

# The Hidden Curriculum



## What is The Hidden Curriculum?

The Hidden Curriculum is a way of teaching the unspoken parts of social interaction to individuals with autism spectrum disorders. So much of our interactions with others is non-verbal, and many of our interactions require people to see beyond what is directly being said, which are very difficult skills for individuals with autism. The Hidden Curriculum works to break down those difficult skills into more understandable pieces so individuals with autism can be more socially successful. It teaches the unspoken rules and expectations in society that most people innately know, but individuals with autism may need directly taught.

## Steps to teaching the Hidden Curriculum

- 1) Assess the specific areas where the child is struggling socially. It is impossible to address the hidden curriculum in all settings simultaneously, so pick one place to start.
- 2) Identify standard expectations in that environment to ensure the student understands the basics (e.g., the expectations in the lunchroom, recess rules).
- 3) Teach the student about the hidden curriculum. Ensure s/he understands that there are unspoken rules so s/he can look for them across environments.
- 4) Teach the student ways to learn these rules (e.g., observing/imitating, asking questions, using rating scales, identifying a mentor for those situations, etc.)

## Why is teaching the Hidden Curriculum Important?

There are many parts of everyday life that aren't specifically taught, but are important for being successful. For example, students may naturally learn that they can joke with teachers during recess and lunch, but not during lessons. They may realize that they can talk with friends one way but must be more polite to adults. Children learn that they aren't supposed to speak to strangers, but its okay to make small talk with the librarian while she checks out your books. It's okay to hug and kiss grandma, who we see twice per year, but not the mailman, who we see everyday. Social rules also change over time—it is cute when toddler hug the leg of a stranger, it's odd when an elementary age child hugs a stranger, and it's criminal if an adult hugs a stranger.

Social rules are confusing and illogical, but essential to follow for social success. Because individuals with autism do not naturally learn these social expectations, they must be specifically and directly taught. It is important to identify the hidden curriculum items that your students struggle to understand and then create a direct teaching plan to help them learn the expectations.

# Example

Braeden is 8 years old. Everyday at recess he wants to play with the other children. Braeden sees the other children playing . There’s a group of children on the soccer field, a group of children playing on the swings, and a group of children playing football. Braeden runs over to the soccer field and starts kicking the ball away from the other boys. They begin to yell at him to stop ruining their game. He is confused because he’s trying to kick the ball just like they are. He goes to the children playing football and jumps up to block a catch. Again, the children get angry at him and this time they tell the teacher that Braeden is being mean. Braeden doesn’t understand what he’s done wrong. He has watched football before—trying to intercept the ball is part of the game.

Braeden is missing the hidden curriculum. He focused on the observable parts of sports—kicking or intercepting the ball. He’d missed the parts that people don’t generally verbalize—that the group of children playing the sport have all already agreed to play, have picked teams, and have agreed to certain rules. When he jumps into the game and goes directly for the ball, he’s missed the social part of the game. He hasn’t asked to play, he hasn’t been put on a team, and he hasn’t waited for the right moment to make his play.

Braeden’s teacher should identify his goal—playing at recess—then work through the hidden curriculum. Playing with others requires building friendships. Teach the steps to build friendships and how to identify potential friends. Teach Braeden how to ask to join a game. Teach Braeden the rules of basic playground games—they generally differ from the professional sports league rules in many ways. Teach Braeden how to wait his turn and how to be a good sport. Once Braeden understands how to join into a game, he’ll be able to do so more successfully and have a better outcome.

## How Can I Learn More?

### Books

- Endow, J. (2010). *Navigating the Social World. The importance of teaching learning the Hidden Curriculum*. Autism Advocate, 3. Retrieved from <https://www.autism-society.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/hidden-curriculum.pdf>
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- Myles, B.S, Trautman, M.L., Schelvan, R.L. (2013). *The Hidden Curriculum for Understanding Unstated Rules in Social Situations for Adolescents and Young Adults 2nd Edition*. Lenexa, KS: AAPC Publishing.
- Myles, H.M., Kolar, A. (2013). *The Hidden Curriculum and Other Everyday Challenges for Elementary-Age Children With High-Functioning Autism* . Lenexa, KS: AAPC Publishing.



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