



# Student Wellbeing Hub

## Positive relationships

Module 2  
Year 9



Teaching resource for  
students with autism

## Contents

Introduction .....	3
Australian Curriculum .....	3
Expressing feelings about and to others in person .....	4
Introduction to expressing feelings .....	4
Teaching activity 1: Think, pair, share – sharing feelings in person .....	5
Teaching activity 2: Expressing feelings about and to others in person .....	8
Expressing feelings about and to others online.....	10
Teaching activity 3: Think, pair, share – using social media .....	10
Teaching activity 4: Trust thermometer .....	11
Teaching activity 5: When are you happiest using social media? .....	13
Analyse the factors that need to be considered before reciprocating feelings online .....	13
Teaching activity 6: Group role-play .....	14
Recognising disrespectful or unhealthy relationships.....	16
Analyse the factors that make up respectful versus disrespectful friendships and interactions .....	18
Teaching activity 7: Create a poster showing the good qualities of a good friend .....	22
Teaching activity 8: Create a ‘to do’ to demonstrate the qualities of a good friend .....	22
Teaching activity 9: Managing unhealthy interactions.....	23
Unsafe situations .....	25
Discussion.....	25
Scenario.....	25
Managing social rejection .....	31
Discussion.....	31
Scenarios for discussing possible responses.....	32

## Introduction

This resource is designed to support teachers of students with autism. It aims to help you as a teacher to understand some of the strengths and challenges that this diverse cohort of students brings to the topic. The core audience is teachers who work in mainstream schools rather than special schools.

The resource includes background information, links to resources designed for teacher use and resources that can be used with students.

The main areas that this module covers are:

- Expressing feelings about or to others in person
- Expressing feelings about or to others online
- Recognising disrespectful or unhealthy relationships
- Unsafe situations
- Managing social rejection

## Australian Curriculum

### [Achievement standard links:](#)

- By the end of Year 10, students critically analyse contextual factors that influence identities, relationships, decisions and behaviours.
- They analyse the impact attitudes and beliefs about diversity have on community connection and wellbeing.
- They evaluate the outcomes of emotional responses to different situations.
- They apply decision-making and problem-solving skills when taking action to enhance their own and others' health, safety and wellbeing.

## Expressing feelings about and to others in person

The learning intention of this section of the module is for students to understand and evaluate contextual factors involved in expressing feelings about and to others. Indicators of success are for students to be able to provide reasonable interpretations and safe responses to relevant scenarios.

By Year 9, students with autism may have increased interest in other people. However, they usually have to learn about social skills and personality development without the opportunity of peer group discussion and support that is available to typically developing teenagers. The intention of this module is to provide some opportunities for students to understand and evaluate contextual factors involved in expressing feelings about relationships and to provide students with strategies that are based on safe responses to situations.

### Introduction to expressing feelings



[Atypical<sup>1</sup>](#) is a television series told from the point of view of Sam, an 18-year-old on the autism spectrum. Sam decides it is time to go on a date, find a girlfriend and hopefully love. Screening some episodes from this series would be an ideal way to start this module. (Purchase or streaming account required)

Many students with autism are bullied. They may not realise that their behaviour is sometimes inappropriate or that others may wish to take advantage of them. They may find it difficult to differentiate between peers' attempts to initiate a friendship and instances of verbal aggression or bullying. If students disclose instances of bullying, make an appointment with them to discuss further with appropriate staff. Work with them on confident posture to minimise likelihood of further instances of bullying.



[Peer relationships and social interaction in secondary school for students with an ASD<sup>2</sup>](#)

This article by Dr Avril V. Brereton contains some more strategies for addressing this topic.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6315640/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/teachers/teachingresources/diversity/peerrelations.docx>

## Teaching activity 1: Think, pair, share – sharing feelings in person

In pairs, have the students discuss:

1. when they have successfully shared their feelings to or about another person
2. when expressing their feelings has led to a difficult situation.

In both cases, prompt them to think about the following:

Type of situation Contextual factors	Successful sharing of feelings	Sharing feelings led to difficulties
Who was involved (e.g. trusted person/ peer/not well-known, group/individual)?		
Where were we (public/private)?		
Was the feeling personal or not?		
Was the recipient of the feeling present or not?		
Did the recipient of the feeling, feel the same way?		
Were people sober, or were alcohol or drugs being used?		

## Extend Teaching activity 1

Analyse the factors that need to be considered before expressing feelings face to face

Feelings and emotions don't have to be related to dating or relationships to be difficult to manage or express. Find some video clips that provide quite exaggerated examples of behaviour – and are thus easy to analyse and to suggest more positive interactions. Sitcoms are a good source for this activity.

Watch the clips with the students and discuss:

1. What emotions were displayed by who in the video clips?
2. Were they handled well, or could they have been expressed more helpfully?

Analyse the factors involved in misinterpreting situations

Some students with autism may have difficulty in both identifying what is happening in a social scenario and in adjusting their behaviour in different social situations. The 'This Is Me: Challenges – Living and Social Skills' clips are a series of short cartoons showing situations where the main character has misinterpreted the situation. This leads to unpleasant outcomes of emotions for them.

Watch the three clips list below to discuss with students to identify how misinterpretations of scenarios can occur, and to identify strategies for more positive outcomes for each scenario.

- [Misreading social situations – Angry](https://vimeo.com/312181584)<sup>3</sup>
- [Living and social skills – Vulnerable with peers](https://vimeo.com/312180715)<sup>4</sup>
- [Living and social skills – Overreaction to touch](https://vimeo.com/312180174)<sup>5</sup>

### Discuss:

1. Why were things misinterpreted?
2. What steps could the main character have taken to clarify meaning?
3. Did the misinterpretations lead to emotions being expressed helpfully or unhelpfully?

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<sup>3</sup> <https://vimeo.com/312181584>

<sup>4</sup> <https://vimeo.com/312180715>

<sup>5</sup> <https://vimeo.com/312180174>



The video [Know the context when communicating](#)<sup>6</sup> is recommended for students wanting to explore this topic in more depth.

#### Additional tips for having positive interactions with others in person

- 1 Ensure you are calm – if need be, do an interoceptive activity or use an app like [Smiling Mind](#) to get you in the right frame of mind to interact positively.
- 2 Decide if you need to express the feelings or emotions out loud.
- 3 If you do, decide if it is better to do so privately – one-to-one – or if it is OK to do so in a group.
- 4 Use a confident posture – shoulders back, head up – and a confident and polite tone of voice.
- 5 Be respectful in the words and tone chosen.
- 6 Walk away from difficult or negative situations. (You can always say someone is waiting for you, so you need to leave.)

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<sup>6</sup> <https://youtu.be/5F5L-tNi334>

## Teaching activity 2: Expressing feelings about and to others in person

Arrange students into groups of two or three and provide one scenario (next page) per group. Groups can all have the same, or different scenarios.

### Group instructions

1. Spend 10 minutes reading and thinking about the scenario.
2. Assign character roles to two group members. The third person can take on the role of an observer. They can join in as per the group's script or, if this will be too uncomfortable, be given the role of timekeeper or script writer/creator.
3. Generate a 10–20 line script, with at least five exchanges between each of the people in the script. This can be written down using the script or storyboard drawing examples below.

### Example script template

Character – Jai	Character – Ro
Exchange 1:	Response:
Exchange 2:	Response:
Exchange 3:	Response:
Exchange 4:	Response:
Exchange 5:	Response:

### Example storyboard template



4. Role-play the script or storyboard for the rest of the group. This should take no more than 5 minutes.
5. Ask for feedback from the group about what the characters could have done differently to improve the way the feelings were expressed, and what they did helpfully. This should take no more than 5 minutes.
6. Revise the script to take into account all the suggestions to improve the way the feelings were expressed.



## Scenarios for expressing feelings

**Scenario:** Chip is really angry with Vy for not giving back a book Vy borrowed two weeks ago. Chip sees Vy in the yard at lunchtime and decides he wants to get his book back.

**Scenario:** Yesterday after school Sara kissed Al, then they texted back and forth until Sara's mum took her phone away for bedtime. Sara is on her way into school when she bumps into Al, who is with all his friends from the footy team.

**Scenario:** Jai and Ro are waiting outside the science room with their class. The teacher is coming towards them to let the class in. Jai has not done the homework and is really stressed about it. Jai knows Ro has done the homework, and it is probably done well. Jai wants to copy Ro's homework.

**Scenario:** Mira has been buying Jack lunch every day this term, but today she left her money at home. Mira has got no snacks or food to eat today and she can't buy any. Jack is waiting for her outside the canteen, expecting her to buy him lunch.

**Scenario:** Rob really wants to ask Lin to go on a date with him. He is sitting studying in the library when Lin comes and sits next to him. No one else is using the library because it is lunch time and they are either in the yard or in the computer room.

**Scenario:** Joe is walking down the street after school, thinking about how much he enjoys spending time with Bud, but how Bud doesn't seem to feel the same way. Joe sees Bud at Maccas and decides to go and talk with him about his feelings.



## Expressing feelings about and to others online

The learning intention of this section of the module is for students to understand and evaluate contextual factors involved in expressing feelings about and to others online. Indicators of success are for students to be able to provide reasonable interpretations and safe responses to relevant digital-based scenarios.

As explored in [Module 1 Year 9: Expressing feelings](#), students with autism may be more vulnerable than other teenagers online. This section of the module seeks to build on activities in that module to develop students' understandings of how online interactions may differ from face-to-face interactions, and strategies for staying safe online.

The Australian eSafety website offers up-to-date information about the following topics among others:



[Online gaming](#)<sup>7</sup>

[Trolling](#)<sup>8</sup>

[Unwanted contact – signs to look out for](#)<sup>9</sup>

[Violent or inappropriate content](#)<sup>10</sup>

[Catfishing](#)<sup>11</sup>

### Teaching activity 3: Think, pair, share – using social media

Use this activity to introduce the topic and analyse the factors that need to be considered before expressing feelings online. Ask the students in pairs, to think about and then share how they currently feel about using social media. You can use the following prompts to guide discussion. Putting them on the whiteboard or handing them out to students will help students with working memory difficulties.

- Do they feel connected or left out?
- Do they feel able to be themselves or pressured to be perfect?
- Do they feel supported or bullied?
- Are they active or passive users of social media?
- Are these feelings across all social media or just some forms of social media?

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.esafety.gov.au/young-people/online-gaming>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.esafety.gov.au/young-people/trolling>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.esafety.gov.au/young-people/unwanted-contact-signs>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.esafety.gov.au/young-people/violent-inappropriate-content>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.esafety.gov.au/young-people/catfishing>

### Extend Teaching activity 3



Screen the video [Is social media making you sick?](https://ww2.kqed.org/education/2017/04/12/is-social-media-making-you-sick/)<sup>12</sup>

Ask the students to listen carefully to all the information as they will be discussing it afterwards.

#### Discuss:

- Can you become good friends in real life with someone you met online?
- What do you have to think about before video chatting with them?
- What do you have to think about before giving them your phone number or asking them for theirs?
- If they tell you not to tell your parents, what should you do?
- What safety precautions should you take if you are going to meet up with them in real life?
- Can you be someone's intimate partner if you only know them online?
- Is it OK if an online friend asks you not to date anyone because they love you?

### Teaching activity 4: Trust thermometer

Ask all the students to read the excerpt from the article by Mike Fahey:



[Are your online gaming friends your real friends](https://www.kotaku.com.au/2010/07/are-your-online-gaming-friends-really-your-friends/)<sup>13</sup>

Explore the following questions:

- Are we labelling these people (online players) friends out of convenience, or is the definition of friend changing with the times?
- How do people show friendship during online games?
- What happens to the friendship if you quit a game?

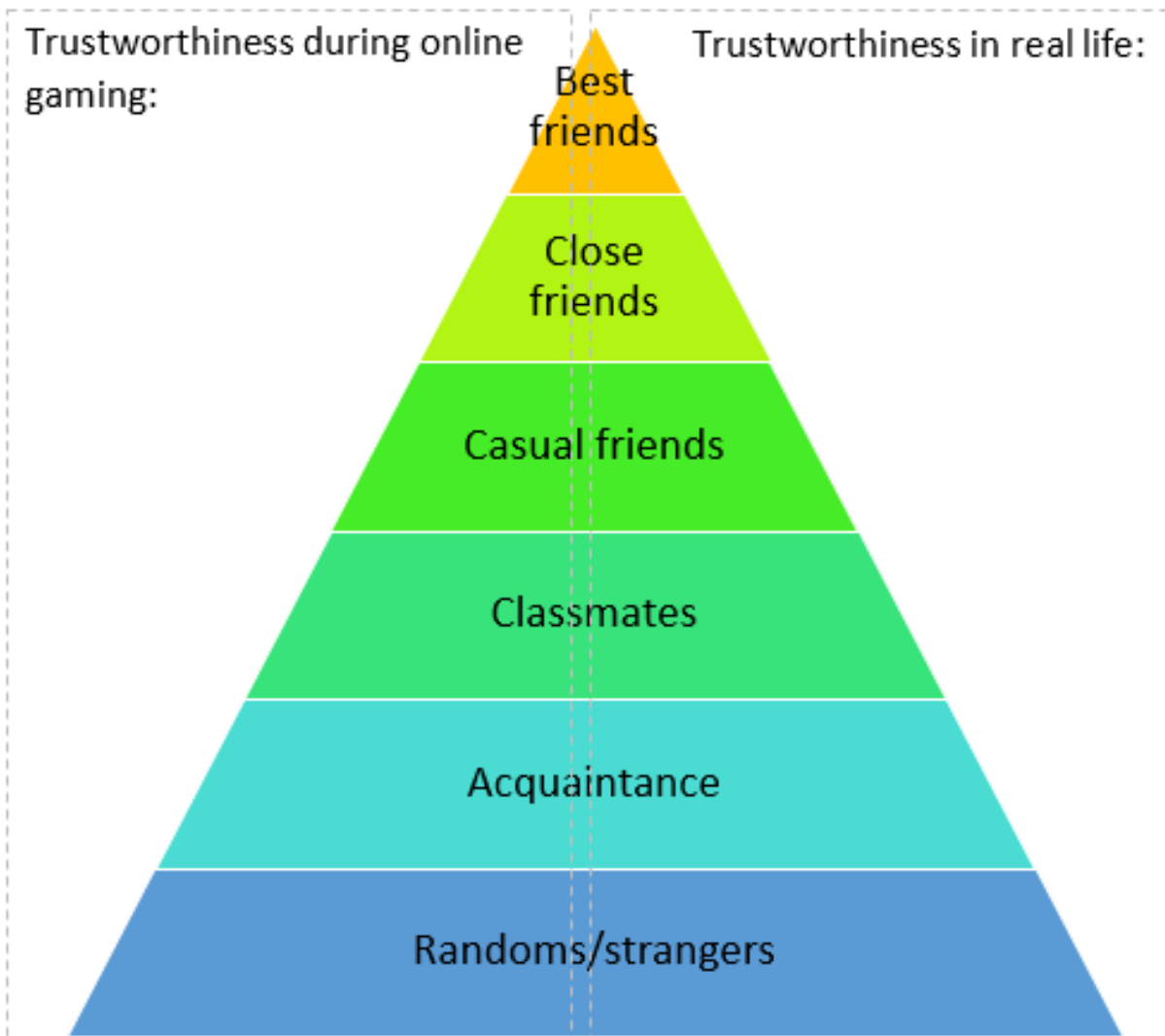
Then, ask students to complete the Trust thermometer (worksheet next page) with which types of friends they would trust, and at what level, in real life and online. It is important to note that many students with autism enjoy online friends with whom they interact over many years in a supportive and positive way, without fear of being judged as weird or not 'normal enough' by the other people.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://ww2.kqed.org/education/2017/04/12/is-social-media-making-you-sick/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.kotaku.com.au/2010/07/are-your-online-gaming-friends-really-your-friends/>

Worksheet: Trust thermometer



Trustworthiness levels

No trust	Complete trust	No idea, don't know them
Low-level trust	Some trust with unimportant things	Trust with everything that isn't personal or important

### Teaching activity 5: When are you happiest using social media?

1. Write a descriptive paragraph about when you are happiest using social media. Be sure to explain which social media platform you are using, how you are using it and how much you are using it when you have this feeling.
2. In the paragraph, highlight or circle things that other people are doing that are a part of making your social media experience positive. If you didn't include anything around other people, write a few sentences to detail what other people are doing/saying/posting on social media to you that leads to you having positive emotions.
3. Write down all the ways that you could interact with others positively on social media, including what things you will *not* do.
4. Make a poster or slide presentation to help others understand how to use social media safely and happily.

### Analyse the factors that need to be considered before reciprocating feelings online

Young adults who struggle with social context and/or who want to be loved are vulnerable to being catfished online. Catfishing refers to someone who pretends on social media to be someone they're not in order to trick or attract other people To explore this topic watch the following video with students:



[Warning signs of a Catfish](#)<sup>14</sup>

Online gamers often forget about privacy, which can make them vulnerable. For each game, gamers should set the highest possible privacy controls. This may mean that in order to play a multiplayer game, individuals choose to sign up with a pseudonym, which makes it more likely that no one is who they say they are in these types of games.

The Australian eSafety website hosts the [eSafety guide](#) which includes tips about how to protect information and report inappropriate content.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://youtu.be/biyZRbgYtQU>

## Teaching activity 6: Group role-play

This role-play is designed to enable students to feel more confident online in their interactions, and to evaluate the difference between gaming friendships and friendships that can travel into other contexts. Using the photos and accompanying scenarios from the next page, ask students to discuss potential issues for all the people involved and make suggestions about the next steps.

Questions to cover include the following:

- Do the students think all people are being truthful?
- Is the conversation safe and respectful?
- Which actions are helpful and positive and which are taking advantage and disrespectful?
- What next steps are most positive?
- Has this kind of thing ever happened to them?
- If this kind of thing happens to them in the future, what will they do?

Steps to having positive interactions with others online:

1	Evaluate the other people's motives.
2	Evaluate where they are on the friendship and trustworthiness pyramid.
3	Only share personal things with trustworthy people. If in doubt, don't share.
4	Be polite and, if people are not polite back, block them and, if needed, report them.
5	Remember that many people are not who they say they are and once something is online it can never be removed from the internet completely.

## Scenarios for group role-play



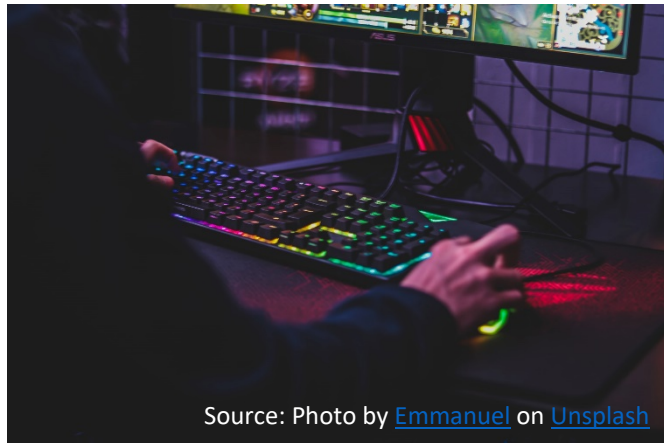
John loves designing objects. He has joined an online forum where people post their projects and how to make them.

Max has posted a 3D-printed gun.

Lauren wants Max to take the post down.

Alex is an online and real-life friend of John's. Alex told John at school that he is going to download the instructions for the 3D-printed gun.

Roles: John, Max, Lauren, Alex, teacher, John's mum, Alex's mum



Jimi just started playing World of Warcraft because his friend from school Billy has been telling him how much fun it is.

Jimi is not sure which character Billy is.

A character called Elfin34 is chatting to Jimi offering to help Jimi get better at the game if Jimi does everything she says.

Braveh83 has suggested that Jimi get a better avatar as his 'says noob' and is 'rubbish'.

MixGdEvl posed the question: 'What is worth killing for?'

Roles: Jimi, Billy, Elfin34, Braveh83, MixGdEvl



## Recognising disrespectful or unhealthy relationships

The learning intention of this section of the module is for students to understand which behaviours signal that a friendship is healthy and which signal that a friendship is disrespectful and/or toxic. Indicators of success are for students to be able to identify behaviours in media and in real life and accurately categorise them as healthy/respectful or unhealthy/disrespectful/toxic.

There is a growing body of evidence that this does not always happen and that students with an ASD may in fact have negative social outcomes. Findings to date have concluded that students with an ASD have fewer friends (Cairns and Cairns, 1994), have more limited social networks (Chamberlain et al., 2003), and experience more rejection from their peers than other children (Symes and Humphrey, 2011). Students with an ASD also report being bullied more than their peers (Humphrey and Symes, 2010a). Surveys of parents have also found that some parents report that their children attending secondary school struggle with a number of social related difficulties such as peer pressure, rejection, isolation and loneliness.

For more about this see the Secondary school factsheet: [Peer relationships and social interaction in secondary school for students with an ASD](#)<sup>15</sup>.

Several pieces of research have contributed to the finding that students with autism are less likely to take part in social activities than adolescents with speech and language disorders, learning disabilities or intellectual disability. In one study, more than 40 per cent of teenagers with autism never saw friends outside of school. Half were never invited to take part in activities. For 54 per cent, friends never called. For more on this research see [Autism in the teen years: what to expect, how to help](#)<sup>16</sup>.

Students on the autism spectrum are more likely to experience disrespectful behaviours from others and to remain in unhealthy or toxic relationships if they are not supported with

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/supportmaterials.aspx>

<sup>16</sup> [https://iancommunity.org/cs/simons\\_simplex\\_community/autism\\_in\\_teens](https://iancommunity.org/cs/simons_simplex_community/autism_in_teens)



skills and knowledge in recognising unhealthy/disrespectful/toxic behaviours for what they are. It is important to teach them what to do next if they are in disrespectful situations as well as to give them the skills to be a good friend to others.

## Analyse the factors that make up respectful versus disrespectful friendships and interactions

Introduce this topic with the video from Bright Side:



[10 differences between good friends and toxic friends](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=774HJQ9AdRk)<sup>17</sup>

A transcript for the video has been provided on the next page.

In facilitating a discussion about the video, ask some of the following questions:

- This is a video that focuses mostly on adult friendships – which parts of the video felt relevant to friendships that teenagers have?
- What advice do you think is most important?
- The video gives examples of friends who behave badly all the time – who are ‘toxic’. Can people change their habits? Is it possible to make positive changes to a friendship? How does this happen?
- How do you deal with people who are disrespectful, who act in some of the ways that the video describes? Do you have to put up with bad behaviour for the sake of a friendship?
- What can you do if someone is treating you with a lack of respect?
- Select one or more of the scenarios to workshop and to identify concrete strategies as an outcome. For example, **Toxic friends say things they shouldn't say and they always add, 'I shouldn't have told you this'**. If your friend tells you other people's secrets, it means they would spread your secrets as well. Just avoid their company. Gossip is not the best pastime.

The focus is on enabling students to identify elements of a friendship that are problematic and those that are positive, and to recognise that people have agency in relationships and the capacity to positively shift dynamics. Take into account the possible scenario that some of your students may not have many friends.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://youtu.be/774HJQ9AdRk>

Transcript: [Ten differences between good friends and toxic friends](#)<sup>18</sup>

We all know the phrase 'A friend in need is a friend indeed'. But did you know the difference between good friends and toxic friends? Well? We all have that one friend who's bad-tempered, a little jealous and somewhat conceited. Do you think he or she is a true friend [to] you?

Let's see. Today, we've got 10 major differences between good friends and toxic friends that you should consider, and don't forget to hit that [thumbs] up button. Because it's important for us.

### **Number 1**

#### ***Good friends celebrate your success***

They're really happy with your promotion at work, your new relationships or even your new shiny car. They'll be the first to call you and say, 'Hey, well done. Congratulations! Let's go out and celebrate. They're always very proud of you.

#### ***Toxic friends get jealous of your achievements***

Even your smallest achievements enrage them. They cannot put up with the idea that someone's [business] is going well. They can like your photos on Instagram, but when you meet them in person it's easy to notice they're jealous of you. It's literally written on their faces.

### **Number 2**

#### ***Good friends know the importance of your alone time***

Sometimes we all can't stand the hustle and bustle of big cities, so we need our private time. Spend this time on meditating, thinking, reading good books or walking. Our true friends understand this and never get offended – even if we cancel weekend plans with them.

#### ***Toxic friends try to occupy all your time***

They're like spiders. They literally need all your time and attention. They easily get offended when you want to spend some time alone and complain about you to others. You always feel guilty when [you] say no to them.

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<sup>18</sup><https://youtu.be/774HJQ9AdRk>

### **Number 3**

#### ***Good friends are caring and empathetic***

They say, 'Wow you look great!' even if you have bed hair and are wearing a rubbish T-shirt. They never judge your appearance, and they always know how to cheer you up.

#### ***Toxic friends judge and criticise you***

'Oh. Where'd you get that weird hat. You look terrible.' They never miss an opportunity [to] point out your shortcomings, even the smallest ones. They hide behind the phrase, 'I just want to help you', but they don't help at all. They make you feel awkward and uncomfortable.

### **Number 4**

#### ***Good friends respect you and value your friendship***

You're a very important person for them, so they know how to argue without being personal. Also, if something goes wrong when you travel together, they'll just laugh at all the troubles.

#### ***Toxic friends lose their tempers easily***

They can even shout at you in front of other friends or in public. If something goes wrong, or not according to their plan, they lose their temper very quickly and become a monster.

### **Number 5**

#### ***Good friends enjoy exchanging opinions***

They're interested in your opinion and always listen to you if they disagree with you. 'I'll express it in the mildest form.'

#### ***Toxic friends only want to win an argument***

They hardly reckon with your opinion because they think that only they are right and they try to prove it by any means.

### **Number 6**

#### ***Good friends believe your words***

Well of course they won't believe you if you say you're moving to Mars next weekend. But they usually believe all your stories when you tell them something interesting, for instance, from documentaries. They believe every word.

#### ***Toxic friends doubt everything you say***

They're like, 'Are you sure? I think it's better to ask Google.' No matter what you say they always want to double-check.

## Number 7

### ***Good friends call you because they miss you***

'How was your day?' 'Is everything okay?' If you miss your class or work, they'll be the first to call to ask whether you're alright. They miss you, and they worry about you.

### ***Toxic friends find you only when they need your help***

'Hey, can you pick me up right now? Help me with my work, walk my dog. No? Come on we're old friends.'

## Number 8

### ***Good friends accept you the way you are***

Even if you wear all bright colours together, sing on the streets, or spend all your weekends riding a canoe, they appreciate your things. They don't care, they love you.

### ***Toxic friends try to change and control you***

They always say something like, 'What's better for you is ...' or, 'You have to try this'. They find it hard to reconcile themselves with your lifestyle. Let's be honest, their advice is so annoying.

## Number 9

### ***Good friends know that everyone has their friends, and they won't judge you for that***

They might even become good friends with your other friends if you introduce them to each other. If not, they'll still respect the fact that you like to spend time with your other friends and colleagues.

### ***Toxic friends don't like your other friends***

Remember they're like spiders. They don't want to share you with other people and even with your family. They always want to be the centre of your life.

## Number 10

### ***Good friends know how to keep a secret***

If you tell them, please don't tell anyone they'll take it seriously. Don't worry, your secrets won't fly around the world.

### ***Toxic friends say things they shouldn't say and they always add, 'I shouldn't have told you this'.***

If your friend tells you other people's secrets, it means he or she would spread your secrets as well. Just avoid their company. Gossip is not the best pastime.

So, have you recognised some of your friends?

### Teaching activity 7: Create a poster showing the good qualities of a good friend

Ask the students to create a poster showing the qualities of a good friend.

Discuss: What qualities of a good friend do each of the students already possess and which ones do they want to work on next.

### Teaching activity 8: Create a 'to do' list to demonstrate the qualities of a good friend

As a group create a 'to do' list that will demonstrate the qualities of a good friend that each of the students is wanting to work on.

Discuss: Are the people in the picture below behaving like good friends? Why do you think that?



Image: [MoteOo/pixabay](https://pixabay.com/)

## Teaching activity 9: Managing unhealthy interactions

This activity explores strategies for managing difficult people.

Social psychologist Dr David McClelland was an expert on human motivation. He completed a 25-year study on the characteristics of achievement motivated people. He found that the single most important factor in success is the 'reference group' comprising the people with whom you live, work, and interact with on a daily basis.

Together with the students, watch the following video from Philosophies for Life, which details the six common types of personalities that create disrespectful interactions, providing strategies to either ignore them or manage the situations created by the personalities.



[How to ignore people<sup>19</sup>](https://youtu.be/IYlxm7qQP00)

The video can either be watched in six different sessions with a discussion after each part, or in one sitting. Provide students with the worksheet on the next page to use before or after watching the video.


The six types of people are:

1. the hopelessly hostile drama queen
2. the person you have failed to please a hundred times before
3. the naysayer who always dumps on your dreams
4. the manipulator
5. the stubborn one who insists you should be someone else
6. the unforgiving friend who refuses to forgive you for your mistakes.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://youtu.be/IYlxm7qQP00>

Worksheet: Managing unhealthy interactions

Type of disrespectful 'friend'	Characteristics and example behaviours	Helpful ways to respond 
The hopelessly hostile drama queen		
The person you have failed to please a hundred times before		
The naysayer who always dumps on your dreams		
The manipulator		
The stubborn one who insists you should be someone else		
The unforgiving friend who refuses to forgive you for your mistakes		

Notes/comments:

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## Unsafe situations

The learning intention of this section of the module is for students to be aware that some situations are safe and others are not. Indicators of success are for students to understand that they need to take context into account before responding to other people's emotions and/or behaviour, to maximise their own personal safety

### Discussion

- Ask the students if they have been in situations where other people have been expressing strong emotions or behaving in inappropriate ways. Ask them to think about context. Is screaming at a footy match OK? What about screaming in a library?
- Ask them how they felt when they were in the situations where other people were expressing strong emotions or behaving in inappropriate ways.

If none of the students say that they became scared or overwhelmed, provide them with the fictional scenario below that resulted in overload. The goal of this discussion is to help students understand that sometimes other people's behaviour and/or emotions can actually trigger their own anger or overload.

### Scenario

Lin is a teen with autism. She was waiting at the bus stop to get the bus home from the library. A group of very drunk adults approached the bus stop. They were shouting and pushing each other. Lin was quite frightened as she was worried they might hurt her. Also, the noise was hurting her ears and she didn't have her headphones. Lin put her hands over her ears and one of the drunk adults pointed at her and laughed. Lin's anxiety increased so much that she got overloaded and went into survival mode. Lin stood up and hit the man nearest to her and then ran away.

### Strategies

Facilitate a discussion about the types of strategies Lin might have to manage her fear. The scenario mentions headphones. What other strategies might assist Lin if she is feeling this way? What help might be available, if any? This scenario is potentially scary for any young teenager – in what ways might someone stay safe?

If students have completed [Module 1: Expressing feelings \(Year 9\)](#)<sup>20</sup>, it is likely that they will be familiar with strategies they can use to both manage unsafe situations and seek help when they feel overwhelmed or in the midst of a 'big emotion'.

Tell the students that you are all going to read the article: **How to prevent your anger from spiralling out of control** (next page). Students will develop a better understanding of anger and aggression and how they differ. This article will also provide students with some practical tips for managing their own reactions to situations and people that are overwhelming.



Note that reactive aggression is unlikely to be a successful strategy for dealing with physical bullying and aggression from peers. It often makes the problem worse. Teach the student with autism how to report incidents to a teacher or other member of staff. Write down what they are to do and who to talk to when they have been bullied. Teach them to walk away from the incident so that it does not escalate. (It is known that students with an ASD are more likely to seek help when they are being bullied if they feel that the person they confide in can be trusted and will help them (Humphrey and Symes, 2010b).

Adapted from [Peer relationships and social interaction in secondary school for students with an ASD](#)<sup>21</sup>

Ask the students to read the text either silently by themselves or taking turns aloud, as a group. Have them highlight whatever information they find helpful or useful for themselves. At the end, have students share two or three of these helpful/useful pieces of information.

Alternatively, give students a digital version of the text and ask them to find appropriate images to illustrate a number of the points made in the article.

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<sup>20</sup> <https://studentwellbeinghub.edu.au/media/10645/mod-1-yr-9-expressing-feelings.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/supportmaterials.aspx>



## Article: How to prevent your anger from spiralling out of control

Adapted from [How to prevent your anger from spiralling out of control](#)<sup>22</sup>, George Dvorsky.

### Section 1

#### About anger

Think of the character Anger in the 2014 Pixar film [Inside out](#)<sup>23</sup>. Anger is well-meaning, and he helps Riley's emotional collective by staying on top of things.

But the only way he knows how to get anyone's attention is by getting angry. He's comfortable with his anger, and it makes him happy. But when things don't go his way, or if pushed too far, the top of his head bursts into flames. When this happens, Anger is not just angry – he's in a rage, and the consequences are often damaging and even frightening.

There's a reason why we get angry. When we are threatened, it motivates us to defend ourselves, to find solutions to problems and to identify when someone is abusing us or using us. Anger is a perfectly normal human emotion. But it can get us into big trouble. Anger can lead to aggression but they are not the same thing. However, in 90% of cases, anger is there before the aggressive act takes place.

We can recognise the signs of anger inside our body. We feel it as heat in the face, we clench our teeth or fists and our heart races. It's often accompanied by angry thoughts where we internally attack, blame, or criticise someone.

Other common gestures of anger include swearing, yelling, arguing, insulting, sarcasm, pounding fists on a table, knocking things over and giving the middle finger. For some, anger can escalate into physical expression, including pushing, shoving and hitting. Anger is also an emotional state.

Anger starts to become a problem when it leads to rage and aggressive behaviours. Can you feel the difference – when you are angry, and when you are in a rage?

#### Is it OK to be angry?

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.gizmodo.com.au/2015/11/how-to-prevent-your-anger-from-spiraling-out-of-control/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2096673/>

Katharine King is a psychotherapist who has a lot of experience working with people who are angry a lot. She says, 'Anger is a signpost; anger has a story to tell. When we are not treated with respect, or when our boundaries are violated, we understandably feel angry.'

BUT ...

Barbara Brown, another psychotherapist, says that anger can be a problem when it is out of proportion with what has happened to cause the anger. 'For some folks it's like the "anger switch" is on all the time, and that is harmful to that person's health and their relationships,' says Brown.

### **Causes of anger**

Some of us are more likely to get angry than others.

**Stop here** and discuss:

Some of us are more likely to get angry than others.

What might cause some of us to feel like that?

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## **Section 2**

### **Causes of anger**

Some of us are more likely to get angry than others. They might have a low tolerance for frustration, inconvenience and annoyance. They can't take things in their stride, are over-sensitive and become infuriated when a situation seems unfair.

There are triggers that make anyone angry — such as lack of respect, support, acknowledgement and control.

Some people in our society are more subject to discrimination, exclusion, and judgement.

### **Effective ways to communicate anger**

The psychotherapist Katherine King says there are effective ways to communicate anger — ways that will be heard by others and will not discredit the angry person or put them at risk. She calls this 'assertiveness'.

### **Managing anger**

If you don't manage your anger, it can impact on you and on the ways that other people see you and relate to you.

For you – if you bottle up your anger, it can leave you feeling upset all the time, or cynical or over-critical or hostile towards people. You might pay out on people in negative ways. Not a nice person to be around!

If you can identify when you are angry, and have strategies that help you deal with that anger, you are less likely to damage relationships – and to feel shame or isolation as a result of moving into rage or aggression. This requires some conscious self-examination. We may not have control over a situation that angers us, but there are many things we can do to control the way we respond.

### **Recognise your personal anger cues**

We all have our own distinct 'anger cues'. They are the thoughts we think, the ways we act and the way we feel when we're angry. By recognising these cues, we can catch our anger quickly and re-adjust.

Psychotherapist Barbara Brown says:

#### **Before responding**

- Taking a moment to acknowledge the anger before acting can help a lot.
- Slowing your body down or walking away for a while before acting can help, as long as you don't take that time simply to 'stew' over the things you're angry about.
- You can ask a neutral person to help you think through the situation to evaluate if your anger is justified, and if it is, get advice on how to manage the problem effectively.

#### **Communicate constructively**

It's OK (under most circumstances) to say that you are angry but it has to be done in a way that is not aggressive.

- We should make our needs clear, and tell others how those needs can be met. This is often done through 'I' statements such as 'When you \_\_\_\_\_, I feel \_\_\_\_\_'.
- You will find lots of examples of how this works if you search on the web.
- This should be done in way that's calm, and not hurtful or harming to others. We can still be assertive without coming across as being pushy, belligerent or demanding.

### **Reframe the situation**

Is it worth getting angry about? For example, it's not unreasonable to get angry at someone when they cancel on us at the last minute. A good way of reframing the situation is to remember that *disappointment* is the main feeling, and that there are other positive things we can now do in place of getting together. Is what you are angry about a big deal? Would other people see it the same way? Can you talk to someone to get another perspective on the issue?

### **Avoid exaggeration**

When we get mad, we often escalate things in our mind by saying things like, 'This is the worst thing that has ever happened' and 'Everything's ruined'. That kind of thinking can really send you down the mine. Try not to use words like 'never' and 'always'.

### **Convert to problem-solving**

Once we recognise that anger is brewing within us, we can stop and think about it, and then focus our attention elsewhere. Alternatively, the anger can be converted into constructive, problem-solving behaviour.

Lastly, remind yourself that anger on its own (it's just an emotion, after all) is not the solution to a problem or situation and in fact it may make things worse.

### **What helps you?**

Some people use humour to distract them when they are angry – they turn what has happened into a funny story. Others use mindfulness or meditation or exercise. Learn the ways in which you can turn down the dial on your anger – learn what works for you.

Everyone is different!

### **Revisit and deconstruct your anger response**

The US National Institutes of Health offers a simple intervention tool to help people gain control over their anger in response to repeated provocative events. The tool is basically a list of five questions:

1. What was the first sign that I was angry?
2. What triggered it?
3. How did I respond to this event?
4. What did I do well this time?
5. What will I do better the next time this event occurs?

## Managing social rejection

The learning intention of this section of the module is for students to understand that some social rejection is inevitable and that intent is contextual and needs to be taken into account in processing the issues. Indicators of success are for students to understand that when people are genuinely busy, it is OK that people say no, and it is not personal.

Developing the social and communicative skills of students with autism, particularly in the areas of understanding when a social initiation has been made, is a relatively new area of research. Some evidence is emerging that social communication skills can improve by combining cognitive behaviour therapy principles and techniques with computer-mediated games to teach the understanding of collaboration and conversation. Try practicing problem-solving, concept clarification, role-play and feedback and behavioural rehearsals with the student.

Adapted from [Peer relationships and social interaction in secondary school for students with an ASD](#)<sup>24</sup>

Explain that it is normal to have felt some instances of rejection. Handle this subject delicately – for some of your students, this may be a common scenario. The aim is to tease out the variety of experiences and that responses can vary. You might like to start with this film clip from *Atypical* titled [Date announcement](#)<sup>25</sup>. In the clip, Sam and his mother talk about the fear that is inherent in beginning relationships.

### Discussion

Move onto a more general conversation about the topic of rejection. You can express the questions in a more distanced way if appropriate – see variations below.

- What are your experiences with rejection?
- Have you said no or ignored someone?
- How do you feel about rejection? Do you always feel the same, no matter what kind of rejection it is?

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<sup>24</sup> <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/supportmaterials.aspx>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CFH8cYGmfFA>

## Variation

- What kinds of forms of rejection have you seen in films and TV?
- How do people respond? Do people always react in the same way? What feelings are expressed?
- Does it ever happen that the person who is rejected goes on to reject someone else? Or to reject the person (in turn) who has rejected them? What is the dynamic here?

In supporting students with autism around the topic of social rejection, the advice is to: 'Try practising problem-solving, concept clarification, role-play, and feedback and behavioural rehearsals with the student.'

## Scenarios for discussing possible responses

Ask students to think of a strategy to respond to the following scenarios:

1. You ask your friend to come to the movies on Saturday. They say no because they have to work.
2. You ask someone out on a date. They say no politely, but the people next to them start laughing and you hear them say you are weird.

It is important to end this activity in a way that acknowledges the strengths that students bring to discussion of the scenarios.





# Student Wellbeing Hub

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