



## Kate Makes it Great!

PARENTAL SUPPORT

# How Can I Help My Child with ASD Better Connect with His Peers?

By **Kate C. Wilde**



**HAPPY 2022 EVERYONE! I AM EXCITED TO START THIS YEAR NOT ONLY BECAUSE I GET TO BE WITH ALL OF YOU FABULOUS READERS AND WRITE FOR THIS AWESOME MAGAZINE, BUT BECAUSE, FOR ME, 22 IS A VERY SPECIAL NUMBER. THE NUMBER 22 REMINDS ME OF A DEAR, DEAR FRIEND AND COLLEAGUE, WILLIAM JOHN HOGAN, WHO PASSED AWAY SIX YEARS AGO. HE WAS A GIFTED SON-RISE PROGRAM® TEACHER AND A TRUE FRIEND TO ME. IN HONOR OF HIS WORK WITH THOUSANDS OF FAMILIES AND CHILDREN ON THE SPECTRUM, I DEDICATE THIS ARTICLE AND THIS YEAR TO HIM.**

look forward to supporting you, reading your questions, and learning the stories from your life. Please keep them coming in. The new year brings a lot of pressure to make resolutions, change, and embark on our bucket lists or unrealized dreams. For me, I have only one wish for all of you walking your journeys with your exceptional loved ones—to know today and each day of 2022 that:

- Whatever happened or did not happen, it was enough.
- Whatever you did or did not do, you did enough.
- When at last you turn off the light and rest your weary head against the pillow, you can kindly say to yourself, “Today I was enough.”

With that sentiment in the forefront of my mind, I chose the question below to answer in detail because I think it will help all of us in the exceptional needs community, not just those on the spectrum.

***Elsa from Sweden asks: “My seven-year-old son on the spectrum seems really interested in playing with his peers. However, when he is around children either at a park or a birthday party, or his cousins at home, he will just watch from the sidelines. This confuses me because he is highly verbal and easily talks to me. How do I help him take that next step to connect?”***

Hi Elsa, thanks for writing into the magazine—I love to get questions from all parts of the world! I have observed many children and adults on the spectrum doing just this. One thing you might notice is he most likely does this with adults as well as children. You may observe it more with children because children can be very unpredictable, much more so than adults. That can make children much harder to approach and talk to than adults.

You ask how you can help him connect more with his peers. You can do that by strengthening his ability to physically participate in an interaction. By physically participate, I mean his ability to take part in a game with an action consistently. Examples of this are:



- Taking turns in a card game by picking up or putting down a card
- Pretending to blow out candles on a cake
- Drawing part of a picture with someone
- Pretending to be driving a car by moving his hands as if he is holding a steering wheel
- Handing you a toy
- Holding a bubble stick and blowing a bubble

Taking physical action interactively in a game can be challenging for most children and adults on the spectrum, but for our more highly verbal children, it can be easily overlooked

as a challenge. I say overlooked because when you are busy talking to one another, it is easy to miss that talking is your primary way to connect. When most neurotypical seven-year-olds get together they talk, of course, but a large part of their connection with one another is through physical participation games. Similarly, for children or adults who have yet to speak, we can become, understandably, hyper-focused on asking them to speak, skipping the simple act of helping them physically participate in an interaction.

Elsa, as you think about this you may think, “Well, he can already do the things mentioned above.” It is not about whether he is capable of them; it is about the consistency and speed with which he is able to show up and physically participate. His peers can participate at a speed that usually leaves neurodivergent children out of the play arena. Focus on helping him do it more of the time. First, help him raise his consistency and speed of participation with just you. He may then get the confidence to do it with his peers.

You can do that by:

### 1. Celebrating all the times he does physically participate in an interaction

Celebrate all the little times he does this throughout your day together. If he hands you a chip bag to open or gives you his school backpack, that is him physically engaging in an interaction—celebrate him! Tell him how much you love it when he gives you things. If he acts out something like a scene from a movie or pretends to be an animal, let him know how awesome he is at it. These celebrations will highlight what you want him to do more of, and it will help him gain confidence in his ability to participate in the interaction.

### 2. Being a model for him

When you are chatting together, add in a physical element. For example, if he is excited to talk to you about dinosaurs, become a dinosaur as you talk about them. If you are talking about a character from a story, get a book about that character and open up a page to a picture of the character. If you are talking about going to the store tomorrow, or a time you have already been, pretend to get in a car and drive there. You are making the conversation come alive by acting it out in some way.

### 3. Initiate a physical game instead of a conversation

When he is making eye contact with you (which is often an indication that he may be available to interact for a little bit), instead of asking him a question or connecting with him through words, just start a physical game. For example, you could:

- Pick up bat and ball and start bouncing the ball on the bat
- Get a puppet and pretend it is eating some of the other stuffed animals or eating pretend food and spitting it out
- Pick up a jump rope and start skipping
- Get a board game and start setting it up

Focus on the fun of the action. Fun is the reason he will get involved in the game and be inspired to come back for more. Show him how fun the game is by throwing yourself into it with everything you’ve got. In the Son-Rise Program® we call this “Entertaining.” Think of it like you are a movie he is watching. A movie does not ask him, you, or anybody to participate. It is just something you enjoy watching. Be his “living movie” for at least two minutes. If he is still looking at you after those two minutes, ask him to physically participate in the game you just presented. Taking the ideas listed above, you could:

- Give him the ball and ask him to drop it onto the racket
- Pick up a piece of pretend food to feed the puppet
- Hand him the jump rope to try skipping
- Ask him to play a turn for his favorite stuffed animal

If he does what you ask, give him a big, sweet celebration. Let him know how wonderful it is when he plays this way with you. If he does not do it, that is okay. Do not push him. If he is still looking at you, continue to play and ask again a little bit later.



Once he gets stronger at physically participating in a game with you, you can invite one of his cousins over for a very short practice play date. By short, I meant just 30 minutes. Talk to your son about a game you can all play together. Give him a choice of three you know he likes and can easily do. It might be a choice between working on a puzzle, playing catch, or playing his favorite board game. When the cousin comes over, you spend 15 minutes playing the chosen game, then 15 minutes having a snack and chatting. That's it. I am a great fan of doing play dates in short bursts so they can end on a note of success. Sometimes when things are going well, we tend to extend the time, and then we push past what is comfortable for our children. This creates stress. Once the 30-minute play dates are easy for your son, you can extend them to 45 minutes, then an hour, and so forth.

Don't forget to send in your questions; you can do so here at [submissions@exceptionalneedstoday.com](mailto:submissions@exceptionalneedstoday.com). I wish you a wonderful start to your year! Have the best time playing with and enjoying your beautiful loved ones. See you in March!

*Kate C. Wilde has spent the past 30 years working with children and adults on the autism spectrum and their families, as well as with therapists, educators, and schools. She is the author of the acclaimed books, Autistic Logistics: A Parent's Guide to Tackling Bedtime, Toilet Training, Tantrums, Hitting, and Other Everyday Challenges and The Autism Language Launcher: A Parent's*

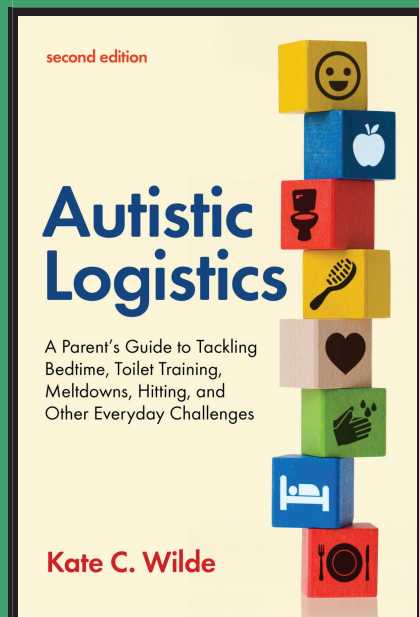
*Guide to Helping Your Child Turn Sounds and Words into Simple Conversations, and is renowned for the well-attended courses she teaches throughout the US, Europe, and Asia. Her YouTube autism quick tip videos, delivered with her trademark infectious enthusiasm, have garnered a following worldwide.*

Websites: <https://www.katecwilde.com/>,  
<https://www.autismcrisisturnaround.com/>

## IN SEARCH OF PERSONALIZED EXPERT GUIDANCE?

Send us your parenting questions, woes, concerns, and tricky situations with your beautiful, exceptional children. This includes all you amazing professionals out there. Kate will answer up to five questions in every issue in her Kate Makes it Great! column. Kate has worked with children and adults on the spectrum for the past 30 years. She has clocked more than 20,000 therapy hours and has worked with well over 1,500 different children. Whatever you are facing today, Kate has most likely experienced it in some form. Her answers will be practical, doable, inspiring, optimistic, down to earth, and real. Together there is nothing we cannot face with a little joy and love.

Submit your questions to [submissions@exceptionalneedstoday.com](mailto:submissions@exceptionalneedstoday.com)



## Have you ever wished there was a manual for parenting children on the autism spectrum?



*Autistic Logistics* provides just that, offering clear, precise, step-by-step advice on everything you want to know, including:

- How to toilet train your child without pushing or pressuring
- How to get your child to sleep in their own bed and through the night
- What to do when your child misbehaves / lashes out, hits or bites
- How to introduce new foods without a fight

*"I am a paediatrician who works with children who have autism. I am also a mother of a child with autism... I speak from the most authentic place I can find when I say that this book is GOLD!"*

*-- Wendy Edwards, Pediatrician*

TO PURCHASE ON AMAZON

<https://www.amazon.com/Autistic-Logistics-Tackling-Meltdowns-Challenges/>