

# ***Social Skills Training***

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Parents, does your child have difficulty making or keeping friends, managing emotions, avoiding eye contact during conversation, acting appropriately in social situations (school, store, parties, meals), or playing with same-aged peers? Teachers, does this describe any of the students in your class? If so, it is likely that he or she has a deficit in social skills.

Social Skills are a set of behaviors that allow a child to get along better with other people. A child with adequate social skills can usually adjust to changes in his environment and is able to make and keep friends. A child who has poorly developed social skills, however, may have low self-esteem, may display difficulties with play or conversations, and may have difficulty developing peer relationships. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, strong social skills often lead to success later in life and they comprise five of the top seven qualities that employers look for in a prospective employee. Additionally, strong relationships have significant health benefits, equivalent to the impact of an individual who quits smoking. Because social skills are so important in human functioning, both for children and adults, professionals in the field have studied and developed effective methods to teach these skills.

While individual treatment allows those working with a child to target certain skills, treatment in group format gives the child the opportunity to interact with peers and receive feedback and assistance in actual social situations. Social skills groups focus on teaching children a variety of social skills, and can help to help improve their ability to make and keep friends, develop more self-confidence, and behave more appropriately. Professionals have identified a set of skills that they believe are of particular significance, including: conversational skills, play skills, reading non-verbal communication, affect regulation, and problem-solving. These skills help students to develop empathy while managing their emotions and behaviors.

As students learn to manage their emotions and social behaviors, they are likely to have more opportunities to socialize with their peers. Unfortunately, students with poor social skills often fall further behind their same-aged peers because they lose valuable practice times. This is one of the reasons that social skills training is so important. The good news is that social skills training has been proven to be effective. Social skills training has yielded improvements in enhancing status within the peer group, developing judgment, independence, assertion, and even improving academic functioning.

While there are many methods of instruction, it is best to break each skill into simplified steps, as this allows the child to learn a complex task in a more manageable way. For example, a good conversationalist needs to be good at three things: starting a conversation, maintaining a conversation, and ending a conversation. A child might first learn how to appropriately start a conversation with a greeting and then to ask open-ended questions about others interests. Next, to maintain the conversation, the child may need to learn to ask follow up questions or encourage the other child to share. They also may need to shift the topic of the conversation. And last, in order to end the conversation, the child will need to learn about the timing of the conclusion and be mindful of his tone of voice. To teach these skills and many other important social skills, it is often helpful to follow the 3-D model, discussed by Dr. Asher & Dr. Gordon at Behavior Therapy Associates more than 10 years ago. In this model, the instructor **D**iscusses the skill and its importance, **D**emonstrates how to complete the skill, and finally the child **D**oes the skill himself. The child then receives feedback about his choices.

While setting aside time for direct social skills instruction is necessary, it is also important that the adults who work with these children do their best to motivate them to display these behaviors across settings. In fact, getting children who have received social skills training to use their new skills outside of the training environment has been a challenge. It is therefore very important that parents and educators help children with their social skills by following the 4 Ps: Pointing out, Prompting, Practice, and Praise (Christophersen, 2002). Adults may point out effective and appropriate skills displayed in any social setting, including school, the community, and even on television. Parents, teachers and other authority figures should also prompt children to use their skills at the appropriate time (e.g. introducing oneself at a party).

Like all skills, social skills improve with continued practice across settings. Role-plays and group interaction give children opportunities to practice these skills. Maintaining communication between home and school settings enables all authority figures to assist children with social skills deficits. Finally, praising children for engaging in socially appropriate behaviors is essential. Children need to learn when they are making positive choices so that they may continue to make them.



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