

Kids Like Me Classes Promote Social Skills Development in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

By Nicole Webb, MS, Kids Like Me Program Director

Nicole Webb, MS, is the Program Director of Kids Like Me, created especially for children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorder and other developmental challenges. Participants can enjoy after-school classes, clubs, camps, and family activities with kids who share similar challenges. Kids Like Me provides opportunities for children to have fun, connect with others, learn new skills, make friends, and enjoy a sense of belonging. All programs are overseen by highly trained professionals and are designed to address specific age and ability levels.

Winter after-school classes - including tennis, ballet, karate, chess masters, and more - are now registering for our Sherman Oaks and Culver City campuses. For more information about each class and to submit your application, visit www.kidslikemela.org.

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Countless studies have shown that those who engage in social activities lead happier, healthier, and more productive lives. Children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder can experience restrictions in the range of activities in which they are able to participate, limiting their ability to connect with others, build communication skills, and develop a sense of community. Often bullied by their peers and misunderstood by adults, these children are regularly left out of normal activities due to the misconception that they are uninterested or unable to participate, which furthers their sense of isolation.

It is essential for children on the spectrum to be involved in enjoyable activities that will allow them to build their social skills, engage in peer interaction, and develop meaningful friendships. Although kids with autism are often hesitant about participating in sports or other new activities, current research has shown that modifying and adapting these activities to address their specific needs can result in more positive social experiences and improve their social skills over time.

If you are the parent of a child who has experienced challenges with social skills, one of the key ways to address this is by enrolling him or her in a program designed specifically for children with autism that focuses on developing the abilities needed to communicate with others and form lasting relationships. Day camps, after-school programs, sports, and other recreational activities are available for children who need extra help and guidance learning the basics of social interaction, building upon existing communication skills, or just having fun in a supportive setting. Opportunities are available for children of all ages, from pre-school through high school and beyond.

Based on the needs of your child, there are several different types of programs to consider. Some are focused solely on building important social skills, the behaviors used to relate to other people. This may include learning to greet others, taking turns in conversation, and engaging in eye contact. Other programs integrate the development of

social skills into cooperative group play, recreational activities, or sports. These activities may include art, karate, basketball, tennis, drama, or dance.

Through the participation in specially-designed programs and activities, children on the spectrum can build communication skills, improve focus, and increase social reciprocity. In time, this can lead to higher levels of confidence and self-esteem and a newfound sense of belonging among peers and in their community. Best of all, these programs allow kids with special needs to just be kids. Your son or daughter can try a new sport, make friends, learn to be a ballerina, put on a play for an audience, and so much more in an environment that is supportive and non-judgmental. Every child deserves the opportunity to have fun and enjoy life, especially those who face challenges that many of their peers do not.

Social development and interaction is a vital piece of daily life for many children with autism. Far too often, these children find it difficult to make new friends or maintain the relationships they had when they were younger. The importance of teaching them to learn new skills and engage with peers cannot be stressed enough; it is an essential learning opportunity they can use to develop lasting relationships, improve self-confidence, and take steps toward a successful adult life.