

Building a Social Network

By Melanie K. Milicevic, BA

One teacher and mom with a child on the spectrum shares some ways to help develop social skills and a social network.

Over the past ten years, one of my chief goals has been to help my son develop strong [social skills](#) and a social network. I recognize that socializing isn't his preferred activity, but as a savvy social butterfly, I made it my mission to help him become as social as possible.

In the end, what matters most in life is the ability to make connections and adapt to challenging environments. These are the keys to professional and personal success. Here are some strategies to help develop your neurodiverse child's or [teen's](#) abilities to perform well in social communities.



Special needs sports

My first tip comes from years of experience with special needs sports teams. We are extremely fortunate to live in a time when our kids have access to various special needs sports. Our kids can participate in many teams and groups, and I'm here to encourage you to try every single team you can find in your city.

Though I was quite apprehensive every time we tried something new, I never regretted a single activity. As each professional opportunity in your life brings about new chances for growth, so does each sport or group your child attempts to join.

One of our first sports was special needs baseball. Our buddy, Josh, and his mom, Heather, are still in our lives. This four-year journey with the Champions Team was our introduction to special needs sports. My son has developed so much in these four years; having the same buddy was a tremendous gift. It allowed my son to trust someone and build a [relationship](#) outside our family.

In the meantime, he learned to hit and run after the ball, run those bases, stand during the national anthem, sit on a bench, and cheer for and encourage others. Being a part of the team was, without a doubt, a huge opportunity. He wore a uniform once a week, and we got out of the house.

At that time, our home felt more like an [occupational therapist's](#) office. However, we



Melanie's son and his buddy, Josh

enjoyed some fresh air with some incredible people every Saturday. I cherish these memories and the friendships formed, even though many were not long-lasting. I am still very grateful that I had the support and love of families when our own was in tremendous need.

Find a special needs sport in your area and sign up your child. Do not hesitate to join any organization that offers your child support. If your child needs more help, request it. If your child needs less help, you can request more independence and focus on leadership. A few of our favorite sports we tried were special needs soccer, baseball, basketball, surfing, tennis, and adaptive [dance](#).

Home entertainment

Entertaining at home is one of the easiest ways to encourage [social skills](#) growth in a familiar environment. Children with special needs often perform better in the comfort of their own homes. Something about the familiarity allows neurodiverse learners to feel comfortable. Entertain as often as possible and with a wide variety of guests.

I did this from the beginning of my children's lives because I knew the importance of social

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interaction and what it meant to their neurological development. When we lived in a very close-knit neighborhood, we did entertain more, but as our kids have aged, we are more likely to have people over once a month.

Invite people over who will engage with your child with needs. Be sure to share your child's interests and to find common interests amongst the kids. I have found that video and board games and outdoor [activities](#) are all appropriate and enjoyable to engage in when having a playdate. Have a respite worker or therapist there? Great! Use them to facilitate a session while you and your friend have coffee.

During COVID-19, we hired instructors who led makeshift classes in our backyard. I wanted to be sure we wouldn't lose the social skills we had worked hard to earn. I held PE, hip-hop dancing, and musical theater for about a year in my backyard. We even practiced and performed in a virtual talent show.

My home was a playground for many neurodiverse and neurotypical kids in the neighborhood! This forced my kids to engage and grow with others once a week. I still have people who come up to me and thank me for those weekly classes.

Though entertaining is always a great deal of work, make it easy on yourself by ordering [pizza](#), making

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sandwiches, or just asking everyone to bring something to contribute. Remember that you are investing in your child's future by putting them in as many social situations as possible. Despite the work it takes to clean up, prepare food, and make yourself presentable, it is good for kids and parents alike to participate in these social interactions.

Social skills goal

Lastly, always include a social skills goal in your child's [IEP](#). Social skills goals are necessary for most neurodiverse students. Make sure you highlight what skills your child does have and build upon them. Share what is working in your home while entertaining and request that educators use similar strategies to get your child to engage in the classroom.

Make sure you push for social growth every year. You can do this by signing your child up for clubs and after-school programs. We have tried [physical](#) fitness and gaming clubs, folklore dancing, and band. These are opportunities for your child to practice the skills you've taught in the comfort of your home or therapy.

Ensure your school stays on top of these goals, and check in at least every two to three months to find out how your child is doing socially. Ask questions such as the following:

- “How is X doing at recess and lunch?”
- “Who does he play with or eat lunch with?”



- “Can we do more to support him outside the classroom?”
- “Is a paraprofessional available while my child is out of the classroom?”

Send videos of successful interactions if they need evidence of your wins. Sometimes, teachers and therapists need to see what is working. By sharing these moments with them formally in an email, you may spark an idea of how they can better help your child.

Today, my son plays tennis and is on a [golf](#) team. The special needs support in sports is no longer needed. One day, I will share stories with him about how valuable and important those special needs sports and play dates were to us as a family. They helped him become who he is today. They supported him in finding a door out of his head and into the world.



Melanie K. Milicevic, BA, is a UCLA graduate and a former 5th-grade teacher with the Los Angeles Unified School District, where she focused on supporting second language learners and collaborating with special needs families to address diverse student needs. As a dedicated advocate for her own neurodiverse children, she continues to nurture her passion for writing, often typing ideas for future books on her iPhone. Her writing has been featured in publications such as Autism Parenting Magazine, Exceptional Needs Today, Parenting Special Needs Magazine, and the Special Needs Resource Foundation of San Diego. In August 2024, Melanie joined the Cajon Valley Union School District as a Learning Loss Intervention Teacher. She lives in San Diego with her husband and two children.

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