

OASIS · AT A GLANCE

# Social Coaching vs Traditional Social Skills Training

The shift away from masking and toward neurodiversity-affirming support. What coaching actually looks like in practice, why the old curriculum produced compliant adults instead of connected ones, and how to find coaches who do the new work.

BY JIM PALASTY · OASIS FOR AUTISM · 9 MIN READ

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### PARADIGMS

Old: train the surface, coach the mask.  
New: coach consent, conflict repair, and how to navigate the room. The shift is documented; the coaches are still scarce.

## How it works

THREE STEPS

### Stop coaching the mask

Eye contact drills, scripted greetings, fake smiles. These do not produce friends. They produce burnout.



### Coach the situation

Consent (asking, giving, recognizing absence). Conflict repair. Navigation of specific rooms, clubs, workplaces.



### Find a coach who does this

Many therapists still run the old curriculum. The new coaches advertise differently. Vet carefully.

## What coaching looks like in practice

|            |                                                                  |
|------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Consent    | How to say no to a request you do not want to fulfill            |
| Repair     | When you interrupted, how to apologize without spiraling         |
| Workplace  | Coworker is being friendly, not flirting; here is the difference |
| Club       | Model train club rules; which ones matter most                   |
| Healthcare | Doctor asked permission; you can say not yet, then yes           |
| Online     | When the message asks for money, the rule is no                  |
| Identity   | Your autism is not the problem; expectations sometimes are       |

## WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

“

*Our daughter went to social skills group for nine years. By the time she was twenty-two she could make eye contact and ask appropriate questions and shake hands. She was also burned out, anxious, and friendless. We changed coaches when she was twenty-three. The new coach taught her how to say no, how to apologize without crying, and how to recognize when she had misread a coworker. Two years later she has one good work friend and a Saturday brunch she actually likes. The old curriculum did not produce that. The new coaching did.*

BEATRIZ, ANN ARBOR

## What matters, at a glance

### Masking is the failure mode

Decades of "social skills training" produced autistic adults skilled at performing neurotypicality and exhausted by it. Research on autistic masking and burnout is now extensive and consistent.

### Consent first

Coaching consent (asking, giving, recognizing its absence, recovering when boundaries are crossed) is more useful than coaching small talk. Consent works at work, at home, in healthcare.

### Conflict repair

Something will go wrong. The coaching is on what to do next: apologize, clarify, reset, return. The skill of recovery beats the skill of performed perfection.

### Finding a coach

Coaches who do neurodiversity-affirming work are scarce in many regions. Plan a three-month search. The Autism Self Advocacy Network and AASPIRE maintain practitioner directories.

### Navigating the room

Each room has its own rules. The model train club is different from the workplace lunch room. Coaching is rule-decoding for the specific room, not rule-following in general.

### Measure the adult's experience

Did the adult feel safer? Did they recover from setbacks faster? Did they choose to return? Those are the outcomes that matter. "Looked more typical" is not on the list.

#### BRING THESE · CHECK AS YOU GO

- |                                                              |                                                                         |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Three candidate coaches identified  | <input type="checkbox"/> Outcome question asked of each                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Chosen coach engaged                | <input type="checkbox"/> Goals set around consent / repair / navigation |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Quarterly review on calendar        | <input type="checkbox"/> Stop-criteria documented in writing            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Adult's own input on goals captured |                                                                         |

#### YOUR MOVE

### Switching coaches

- 1 Identify three potential coaches in the region who advertise neurodiversity-affirming practice.
- 2 Ask each one what they consider a successful outcome. Listen for whose experience they prioritize.
- 3 Choose the one whose answer focuses on the autistic adult's experience, not on appearance metrics.
- 4 Set coaching goals around consent, conflict repair, and the specific situations the adult faces this month.
- 5 Review quarterly: did the adult feel safer, recover faster, want to return to settings?

*A good coach measures the autistic adult's experience. A bad coach measures how convincingly the autistic adult performs as if they were not autistic.*

#### RESOURCES NAMED IN THIS POST

oasisforautism.com · <https://oasisforautism.com>

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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