separate instructions for those who are left-handed). While I read, Nathan listened and looked at the accompanying photographs as he maneuvered the special blue and yellow lace.

Amazingly, the third time through (about thirty minutes after starting), Nathan told me that he no longer needed me, and he began tying the shoe as he repeated word-for-word some of the text from the book. And he was successful on his first try! Although he struggled a little as he worked to transfer his newfound skills to his own shoes (particularly when they were on his feet), within an hour he had tied them several times.

As a dedicated mom, I like to think that the many hours I previously invested in teaching Nathan to tie his shoes finally paid off. Or maybe he reached a "magical age" where he was suddenly ready to learn. Nathan is not as skeptical. When asked why he mastered the shoe-tying skill in one morning, he readily answers, "It was the book!"

All skepticism aside, I'll be the first to admit that I will use this book with my third child when the time is right...and I am eagerly awaiting what I believe should be Kelly Wilk's next book: *Bike-Riding Made Simple!*

Illustration by Nova Development (1997-1998). Art explosion. Calabasas, CA: Nova Development Corporation.

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