

Autism Parenting Magazine



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FRESH ASD GUIDANCE FOR A NEW YEAR

Friendship Group Celebrates People With Nonverbal Autism

By Emma K. CLADIS

There are many social groups in our society going on most days of the week, all organized around topics of interest or values people share.



One particular group that meets in Newport Beach, California, is a remarkable one. It may be one of only a couple of its type in the United States and the world. This group's membership is not really to be envied, though. The price of admission is being a nonverbal autistic person who types to communicate. Another unusual aspect of this group is found in its name. It's called Friendship Group, stemming from the group's main goal of helping people meet and form friendships.

Until recently, there have been widespread misconceptions about people with autism, especially nonverbal ones. The main misconception is they have no theory of mind and no empathy. In other words, they do not have the ability to think or feel what another person is thinking or feeling. Looking around the group, it's obvious that autism can be confusing from the outside. People with nonverbal autism may appear uninterested or even walk away. This is mainly due to them having bodies that do not cooperate with their brains. One's body language and facial ex-

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pressions do not always reveal what he/she is truly feeling. However, if time is taken to wait for the autistic person to type his/her thoughts and feelings, there is no longer any misunderstanding.

A typical time together for this group is found under the shaded area outside the food court at the Bluffs Shopping Center. It can be cold and windy during the winter and hot and stuffy in summer, but the group comes faithfully like a pilgrimage to a shrine. Some travel over an hour drive to sit, visit, and share their lives with others who truly understand them. At first, there is the initial flurry of parents and support staff getting food and drinks. Once the smell of French fries and Chipotle food fills the air, the group relax on the chairs and couches to discuss their latest news and plans for the future. The usual glances from people passing by don't seem to bother the group today, because they are the majority here, not the odd ones. From within the group, the occasional yell or jumping up or out of place body movement goes unnoticed because what's important is sharing their hearts and having fun together. Jeremy (2018) who is 29 years old and one of the oldest members of the group describes it best when he says, "Really, the typing group is very important to me because I need really to see that there are others like me in the world...truly I need to see that other Typers exist because truly knowing that others are like you makes me feel more a part of some group within the larger population of humans."

Another longtime member, Woody, (2018), describes his group experience by saying, "Friendship Group is important to me because it is a vital chance to be around other young people who truly understand what it is like to be a non-speaker in a speaking world. Hear my voice through my friends, hear my friends through my heart."

These quotes show the one accord in these members' hearts as each shares the importance of community and finding friendships.

The idea of social groups and friendships being good for any individual's overall well-being has reams of valid research behind it (Collingwood, J. 2016). The bottom line is that friends increase a person's trust and health and can decrease stress. Great men all the way back from Aristotle and the philosopher Epicurus to more modern-day writers such as Mark Vernon describe the importance of friendship. "In poverty and other misfortunes of life, true friends are a sure refuge" (Aristotle). "The noble man is most involved with wisdom and friendship" (Epicurus). "A close friend is a mirror of your own self, someone with whom you realize that, though autonomous, you are not alone" (Vernon, 2006). They all agree a friend is good to sympathize with, be honest with, and to celebrate life.

Unfortunately, this has been sorely overlooked for nonverbal autistic people. Now, as more nonverbal individuals learn to type to communicate, they are able to express their need for friendship.

The history of this particular group dates back at least 10 years, when three families took the chance to meet and see what the other's lives were all about. They were brought together by a mutual person in their children's lives, Darlene Hanson. Hanson is a speech and language therapist who is world renowned for her work in teaching people to type to communicate. She is the director of Communications Services at REACH, a nonprofit organization working with the special needs population. Hanson knows from God that her calling is to help the autistic community and open the minds of others to always assuming competence, even when it is hard to see. In a recent interview with Hanson, she talked about why the group

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was formed and what she has seen since its conception. She tells how a long while ago she and one of the founding members of the group, Nancy and her typing son Nick, were at a conference in Syracuse for Typers. She relays how the best part was spending time with other Typers which gave them the idea to try and form the Friendship Group. Hanson describes that over the years, she has seen the group members support and help each other. She discusses how their lifestyle and communication are paramount for them to share with each other because their challenges are different than the speaking world.

“I think it is wonderful that you are truly friends, in the same way any of us have friends. So often professionals and even parents think we have to teach autistic people friendship skills. I think the Friendship Group is proof that there is no replacement for getting together with people who you have something in common with. Of course, we all need a way to connect with each other, and communication is the way we typically do this. The members all have become friends in the same way any of us becomes friends. You hang out, you share, and you care” (D. Hanson, personal communication, September 15, 2018).

The group members’ families saw the benefits of their kids forming friendships but also enjoyed the company of likeminded parents themselves. Being an advocate for a special need’s child can be isolating, so sharing ideas and information is valuable. The group has steadily added to its numbers. To this day it can be found to have up to 40 people in attendance. The older kids, now young adults, often meet other times for lunch or outside activities. Like all good groups, friendships have formed there and then developed into deeper relationships outside of group time. Even a weekly Bible Study now meets on Zoom, an internet chat room site, made up of members who origi-

nally met at Friendship Group. In another interview with William (2018), a member from both the Group and Bible Study, he shares, “Friendship group means so many things to me. We are like all young people, interested in friends, into talking about our dreams and want to be putting our thoughts in words so we can be heard. Friendship group has allowed me the chance to make friends who believe in me like I believe in them. Know how much I look forward to group each month.”

The encouragement and support the members show each other are part of the amazing bond that forms between them all. Only each member can truly identify and understand the culture and challenges they each face as non-speaking individuals in this world.

Wanting to be heard, other group members painstakingly took the time to focus and type their insights.

Austin, (2018): “Being together means everyone can tell how they are working on stuff that is difficult to do and give encouragement to be more confident and independent.”

Bella, (2018): “I feel welcome and happy when I am here in their company.”

Sydney, (2018): “We share our dreams and accomplishments and we support one another.”

Peter, (2018): “I am inspired and encouraged by how cool and capable other typing members are. Really helps to have understanding loving friends.”

This group is dramatically changing (incorrect) long-held world views from always seeing autistics one way and now being forced to see them differently. The evidence is here. This community of friends has so much to offer its members and at the same time

has taken apart old, hardened beliefs about who nonverbal autistic people are and what they need and want. This grass roots Friendship Group will surely continue to grow and spread and has already been so successful that it has had members break away and start social groups in other geographical locations. On the outside they may, at times, look different or unusual, but on the inside, their desires, hopes, and dreams are the same as everyone else's.

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Emma K. Cladis is an amazing young woman; she was diagnosed on the autism spectrum when she was two years old and has been non-speaking most of her life. At the age of six she learned to communicate through typing, which she has used to engage the world ever since. Emma is in her third year at Vanguard University of Southern California, studying to be a screen writer. Her hope is to bring fun, hopeful stories to the world. For fun she loves to walk on the beach, swim in the ocean, and socialize with friends. Most of all, Emma is a devoted Christian and loves to write about God and the hope He brings.

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