



# **NOT AUTISTIC ENOUGH**

*Striving to Thrive in a Social World*

## **An Intervention Guide for Parents & Professionals**

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# Preface

It was the spring of 2014, and I was working as a speech-language pathologist (SLP) in a middle school. I had just wrapped up a session with Jake, a student on my caseload, focusing on his pragmatic (social) skills; specifically, we were working on his flexibility and handling of unexpected situations. That day's lesson included hypothetical questions, situational challenges, and role-playing scenarios. Jake nailed it, 20/20 correct. Goal met!

Feeling like “SLP of the Year,” I congratulated him, and we ended the session on a high note. As we opened the therapy room door, we saw his classmates walking in a single-file line toward the cafeteria. Jake naturally fell into place—until he remembered it was his week to be the line leader. Everything quickly unraveled. Without any warning, Jake took off sprinting down the hallway, knocking over trash cans and bumping into students yelling, “Stop! Stop! STOP!” Once at the front of the line, he burst into tears and began stomping and berating the teacher for letting the line move before he was in his rightful position of line leadership. His meltdown scared many of his classmates and drew the attention of the entire cafeteria.

Flexibility. Handling unexpected situations. He had *just* mastered his goal for these skills in my office.

Once Jake calmed down and sat (alone) to eat his lunch, I joined him. We talked about the lesson he had just completed. He recited coping strategies for staying flexible in hard situations. He listed alternative ways he could have handled his frustration over being at the end of the line. Finally, I stood to return to my office. That's when he said something that changed the trajectory of my career. “Ms. Micki,” he sighed, “easier said than done.”

While walking that middle school hallway back to my office, I faced an undeniable truth: I was a good therapist, but my therapy wasn't working.

So, like any determined young therapist, I scoured the internet for a program that would work for Jake. A program that could bridge the gap

between knowing the social skills information in my office and applying it in the hallway. I started paying attention to what I wanted and what my students needed: something that balanced instruction with application, structured but flexible enough to meet them where they were.

I couldn't find it, so I started creating it.

I began taking my therapy sessions outside of my office, literally. I met with students at recess, PE, and during lunch, and I incorporated peers into therapy anytime I could. I began getting positive feedback. Teachers were seeing carryover in the classrooms, and parents began reporting, eyes glistening, about conversations they were having with their children around the dinner table! Encouraged, I kept revising, and students kept responding. By the end of that year, I could see a difference in the social interactions of the students on my caseload. They had found their confidence, their voice, and, most importantly, their people. Friendships were formed, jokes were exchanged, and Jake was no longer eating lunch alone.

As time went on, I continued to refine the way I approached social skills intervention. I focused on intentional conversations instead of predetermined lessons, and I replaced static worksheets with interactive games. I also began noticing patterns in the students as well as in myself. Their overall social struggles were not altogether unique. I would often hear them say, "Yeah, me, too," and relate to each other's experiences. At the same time, I found that I was repeating myself a lot in sessions despite my caseload being very diverse.

I was finding structure in my therapy.

Simultaneously, I was becoming very humble as I found myself relating to many of the topics of conversation we were having in sessions! I, too, get nervous meeting new people. I, too, experience social anxiety when speaking in front of crowds, and I also have "no filter," sometimes. In relating to them and reassuring them that they weren't alone, I saw firsthand the immense power of rapport building and trust.

A cohesive therapy approach was taking shape. It was fun, it was functional, it was exhausting, but most importantly—it was working. Years later, here



I stand, sharing *Not Autistic Enough: Striving to Thrive in a Social World* with you for one reason. Because it works.

I don't know where Jake is now, but I hope he's found his place and is thriving in this social world. The truth is, whether you're dealing with missing your chance to be line leader or feeling lonely in a crowded room, social skills are tricky. But they're also essential for finding people who truly get you and developing relationships with them. And that?

That's not as easy as it looks.

# Introduction

If you get it, you get it.

You, or the young people in your life, struggle socially. Navigating social situations is stressful, and you are often misunderstood as being rude, too blunt, self-absorbed, or disinterested. Your sensory system is easily overwhelmed, and you find it difficult to advocate for what you need because you're not sure what that is. You mask all day every day, and if that isn't exhausting enough, you then spend all night revisiting conversations you had that day, analyzing every word that was said and wondering if you came across the wrong way. Friendships, college, and employment are a constant challenge. You know your capabilities go far beyond your current living situation, but you don't know how to "reach your potential." Despite all of these challenges, however, you know that you have a wonderful sense of humor, you are a deeply sincere, kind person, and I'm willing to bet you graduated at the top of your class.

I meet people like you every day, and if I've heard it once, I've heard it a hundred times: "I'm autistic... but I'm not autistic enough."

Not autistic enough to qualify for services.

Not autistic enough to get accommodations at work.

Not autistic enough to be officially diagnosed.

Not autistic enough for family members to understand.

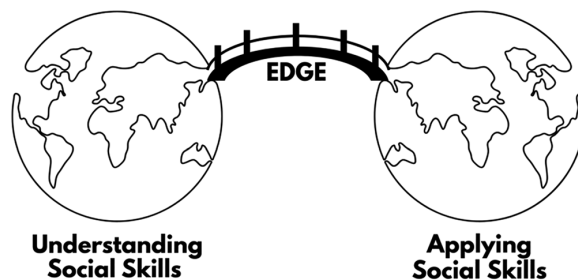
Not autistic enough for available interventions to be helpful.

I get it. And if you've picked up this book, I'm willing to bet it's because you get it, too, and you're looking for answers. I've made it my life's work to facilitate interventions with this exceptional population of people who feel "autistic but not autistic enough." They are vastly underserved and in desperate need of intervention.

Some of the people I see have a formal autism diagnosis; others do not but will say, “I know I have a touch of the ‘tism.” The individuals who I consult with or who participate in my Social Skills Groups are some of the kindest, most caring, and intelligent people I know, but they are also frustrated, isolated, and lonely. They want to form and keep relationships, but their lack of awareness of social nuances prevents them from being seen for who they truly are. The most frustrating part is that many times they don’t know why this is happening and certainly don’t know how to “fix it.” One young woman described it as “surviving but frozen in my life.”

Regardless of age, race, or gender, the people I provide services to share one common experience: they live between two worlds. On one hand, they’re brilliant, talented, and kind. On the other hand, they struggle to interpret social cues, understand humor, and participate in small talk. Between these worlds of understanding social skills and applying those social skills lies a chasm, one that needs a bridge.

That’s where I come in. At EDGE, I help this unique population understand and improve their social skills so they can gain independence and thrive, not just survive. Through trust, respect, empathy, and intervention, I help them build that bridge.



Over the years, I’ve struggled to find curriculums or therapy guides tailored to meet the needs of this exceptional group: individuals who live between two worlds without a bridge. Most intervention programs are either too rigid and fail to address real-life social challenges or so unstructured that while there are social opportunities, there’s no real intervention. Therefore, as my therapy has evolved, I’ve developed my own approach—EDGE: a social skills intervention approach designed to *Empower* individuals with



(and without) autism to *Develop* social skills so they can *Grow* into their authentic selves and *Emerge* more confident.

It's the most effective therapy I've ever done. The young people in my Social Skills Groups tell me it's fun, challenging, and (most importantly) it works.

Experiencing the lack of resources for this unique “not autistic enough” population fueled my commitment to creating this guide. Over years of practicing my EDGE Approach, I continued to develop this unique style of therapy, and the Social Skills Group participants were truly thriving! Parents, coworkers, and Group participants began encouraging me to get this unique approach “out there” for others to use, so I did! *Not Autistic Enough: Striving to Thrive in a Social World* is the culmination of that process. It is a structured intervention program that anyone can use for developing the inherently unstructured skill of socialization.

It is my prayer that *Not Autistic Enough* will be a resource for parents, educators, therapists, and individuals who are navigating their own journey of self-discovery. It brings together insights from talented administrators, behavior analysts, therapists, teachers, and parents I've had the honor of working with. But more than anything, it leans heavily on the reflections of the incredible people who have participated in social skills therapy with me—those who have trusted me enough to share their insights into themselves. I wrote this guide for them. This population deserves an intervention program that truly understands their unique experience of being autistic... but not autistic enough.

So if you get it, you're in the right place.

If you are a teacher and current social skills curriculums aren't a good fit, so you instead rely on TED Talks, clips from *The Big Bang Theory*, and *Teachers Pay Teachers*, you're in the right place.

If you're a speech therapist with a caseload of students who answer hypothetical questions perfectly but sit alone at lunch, you're in the right place.

If you're a counselor and your supervisor just told you, “You're going to run a Social Skills Group for students with autism next year,” so you googled

“how to run a Social Skills Group for students with autism,” you’re in the right place.

If you have a son or daughter with (or without) autism and you want to know more, understand better, or help differently, you’re in the right place.

If you feel like you’re living between two worlds with no bridge because you’re “not autistic enough”... you’re my favorite kind of person. And you’re in the right place.

I get it.

As you read through this book, you will find that some parts are meant to be read like a story and other parts are meant to be used for reference. I decided very early on in the writing process that I wanted to write a therapy guide, not a book about therapy. It is my hope, therefore, that the stories will help you better understand the challenges, celebrations and humor of Social Skills Group participants while the lists and tools will provide you with information you can easily access when needed.

In Section 1, I will introduce you to the framework of the EDGE Approach. Understanding the framework is critical to implementing this approach. You will be introduced to EDGE, and as the book unfolds, it will become more and more clear.

In Section 2, I explain the importance of trust, and I run through three foundational mindsets to it; I call these Social Truths.

Section 3 begins to dive into the meat of EDGE therapy tools: the seven key concepts. When people ask me *what* I do, I tell them about the key concepts in my EDGE Approach. These key concepts are based on conversations that I have found repeat themselves over and over throughout the years of facilitating Social Skills Groups. Within this section, I also talk about more specific skills that can be utilized. I call these “pillar skills;” they support the key concepts.

Section 4 outlines the therapeutic methods I use in my interventions; in other words, *how* I do things. While these may not be groundbreaking techniques, I’ve discovered a few simple yet effective methods that work particularly well for this unique population, making them worth sharing.

Section 5 presents the topics of conversations to start with, the tools to add to your toolbox: this is the information I, as a therapist, would probably scan through first. This is what I use to facilitate conversations around a key concept or pillar skill. If you speak “teacher-language,” these are your lessons. This is the section I hope you will refer to time and time again as you facilitate your own Social Skills Groups.

Within Section 6, you will see examples of the rubrics I use to collect data and the self-reflection tool I give to participants to complete periodically. This section also includes a spreadsheet that shows the interconnections of the EDGE Approach.

Finally, in Section 7, I offer ideas from my own experience on how to establish Groups, a list of my favorite games and activities that fill my bookshelves, and suggestions of things to keep in mind as you facilitate Social Skills Groups.

What you will *not* find is a one-size-fits-all approach. You will not find worksheets to copy, pictures to laminate, nor a hierarchy of skills. EDGE is a cohesive program with a consistent framework that can be individualized for every person and every group. Please adapt every piece and part of it to meet your needs! Flexibility in the EDGE Approach is essential because every Group facilitator and participant is unique. Each brings their own story, shaped by personal experiences and perspectives.

The hard truth is that by the time many of the participants who attend Groups reach their teens and young adulthood, almost all carry invisible “battle scars” from negative social experiences. They have explained to me that they often find it much easier to stay home, talk to their online friends, or disappear into video games alone in their bedroom. If I’m being honest, on some level, I can relate. For me, it was not a video game, it was reading a book alone in a ski lodge.

Several years ago, my husband, Matt and I traveled to Colorado, where he grew up, to do some skiing. I was excited to learn. I had a vision of how it would be: Matt and I gracefully gliding down the slopes with ease. We had rented a cabin for the week and the plan was to ski all day, every day.

Day one finally approached. Matt had warned me that getting on and off the chairlift was the hardest part, but I wasn't worried, I'd done my research, and I had my plan: shuffle, stand, turn around, wait, grab the bar, sit, ride. With not a lot of grace and some help from Matt, I did it. I was on the lift. The ride was terrifying and before I knew it, it's time to exit the chairlift. Again, I had a plan: feel the ground, stand up, veer right. I felt the ground, I stood up and BAM! I fell flat on my back. I somehow got back up, and BAM, fell again. At this point the entire lift had stopped. I was humiliated. Finally, with Matt's help, I somehow got myself upright, brushed off the snow (and humiliation), and looked down the mountain. Time to ski!

I'm not going to go into every detail about my trip down the green (easy) trail, but I will tell you, it took hours, and by the time I got to the bottom, I was cold, wet, and on the verge of tears. My hair was somehow frozen to my face, I'd lost my glasses, and Matt (who I knew was only trying to help) was on my last nerve.

Now I was supposed to repeat the whole chairlift thing again? No way. I decided to disappear into the ski lodge for a few hours. I wanted to dry off, warm up, be alone, and read my book. Instead of reading, however, I found myself running through the morning over and over in my head. Why was this so hard? What am I doing wrong? I'm so annoyed! Why can't I just ski? I was frustrated, confused, and bruised. I was really trying, but it wasn't working, and I didn't know why.

I needed lessons. I needed to practice.

The following morning, I enrolled myself in ski lessons. I was grouped with other new skiers, many also bruised and embarrassed. Everyone in the class, however, was there to learn, and an immediate comradery was formed. As the lesson progressed, we made mistakes, we fell, and we laughed. We practiced skiing together, and by midmorning, things were coming together. That

afternoon, I was skiing the beginner green trails, and by the end of the week, I had moved on to the more challenging blue trails!

I can't say it was easy, and I certainly didn't "glide" down any slopes, but it sure was fun, *and* I learned how to ski!

Social Skills Group participants have attended parties, joined dating apps, and sought out friendships. They've fallen, gotten up, and fallen again, only to face moments of humiliation and disappointment. They are frustrated, confused and bruised. They've been really trying, but it isn't working, and they don't know why.

They need lessons. They need to practice.

By participating in Social Skills Groups utilizing the EDGE Approach, neurodivergent individuals have the opportunity to practice social skills, and the topics of conversation serve as the lessons. When gathered with peers in a safe environment where everyone is working on something, participants can make mistakes, fall, and try again. They practice. Much like in my ski lessons, a camaraderie naturally forms, and as they practice, they get comfortable being uncomfortable. Participants also learn, in a world that is not black and white, how to cope with the difficult gray areas. In Groups, we trust each other, we respect each other, and we laugh... oh, do we laugh!

Throughout *Not Autistic Enough: Striving to Thrive in a Social World*, I will introduce you to many individuals who have trusted me with their stories. They have all had a hand in the progression of the EDGE Approach, and I hope you grow to appreciate them as much as I do. I ask you to receive every person and every story with a spirit of dignity and respect and avoid any generalizations, stereotypes, or judgments. Their names have all been changed, but their stories are true and, in many cases, relatable. They are brilliant, unique individuals who truly are striving to thrive in this social world.

Thank you in advance for your interest in *Not Autistic Enough* and the EDGE Approach to social skills intervention. In the 25+ years I've worked as an SLP, it has proven to be the most rewarding therapy I have ever done. I can't wait to share it with you.

## SECTION 1

# The EDGE Approach

*Not Autistic Enough: Striving to Thrive in a Social World* is a practical Guide designed for parents, teachers, therapists, counselors, and anyone who wants to support social growth. Rooted in my EDGE Approach, this guide aims to help anyone, regardless of professional background, empower and facilitate the growth and development of social skills.

This guide is meant to be accessible and impactful for anyone—from parents and friends to professionals—who is dedicated to empowering the social skills development of others. *While no specific degree is required when implementing the EDGE Approach, a particular mindset is.*

To understand and effectively implement the EDGE Approach, it is important to grasp the underlying framework that guides it. Unlike traditional models, EDGE doesn't teach skills that build on one another in a set order, nor does it follow a linear path with fixed benchmarks. Instead, it's a structured approach that brings focus to the unstructured nature of social interactions.

Much like the framework of an umbrella, the parts of the EDGE Approach are designed to work together rather than in isolation. Think about an umbrella: when you pick one up, the first thing you do is grab the handle. The handle is what helps you keep the umbrella steady, gives it balance, and gives you control as you open it.

Similarly, **the foundation of the EDGE Approach is trust.** Without it, the entire approach becomes unstable, unbalanced, and less effective. Like the handle of an umbrella, it's what you will hold onto throughout your entire walk.