

Destination Friendship

Developing Social Skills for Individuals With Autism Spectrum Disorders or Other Social Challenges



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Table of Contents

Foreword 1

Section I: Mapping out the Journey

1 Introduction to *Destination Friendship* 3
2 The Importance of Friendship 5
3 The Friendship Skills Checklist and Intervention Strategies..... 9
4 Linking *Destination Friendship* Strategies to Existing Research..... 55
5 Getting Started..... 71

Section II: Activities

6 Orientation Session 79
7 Introductory Session – Meeting New Friends 105
8 Special Interest Sharing 131
9 Board Game Night..... 155
10 Active Game Night 175
11 Video Game Night..... 199
12 Movie Night..... 219
13 Taste-Testing Tour 237
14 Night of Celebrations 259
References 279

Section III: Appendix

Research Table and Comprehensive List of Strategies..... 283
Index of Strategies 292
Forms:
Friendship Skills Checklist..... 295
Interest Survey..... 298
Calendar Blank..... 300
Group Form – Form Tracker..... 301

Group Form – Emergency Contact Information	302
Group Form – Media Release	303
Group Form – Participant Information	304
Group Form – Attendance Log	305
Flyer	306
Magnificent Moments Poster.....	307
Magnificent Moments Chart	308
Orientation: Meet the Tour Guides – Scrapbook Page.....	309
Introductory Session: Meeting New Friends – My Scrapbook Cover	310
Special Interest Sharing Scripts for Sharing.....	311
Special Interest Sharing Scrapbook Page	312
Board Game Scrapbook Page	313
Active Game Scrapbook Page.....	314
Video Game Scrapbook Page	315
Movie Night Scrapbook Page.....	316
Taste Testing Night Scrapbook Page	317
Night of Celebrations Scrapbook Page	318
Friendship Trail Mix.....	319
Blank Certificate of Achievement – Girl.....	320
Blank Certificate of Achievement – Boy.....	321

Foreword

Research has shown that social skills instruction in groups, an evidence-based practice (EBP), is related to (a) increases in academic skills, (b) decreased anxiety, and (c) fewer challenging behaviors. Critics of this body of research discuss its limitations, including lack of generalization (cf., Rao, Beidel, & Murray, 2008). According to Beidel, Turner, and Morris (2000) and Krasny, Williams, Provencal, and Ozonoff (2003), one way of ensuring generalization is programmed practice in naturalistic settings.

Mary Benton, Carol Hollis, Kelly Mahler, and Alice Womer, in their innovative curriculum, have made generalization a central theme. That is, social skills use is coached in actual social situations, making instruction relevant to the learners. To the point, this book is elegant and ground-breaking in its simplicity – teach social skills in the setting in which they will be used.

The authors succinctly introduce their curriculum as follows, “The ***Destination Friendship*** model presents a shift away from current trends that teach discrete ... skills in isolated situations. Our model immediately infuses and weaves the ideas and principles of effective ISP [Intuitive Social Processing] into every fun activity. From the initial session, participants are exposed to the idea that what they say and do has a direct impact (positive/negative) on those with whom they are paired. Adult Tour Guides (TGs) act as a personal GPS system, guiding participants through social activities and situations. Much like the popular navigation systems, this ‘personal GPS system’ provides direct visual and verbal feedback to guide students to their destination of friendships” (p. 8).

How many accolades are too many? Let me briefly say: This book is brilliant! Here are some examples:

1. Two special educators, a speech-language pathologist, and an occupational therapist teamed to write this book. They understand the complexity of autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and know that collaboration is the vehicle by which learning occurs for individuals on the spectrum.

2. Social skills instruction and supports are woven into social activities. Skills take into account context, and learners have opportunities for immediate practice and feedback.
3. Adults are “tour guides.” They do not disrupt social activities, but help learners with ASD navigate social situations.
4. Skills are taught using evidence-based practices (EBP).
5. The results of an easy-to-use, yet comprehensive assessment and interest inventory are used to guide social instruction and support.
6. The authors specifically tell users that these activities are supposed to be “light-hearted and fun.” This is refreshing because, in general, the link between enjoyment and social interactions is not emphasized enough.
7. The authors illustrate that BCBA’s can collaborate with others and integrate applied behavior analysis (ABA) strategies into real-life situations. It’s sad that this needs to be mentioned, but too many people think that ABA only occurs in isolated settings at a table.
8. This program was created by practitioners. ***Destination Friendship*** is well organized, easy to follow, contains all the necessary elements for immediate use and can be implemented in school or clinical settings. The skills are meaningful; they are linked to strategies.
9. *Destination Friendship* acknowledges that practitioners from various backgrounds can teach social skills, and for those who have not attempted social skills instruction before, the steps outlined in this book make this task a simple one.
10. When learners demonstrate a skill, it is identified as a “magnificent moment.” What can be better than that?
 - Brenda Smith Myles, Ph.D., a consultant with the Ziggurat Group, is the recipient of the 2004 Autism Society of America’s Outstanding Professional Award and the 2006 Princeton Fellowship Award. She has written numerous articles and books on Asperger Syndrome and autism, including *Asperger Syndrome and Difficult Moments: Practical Solutions for Tantrums, Rage, and Meltdowns* (with Southwick) and *Asperger Syndrome and Adolescence: Practical Solutions for School Success* (with Adreon). The latter is the winner of the Autism Society of America’s 2002 Outstanding Literary Work.

CHAPTER 1



Introduction to *Destination Friendship*

Many years ago, co-author Carol Hollis dreamed of providing an opportunity for individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) to come together, participate in fun activities and build relationships all the while improving friendship skills. Once she partnered with co-authors Mary Benton, Kelly Mahler, and Alice Womer, the journey towards ***Destination Friendship*** began. The four Tour Guides (TG) created ***Destination Friendship*** and offered it to individuals with ASD in the community. The four TGs immediately started noticing many magical results. The ***Destination Friendship*** participants were having fun, building self-esteem, improving crucial friendship skills and developing relationships. Participants, some of whom had struggled with friendship skills for years, were finally making the connections that they were seeking. Some were leaving the ***Destination Friendship*** experience with their very first invites to birthday parties, play dates, and get-togethers within the community.

Over the years of providing ***Destination Friendship***, we have had the joy of witnessing many magical moments. This book was written with the hope of spreading this magic to many more individuals with ASD. It provides a roadmap for the reader to follow when teaching friendship skills. The book provides a series of theme-based sessions and a large selection of fun activities. It also includes subtle strategies designed to target a wide variety of skills that are necessary to foster friendships.

The activities and strategies have been successfully implemented with children of varying ages from elementary through the high school years. Further, generalization of skills beyond the group has been achieved as reported to us by both parents and the children themselves.

The ***Destination Friendship*** model is based on the philosophy that all participants should be accepted for who they are and should be guided and supported to grow in a positive way as they develop friendship skills. Furthermore, participants are encouraged to be proud of who they are and the interests they love. They are never made to feel “different.”

*Colten, a 12-year-old, came to Special Interest Sharing Night with his special interest in a plastic bag. When it was his turn to share with the group, he pulled his most prized possession out of the bag – his teddy bear. The other participants did not act as if it was “different” or unusual for a 12-year-old to bring a teddy bear to share with a group of people he recently met. Colten shared his information about his teddy bear and the group demonstrated interest by asking many questions about his special bear. By the end of his sharing, Colten was beaming from ear to ear and shared that he felt so good. Colten later reported to the TGs that **Destination Friendship** was the first place where he felt like people really respected and listened to him.*

Before embarking on the friendship journey, we feel it is important that TGs embrace the following beliefs:

1. It is important to celebrate and openly value the strengths and talents of each participant. An upbeat and encouraging environment is a MUST!
2. All sessions should be centered on activities that are motivating, fun and common leisure pursuits of participants.
3. Building friendship skills is absolutely crucial, but it should be done by using non-intrusive, easy-to-implement strategies – no long, boring “lessons,” worksheets, etc.
4. The concept of Intuitive Social Processing (ISP) should be integrated into all activities (for more information on Intuitive Social Processing, see Chapter 2).

We sincerely hope this resource will allow more individuals with ASD to achieve positive and meaningful friendships.