

# BUSINESS PROFILE



## Building Bridges: Building Social Skills Leading to Friendships

by June Portnoy

Making friends doesn't come easy to everyone.

Some kids lack the social skills necessary to initiate conversation and social interaction of any kind.

As a result, these kids become isolated.

Lacking appropriate social skills sets children up for an uphill battle because they simply do not possess the necessary tools to succeed.

Remi Freeman, a licensed social worker who has worked with the local autistic population for the past 15 years, recently recognized that no services existed in the area to help autistic children improve their social skills.

As a result, she established Building Bridges in Morrisville.

This program brings a group of kids together who struggle to socialize and teaches them the skills they need to make at least one new friend.

Although 70% of the children in this program are autistic, the remaining children typically have ADHD (attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder) or questionable social skills.

Fortunately, social skills can be learned just like any other skill. Building Bridges' program takes a systematic, behavior modification approach that is data-driven.

Kids between the ages of three and 21 are broken into groups based on age and level of functioning.

By keeping kids in groups at their same level, they interact with kids who talk the same as them and who have

similar interactive skills.

Lower functioning kids are put into a task-oriented group consisting of four to six children that is run by two ABA (certified verbal behavioral) trained therapists.

Kids can select a board game, Lego, jewelry making or art group, but regardless of the activity, children get the opportunity to learn and practice their social skills in a friendly, fun-centered environment.

In order for kids to complete their tasks each week, they must successfully work together.

Turn-taking skills, patience, asking for help and encouraging others is practiced during each one-hour, six-week session.

These groups allow children to be accepted by peers and make friends, the ultimate goal for each session.

And while children are learning how to socialize, their parents get the opportunity to network with other parents who are experiencing similar difficulties.

For higher functioning kids, Building Bridges offers a chat group for a maximum of eight kids.

There is no agenda planned ahead of time for this group.

Instead, kids come to discuss issues with which they are currently dealing,



Remi Freeman (back left) with children at a recent Peer Chat workshop

like peer pressure, bullying or being made fun of.

This group, also run by two therapists, gives kids the opportunity to see that they are not alone and that other kids are feeling the same way they are.

"Everyone leaves making at least one new friend and they generally continue that friendship outside these sessions," says Remi.

Social skill help is currently not covered by insurance, but it soon will be thanks to Act 62, a new bill that was recently passed.

Beginning July 15th, 2009, this bill will allow private insurance companies to cover up to \$30,000 for any service parents want for their child who has been diagnosed with autism.

If your child desperately wants a friend, but lacks the social skills to make one, contact Building Bridges at 215-740-4201 or visit [www.buildingbridgespa.org](http://www.buildingbridgespa.org).

It's located in the Pennsbury Professional Center at 210 Woolston Drive, Suite 26.

Everyone deserves to have at least one good friend in life!