Effective Social Skills Programming

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This article has been developed for parents of children with difficulties in the area of social interactions with others. In particular, parents of children with Mental Retardation, Pervasive Developmental Disabilities, and other disorders where social behavior is of concern can benefit from the information presented here regarding best practices in the promotion of social skills in youth.

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What Are "Social Skills"?

Good social skills are important tools for day to day living---they help children navigate social interactions effectively and smoothly. The most basic and essential skill is the ability to communicate with others. So, what exactly are "social skills?"

Social Skills are commonly defined as those specific behavioral strategies that allow one to:
initiate and maintain positive social interactions with others
develop friendships and social support networks
cope effectively with the social environment

Children must negotiate important social relationships:
- ❖ <u>Parent-related</u>:   they must be able to follow directions, sit quietly when needed, assist with household chores and self-care abilities as possible, and communicate needs in appropriate way
- ❖ <u>Teacher-related</u>:   they must be able to respond to the behavioral expectations of teachers
- ❖ <u>Peer-related</u>:   they must meet the behavioral requirements of peers in free play settings

Q. Is it important to promote social skills and prosocial development in children?

A. A child's social competence is a critical developmental achievement for later social success (Sroufe & Rutter, 1984). Social competence has also been strongly associated with successful school performance, transition into school and work settings, better job opportunities and corresponding adult support, and improved overall interactions with others (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, Cox, 2000). Without intervention, children who demonstrate poor social skills may continue to experience problems into middle childhood and beyond.
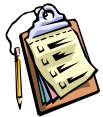
Children with **good** social skills:
- ❑ Better accepted by their peers
- ❑ Better coping & attention skills
- ❑ Better school & social adjustment

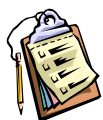Children with **poor** social skills:
- ❑ Higher risk of developing patterns of aggressive behavior
- ❑ Experience higher rates of emotional & behavioral problems

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Developmental delays, however, affect the ways children demonstrate and develop social skills.
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Consider the features of Mental Retardation:

Below Average Intelligence and Significant Impairment in Adaptive Skills
Impairment in at least two adaptive skill areas such as communication, self-care, home living, social skills, community use, self-direction, health and safety, functional academics, leisure, and work.

Consider features of Pervasive Developmental Disorders:

Qualitative Impairment in Social Interactions
Impairment in use of nonverbal behaviors ~ eye gaze, posture, facial expression, gestures
Failure to develop peer relationships appropriate to developmental level
Lack of spontaneous seeking to share interests/achievements
Lack social/emotional reciprocity

Restricted, repetitive, & stereotyped behaviors, interests, and activities
Preoccupation with 1+ restricted, stereotyped interest, abnormal in intensity or focus
Inflexible adherence to specific, nonfunctional routines or rituals
Stereotyped/repetitive motor mannerisms
Persistent preoccupation with parts of objects

Qualitative Impairment in Communication
Delay in or total lack of the development of spoken language
If adequate speech, then impaired ability to initiate or sustain conversation
Stereotyped and repetitive use of language/idiosyncratic language
Lack of varied, spontaneous pretend play or social imitative play
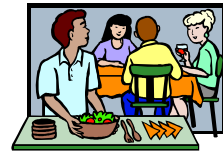
Typical Communication Deficits
Poor communication abilities in nearly all individuals
Some never acquire functional speech
Content of speech is often related to immediate environmental events
Repetitive and stereotypic utterances are most common
Most characteristic: inability to use speech in socially communicative way
Often, delayed or immediate echolalia
Unusual volume of (yelling, whispering, wide fluctuations in voice volume)
Impaired nonverbal communication

My Child has a 'Social Skill Deficit' – What does that mean?

1. <u>Acquisition Deficit</u>: child does not have knowledge for performing particular skill

Can't Do   Example: Jack stands by the wall while watching a circle of his friends—he wants to join in but doesn't know how to start the process.

2. <u>Performance Deficit</u>: child has skill but is not motivated to perform skill

Won't Do   Example: Jim can raise his hand in class, but instead he yells out to get his teacher's attention.

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Q. Can anything be done to address my child's social skills deficits?
A. There are both formal and informal ways to help children with social skill deficits. Formal interventions designed for this purpose are generally termed "Social skills programming."
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⭐ Developing Effective Social Skills Programming ⭐

What exactly is "social skills programming?"
- A psychological and educational intervention for students with social skill deficits
- Used to strengthen social interactions, improve self-control
- Skills can be taught like other academic subject matter
- Both home and school settings can support this learning
- General Target Areas:
    1) Social skill deficits: Children may lack, or be weak in, skills, abilities, or behaviors needed to be socially competent.
    2) Inappropriate social behaviors: Need to teach replacement behaviors (i.e., social skills) so that the child can manage his/her environment in a more prosocial way.

4 Key Areas in Developing Effective Social Skills Programming

#1 Social Skills Assessment

The first step in developing effective social skills programming is an assessment of your child's social skills---both strengths and deficits. Best practices in social skills programming involves identifying those target areas in need for programming. As mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA-97), school-aged children with developmental delays are required to have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that specifies the services necessary for a student's successful performance in a given setting. By identifying your child's social skill abilities, you increase the likelihood that a social skills program will match the target areas in which your child needs intervention.

Q. What strategies can be used to measure a child's abilities?
A. Observing, Asking Others, Formal Assessment Strategies
Informal observations and feedback from a parent or other individuals who are very familiar with a child can provide helpful information regarding potential target areas to address with social skills programming (e.g., joining into an activity, asking for help in an appropriate way). Formal assessment strategies help to provide objective information about how a child's current abilities compare with same-aged peers. Formal assessment tools are designed for various purposes such as tests of cognitive and intellectual ability, tests of adaptive functioning, personality measurements, and functional behavioral assessments.

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While formal assessments can take on various forms depending on the purpose and goal of the evaluation, there is a clear <u>advantage</u> in using empirically-based assessment tools.

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Q. What are "empirically-based" assessment tools?
A. Empirically-based assessments are those measures or surveys that are developed through careful testing with the intended population such that the results of testing during its development indicate that the test is highly accurate for achieving its purpose. Testing is often conducted with many, many children of various ages, backgrounds, and abilities to determine whether the assessment measure or tool is <u>reliable</u> and <u>valid</u> for understanding the patterns of behaviors that occur in children.

Reliable --- use of the assessment tool consistently provides the intended information in an accurate fashion each time it is used.

Valid --- the assessment measure really does measure what it is supposed to measure (e.g., intelligence, social competence, achievement).

In the process of testing the measure in an empirical way, steps are also taken to standardize the assessment tool with typical populations of children. This strategy yields 'normative' information or what someone might expect from a typically developing individual. These factors, therefore, combine to yield an 'empirically-based' or data-based assessment measure or tool.

Q. What are the advantages of using empirically-based assessment measures?
A. The benefits are that the results will provide information about:
Your child's social competencies as compared to typical students—this allows the parent and others working with the child a better understanding of the child's developmental progress in developing age-appropriate skills.

Π Your child's social competencies as compared across raters – especially useful since children commonly show different behaviors/skills when in different settings with different care providers.
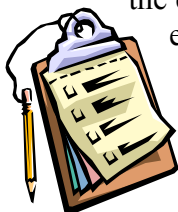
Π Your child has both strengths and weaknesses in the area of social skills. These assessments will more precisely measure these strengths and weaknesses.

Π Your child's improvement or changes over time—by using the same assessment tool to track progress, parents and teaching staff can determine if the social skills intervention is working or areas needing additional intervention.

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Standardized Empirically-based Assessment Tools (Examples)	Other Types of Assessment Tools
Walker-McConnell (K-6/7-12) Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scale Scales of Independent Behavior—Revised	Teacher Skill Checklist Parent Skill Checklist Child Skill Checklist Skill Situations Measure Skills Grouping Chart Progress Summary Sheet Teacher Record

One type of formal assessment ™ Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA)
For those students with challenging behavior, a functional behavioral assessment may be necessary. Functional Behavioral Assessment is a process for gathering information that can be used to maximize the effectiveness and efficiency of behavioral support because the problem behavior is evaluated in context. In other words, an FBA is a process for understanding the context (antecedents and consequences) associated with social skill deficits in that it provides information about when, where, and why problem behavior occurs. An assumption of FBA is that behavior is functional---the individual engages in patterns of behavior that work for him/her in some way. There is a logic to the target behavior, and functional assessment is an attempt to understand that logic. By looking at the relationship between behavior and a child's environment (e.g., schedules, activity patterns, curriculum, teachers, physical settings), we can identify clues as to what factors help to maintain the target behavior.

Several strategies are used when conducting an FBA and these include interviews, direct observation, and sometimes manipulation of variables that seem to maintain the behavior. An FBA is especially helpful 1) when there is no agreement about the consequences that appear to maintain the behavior and 2) because it allows confident prediction of the conditions in which the problem behavior is likely to occur and not occur. An FBA should be done particularly when severe problem behaviors are a concern. In fact, IDEA-97 now requires that an FBA be conducted for any child who is suspended from school for more than 10 days due to behavioral problems. In short, conducting an FBA is now a professional standard.

Answers to the following help to inform an FBA evaluation:
- ☞ What are the problem behaviors that are causing concern?

  - ☞ What events or physical conditions that occur significantly earlier in time prior to the problem behavior increase the predictability that the problem behavior will occur?

  - ☞ What events and situations that occur just prior to the problem behaviors reliably predict occurrence of problem behaviors? What events reliably predict when problem behaviors will not occur?

  - ☞ Given a specific situation when the problem behavior occurs, what are the consequences that appear to maintain the problem behavior?

- ☞ What appropriate behaviors (if any) could produce the same consequences that appear to maintain the problem behavior?

Developing IEP Goals & Objectives based on Social Skills Assessment Results

Best practices in IEP development support the development of goals and objectives that are:

K Measurable   K Reasonable in number   K Include measurable benchmarks
          K Objectives that can be achieved in 1 year   K Addresses parent priorities

Common Goal Areas	Specific Social Goal Areas
Social interactional skills	Initiation of social interaction
Communication development	Shared activities/cooperation
Appropriate behavior development	Asking for help & information
Functional academics	Negotiating for space/activities
Daily living skills	Alertness to social contexts & appropriate behaviors
	Understanding & expressing affect

Behaviors considered for priority intervention are those which:
1. are physically dangerous
2. would enable the student to have better access to more inclusive activities
3. provide a positive rather than a problem-focused approach
4. are precursors to later, more complex skills;
5. alter the perceptions of others and thus have long-term positive implications

IEP Goals & Objectives: An Illustration

	Poor Example	Good Example
Goal 1	Bobby will get along with others.	Bobby will demonstrate a 3 percentile increase in social skills over baseline levels as measured by a standardized social skills assessment.
Objective #1	Bobby will try to begin conversations with others.	Bobby will initiate at least 1 conversation daily with peers.
Objective #2	Bobby will play games with others.	Bobby will take turns on a board game on at least 3 occasions on a daily basis

4 Key Areas in Developing Effective Social Skills Programming

#2 Curriculum Selection & Implementation

The second key in developing effective social skills programming is selecting a well-designed social skills program that will address your child's deficits. The good news is that the results of the social skills assessment should help guide the decision-making and selection

process.

Q. What should I look for in a social skills curriculum or program?
What does a classroom-based social skills curriculum <u>LOOK LIKE?</u>
A. There are numerous kinds of social skills curricula available on the market today. There are a number of published social skills curricula. (see List of Resources at the end of this article.)

Types

Using a <u>validated social skills curriculum</u> means that the curriculum has been research tested and has been found to be effective for improving social skills. Implementing a social skills curriculum will require time and effort on the part of many individuals that work with a child----it's to everyone's benefit that the curriculum selected is one that you can have confidence in for bringing about the changes in your child's social skills and behavior. A validated curriculum can provide you with that confidence because it has been shown to be validated (i.e., shown to work!).

Targets

Social skills curricula are focused on social skill development in the following common areas: pragmatic language development, flexibility in managing tasks, settings, etc., attentional skills, adaptive behavior, academic

Materials

The materials used to teach social skills should be as similar as possible to materials needed in real life---this leads to a greater transfer of skills because the instructor can tailor the 'lesson' to the needs of the class/student

Frequency

Depending on the assessment results, social skill programming can occur on a daily, multi-day, or weekly basis; it is most important that programming be increased or reduced in duration based on developmental level, attention span, interest, & maturity level.

Q. How will a social skills curriculum be implemented with my child?
A. Social skills curricula may be implemented in many different ways depending on the needs of the child and the target skills to be addressed. A multisystemic strategy of social skills programming can be comprised of instruction that is implemented at the district, school, classroom, and individual levels. Also, social skills programs can be conducted with whole classrooms, small groups, or on a one-on-one basis.

School-based social skills curricula:
Can be implemented at all levels--Early Intervention, Preschool, Elementary, Secondary, Post-secondary
Should include strategies to demonstrate progress ~ empirically based
Should include inclusionary opportunities
Should meet the parents' needs
May include a home-based component
Should include instruction for skills that are useful at home

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Often, a child will not learn social skills just from being given an
opportunity to interact with peers alone.
Like any other skill (academic or athletic), they need to be taught
<u>what</u> to do - and <u>when</u> to do it!

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Q. What's the best way to teach social skills?

A.   There are several different approaches to teaching social skills. Some children learn as a result of Incidental Teaching. This is when children learn about social skills and how to demonstrate social skills through their own observations of others and the interactions they have with others in their natural environment (e.g., reinforcement from teacher for demonstrating a particular skill). Other approaches for teaching social skills involve a target child's peer network (i.e., Peer-initiation Strategies, Peer Tutoring) whereby socially competent peers are paired with a child toward the goal of assisting the target child in developing or refining a particular skill. Some children can only learn social skills through Direct Skill Instruction. This kind of instruction involves a direct and systematic way of teaching a social skill or behavior and can involve a curriculum that is used to teach various skills. There are critical features that research has shown to be most effective in bringing about long-lasting change and improvement with this approach. Most importantly, research has found that there is a direct relationship between the amount and quality of social skills training and the amount of behavior change.

KEY FEATURES OF DIRECT SKILL INSTRUCTION

Modeling & Coaching
Children are shown examples of people ("models") performing behavioral steps competently

Role Playing ("behavioral rehearsal")
Children need to be provided numerous opportunities to practice skills

Performance Feedback & Reinforcement
Children need numerous opportunities to receive feedback and positive reinforcement (e.g., praise, reward plans) for demonstrating skill to make it 'worthwhile' to use skills; behavior must occur frequently enough so reinforcement can be given. Through this process, children should understand:

- ❑ Why should I use skill?
- ❑ With whom should I use skill?
- ❑ What skill should I choose?
- ❑ Where should I use skill?
- ❑ When should I use skill?
- ❑ How should I perform skill?
- ❑ What should I do if skill is unsuccessful?

Generalization
In order to increase the strength of a social skills intervention, a number of service components needs to be in place that will promote skill acquisition across settings. When a child begins to demonstrate success in using the skill across different settings or with various individuals, generalization of the skill has occurred. Generalization of social skills is improved when social skills programming is conducted in more than one setting, in those settings where the skill needs to be performed, with different examples/models, involving socially competent peers, teaches the difference between appropriate and inappropriate skills, teaches child to self-manage own behavior when possible, and efforts are coordinated with school staff. **Transfer training** refers to the specific procedures that are designed to help build generalization, such as the teaching setting, materials, personnel, reinforcement systems, and task instruction.

4 Key Areas in Developing Effective Social Skills Programming

#3 Program Monitoring & Evaluation

The third key in developing effective social skills programming is to monitor and evaluate program outcomes to determine if the intervention is working. This step also involves identifying personnel who will monitor, evaluate, and communicate program progress over time.

In monitoring behavior, the identified personnel should look for instances when the skill is demonstrated, the fluency of the skill, and the child's mastery of the target skills. Data collection can involve both formal and informal observations and assessments using empirically-based rating scales or surveys. Ongoing data collection allows team members to track progress on a daily, weekly, or biweekly basis. This kind of frequent monitoring can allow staff to quickly identify progress and/or areas in need of improvement in programming so as to ensure the rate of student progress to meet annual goals. <u>Progress data should be used, then, to change social skills programming, modify goals, and/or to establish new goals and objectives.</u>

4 Key Areas in Developing Effective Social Skills

#4 Staff Competencies

The final key in developing effective social skills programming is that relevant staff, support personnel, and case consultants have the adequate training and competencies necessary to develop, implement, monitor, and evaluate programming. In the process of discussing and developing effective social skills programming for your child, you should know about the following:

Q. Who should implement social skills programming with my child and what type of competencies, skills, or qualifications should a person possess who will be involved in teaching social skills to my child?

A. It is recommended that staff who provide social skills programming for students with developmental disabilities develop competencies in the use of applied behavior analytic procedures. Applied behavior analysis (ABA) is a highly individualized method of instruction based on scientific principles of learning theory. It is used to design student programs that are implemented systematically, evaluated empirically, and introduced within natural environments. This method has been validated by more than 25 years of research as the most effective way for individuals with and without disabilities to acquire skills, increase socially useful behaviors, and reduce problematic behaviors (Matson, 1990; Sulzer-Azaroff & Mayer, 1991). In short, staff competencies should include knowledge of:

- ❑ Mental retardation & developmental disabilities
- ❑ Assessment: Functional Behavioral Assessment, Social Skills assessment
- ❑ Best instructional practices
- ❑ Applied behavior analysis
- ❑ Social skills training
- ❑ Behavior support plans

Q. What kind of training or support would benefit teaching staff and who should conduct the staff training?

A. Research in staff training has demonstrated that competency-based training is superior in effectiveness over just workshops and didactic instruction (Christian, 1987). Specifically, staff training should include both instruction and competency-based consultation to ensure that staff develop measurable competencies, rather than simply receiving hours of training (Jenson, Walker, Clark, & Kehle, 1991). Competency-based training means that the skills needed by staff to implement various components of programming or to generally enhance children's social skills are task-analyzed into a checklist. This checklist would serve as a tool for the consultation provider to ensure that all necessary competencies are demonstrated. Staff performance should also be monitored regularly to ensure that competence is maintained (Reid & Green, 1990; McConnell & Hecht, 1991).

Staff training should be conducted by qualified professionals in applied behavior analysis, such as behavioral consultants, with expertise in school consultation. In this way, the behavioral consultant can utilize all necessary consultation skills in producing the greatest likelihood of successful collaboration and outcomes for your child. (For more information, please refer to "Identifying Qualified Professionals in Behavior Analysis and Behavioral Intervention for Young Children with Autism" edited by Maurice, Green, and Luce (1996) and "Behavioral Consultants: Who are they and how do I find the right one?" by Rotholz & Jacobson (2001). Also visit the Behavior Analyst Certification Board website at www.bacb.com).

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A Summary Checklist   4

Assessment

1. An assessment has been conducted to measure my child's social skills.
2. Standardized, empirically-based measures are used to assess my child's social skills.
3. Results provide information about both my child's social skill deficits and strengths.
4. If challenging behaviors, Functional Behavioral Assessment is conducted by a qualified professional.

IEP Development

1. Goals and objectives target specific social skill deficits.
2. Goals target priority areas for intervention.
3. Goals and objectives are measurable.
4. Goals allow for change over the course of a year.
5. Goals and objectives include measurable benchmarks.
6. Data collection systems are in place to measure progress toward each of the goals/objectives.
7. Changes are made to social skills programming or goals as indicated by the data.

Social Skills Programming

1. Social skills programming is matched to the target areas for which your child needs intervention.
2. For direct skill instruction, key features are incorporated: Modeling, Coaching, Role-playing, Performance Feedback, Reinforcement, and Generalization procedures (Transfer Training).
3. If curriculum used, a validated (i.e., tested) curriculum is chosen.
4. Includes instruction for skills that are useful at home

Staff Qualifications

1. Consultant is qualified to develop appropriate social skills programming based on assessment results and needs of the child.
2. Staff are qualified to implement social skills programming.
3. Staff who implement social skills programming are knowledgeable in the following: ❑ Mental retardation and/or Pervasive Developmental Disorders   ❑ Functional behavioral assessment   ❑ Social skills assessment   ❑ Best instructional practices   ❑ Applied behavior analysis   ❑ Social skills training   ❑ Behavior support plans
4. Behavioral Consultant possesses the necessary qualifications in applied behavioral analysis and school consultation that addresses your child's needs.
5. Behavioral Consultant is part of the team of providers and regularly monitors and provides feedback to staff and parent regarding program progress and necessary modifications.

Parent Involvement

1. We have discussed concerns about our child's social skills deficits.
2. We are invited to and attend each planning meeting.
3. Our opinions are solicited and valued at these meetings.
4. The plan reflects our input.
5. All parties work toward generalization of my child's skills to both school and home.

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WHAT CAN A PARENT DO?
At Home

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- ™ Look for and find appropriate behavior
- ™ Operationally define the behavior (and quantify)
- ™ Use reinforcement
- ™ Take advantage of natural opportunities
- ™ Try to ignore inappropriate behavior
- ™ If needed, find a competent behavior analyst to help you
- ™ Look at the long-term
- ™ Prepare for transitions

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WHAT CAN A PARENT DO?
At School

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- ™ Do you know whether your child is making progress?
  – Outcomes: "Show me"
- ™ Has the school asked you what you think is important for your child?
- ™ Have you indicated what are your long-term goals?
- ™ What is your child's curriculum?
- ™ Ask yourself: "How can I help the educational staff working with my child?"
- ™ Attend meetings
- ™ Communicate, communicate, communicate

Social Skills Game List
Ordering Information

Social Skills Game, Item #LSG120, $49.95
   PCI
   P.O. Box 34270, San Antonio, TX 78265
   1-800-594-4263 (www.pcicatalog.com)

Circle of Friends Game, Item #67035, $49.00
   Childswork/Childsplay
   135 Dupont St., Plainview, NY 11803
   1-800-962-1141 (www.childswork.com)

Communicate Game, Item 1207, $69.00
Communicate Jr. Game, Item #4401, $49.00
   Thinking Publications
   P.O. Box 163, Eau Claire, WI 54702-0163
   1-800-225-4769 (www.thinkingpublications.com)

http://communitygateway.org/faq/social_skills/index.htm

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