

ECHO IDAHO

**K12 Supporting Students
with Autism**

Neuro-Affirming Social Skills Support: Key Strategies, Signs of Growth, and What Works

10/16/2025

Panel Roundtable

None of the planners or presenters for this educational activity have relevant financial relationship(s) to disclose with ineligible companies whose primary business is producing, marketing, selling, re-selling, or distributing healthcare products used by or on patients.



University of Idaho
School of Health and Medical Professions
College of Education, Health and
Human Sciences



Julie: BCBA/Parent Perspective

- Social skills should be assessed for students with an autism diagnosis, and they should have clear social skills goals that are measured.
- Choosing what materials/curriculum to use can be a challenge.
 - [Socially Savvy](#) (James Ellis): includes an assessment and curriculum with good activities that can be leveled, especially for students with Level 3 support needs or nonverbal students
 - [The Social Skills Picture Book](#) (Jed Baker): picture book for social skills
 - [Building Social Relationships](#) (Scott Belini): good resource
- Sometimes too many students in a social skills group is overwhelming, the approach should be individualized to the student and the skill being taught.
- [PMII](#) (peer mediated instruction and intervention) is a great strategy
 - Getting adults to prompt the peers and not the target student is often the hardest part
 - Peers can be fantastic teachers
- Success may be just getting the student there to the social skills group.

Christy: SLP

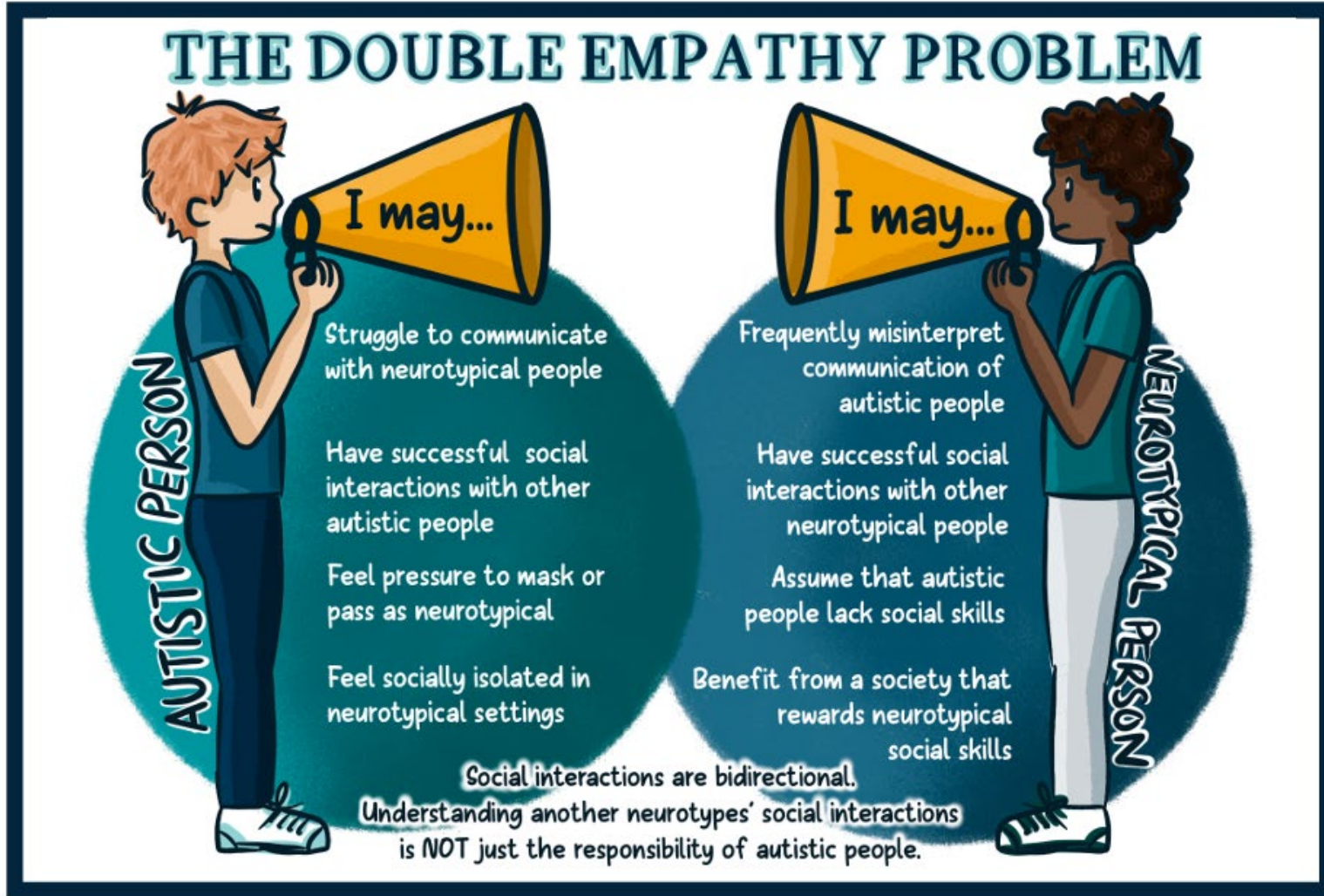
Designing Pragmatic Language Goals & Therapy

- Use Strengths-Based Approaches to build scaffolds
- Consider functional skills with most impact
- Incorporate student's interests

Pragmatic Language Areas to Target

- Develop robust communication
- Self-Advocacy
- Understanding multiple perspectives
- Problem solving (cause/effect, predictions, solutions, etc.)

Christy: SLP



the
INFORMED SLP

Susan: OT

- Shift from conventional to **neuroaffirming approaches**
 - Guided by the double empathy problem and neuroscience, we move beyond teaching neurotypical norms
- **Promote authentic communication and connection**
 - Support diverse ways of thinking, communicating, and socializing without defining one “right” way

Susan: OT Perspective

Neurodiversity-Affirming Social Emotional Learning bridges perspectives across neurotypes so that neurodiverse students can:

- Communicate effectively and understand that people use different communication styles
- Engage in authentic social interactions with peers
- Participate in school and community life in ways that work for them
- Hear positive messages that affirm who they are

School-Based Strategy:

- Create opportunities for authentic connection through interest groups (e.g., art club)
- These groups allow students of diverse neurotypes to socialize around shared interests, fostering belonging, confidence, and a strong sense of self

Christiane: Self-Advocate and Parent Perspective

- Gathering students' special interests and assessing what social skills they do have and creating a space or group for them to build stronger skills
- Consideration for auditory sensitive students can not prioritize socializing if the environment is loud or too busy (i.e. cafeterias and high energy classrooms)
- A student's social stamina is varied.
 - Weekly get-togethers (like in a special interest group) may be fine for one but another may prefer bi-weekly or monthly
 - While enjoyable it can take recovery time from the external sensory factors and mental load of socializing

Adrienne: BCBA/Parent Perspective

Best Practices When Including Social Skills in IEPs:

- A new paradigm is needed in that using neurotypical standards can be more affirming to a third party (e.g., teachers/staff) than to the individual with autism
- Involve the student and caregivers in identifying needs and expectations on social skills
- Identify strengths as well as needs of the individual
 - Can be done using semi-structured interviews
 - Preference assessment for activities, communication styles, rating scale of to help determine what they deem as important or not
 - Complete a motivation inventory that helps to determine what is motivation or desire to learn new skills
 - Conduct direct observations of interactions with peers and staff
- Provide opportunities that include similar interests of not only the targeted individual but like-minded peers and staff
- Provide modeling opportunities of successful interactions where individuals can practice new skills in a "safe" or familiar environment before interacting in a new setting or with unfamiliar people
- Allow for evaluation by the individual and the parents when determining effectiveness of skills training

(Dart et al., 2023; Kalyvez et al., 2020; Roulton and Hansen, 2021)

Tom: Pediatrician Perspective

1. Elopement and safety
2. Building relationships & skills to reset nervous systems
3. Building resilience