

National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET)

THE PRACTICAL TEACHER

This Month's Topic:

Practical Social Skills for Special Education Students

By Brett J. Novick, MS, LMFT, CSSW

Introduction

This issue of **NASET's Practical Teacher** series was written by Brett J. Novick, MS, LMFT, CSSW. Social skills are a vital component to development of well-rounded special education students. Unfortunately, though many classified students are mainstreamed academically they are often self-contained socially and bound by limited social skills. Social groups or programs effectiveness are largely determined if the skills are practical to what a student will need within the larger peer societal framework. Therefore, focus in this article is placed on what attributes are needed to "fit in" to the ever changing dynamic of the student's peer society. Specific skills such as starting and maintaining conversations, phone etiquette, as well as emotional and assertive expressions are touched upon. Accordingly, the article considers that it "takes a village" of educators and parents to provide guidance "on the spot" in social situations as they arise. Educators and parents are encouraged further to play numerous roles of educator, consultant, and guide in the environments of home, school, and the workplace.

Abstract

Social skills are a vital component to development of well-rounded special education students. Unfortunately, though many classified students are mainstreamed academically they are often self-contained socially and bound by limited social skills. Social groups or programs effectiveness are largely determined if the skills are practical to what a student will need within the larger peer societal framework. Therefore, focus in this article is placed on what attributes are needed to "fit in" to the ever changing dynamic of the student's peer society. Specific skills such as starting and maintaining conversations, phone etiquette, as well as emotional and assertive expressions are touched upon. Accordingly, the article considers that it "takes a village" of educators and parents to provide guidance "on the spot" in social situations as they arise. Educators and parents are encouraged further to play numerous roles of educator, consultant, and guide in the environments of home, school, and the workplace.

As a child, we had a player piano. Often times I would put a musical roll into the console of the piano and let it run and see if I could pattern my fingers after the keys. In doing so, I would try to fool myself (and others) into believing that I could play piano. Anyone watching me could know that I was “faking it” and was doing a melodic version of lip syncing. Something just seems forced and fake.

So is the situation in many of our “social skills” issues with our classified students. Often we are trying to conduct social skills in hopes that they will “get it.” Yet, when they go out to the society that is their peers the question is quickly answered if they can tread water among the dynamic and fluid ocean of the child or adolescent world that they are to be a part of and that educators, parents, and adults only have a generational gap glimpse of.

So what are the practical skills that a student needs to be successful in socializing with their peers and to have a rewarding and successful social network? What are the skills that are not necessary or may never be able to be fully or partially applied? Most importantly, how do we equip our students for the world of school, home, work and social media that they are entering into and is changing at a frenetic pace?

In this article I am going to attempt to review some of the most important social skills that a student can learn and we can instruct and support them on and how to make social skills programs more effective for students and, in turn, more rewarding for all parties.

Social Skills Groups & Programs “Must Be on the Job Training”: Social skills groups must be a field experience. If we are going to mainstream students in the classroom. Social skills groups must be mainstream field experiences in areas such as the playground, lunch at recess.

Social Skills Leaders are Teachers, Coaches, and Counselors: Students who are involved in social skills must have consistent staff who know what social skills goals are for the student. This will allow social opportunities while the “iron is hot” and most effective.

Social Media Must Be Included: Social media is a fact of the very fabric of child/teen society now. If we are going to prepare social skills for a student it must include such skills as cyber safety, cyber bullying and appropriate internet etiquette.

The Phone Is Your Friend: Students that have limited social skills often neglect use of the phone for fear of having to resort to conversational skills. Teaching and rehearsing with students a prepared script will help them establish a means of bringing acquaintances from the realm of school into play dates or, for older teens, budding friendships.

Distance Learning: Students that are “close talkers” are often surprised by the reaction of their peers when they get too close. Peers may be brutally honest or the student in question will take their distancing from them as rejection. Students can be taught this lesson by taking them to a playground or anywhere with a pavement and drawing concentric chalk circles and discussion of appropriate distances for friends, peers, strangers, etc.

Joining In Conversation/Games: Many times students with limited social skills will often attempt to “jam” themselves into conversations without an awareness that conversations have an ebb and flow and games activities have a natural starting and ending point. Though adults may consider allowing children to join in conversations or games after they are started peers are not as likely to be as patient in allowing this to take place. Therefore, faculty acting as a consultant by being on the playground the lunch room or less structured activities can teach a student when the entry point is for a conversation or game.

Finding “Pick Up Lines”: Any of us who enter conversation have certain “pick-up” lines we use to engage others...“how are you, I like your outfit, what happened at the last PLC Meeting?” These lines help us enter conversations by rehearsing a means to become involved with another individual. Providing a limited script for a student to attempt is a vital social skill. Also, should rejection take place; moving on to another person or individual versus sulking or giving up.

Not Being The Boss, The Know-It-All or The Rule Keeper: Students should be encouraged to ask questions about how games are played, what the expectations are, and what they are supposed to do in a social situation. Encourage questioning such as “Who? What? When? Why? Or How?” of peers versus statements that seem “bossy” in nature. Have students distinguish between what are issues that are of danger (or prospective danger) that should be told to an adult versus issues that they should attempt to solve on their own to avoid the “Rule Keeper” role that is often not viewed favorably by peers.

Watch Out for Rumors: Students who have social skill deficits often can get dragged into the messenger or receiver of rumors. Lessons such as the game “telephone” can help them to understand how what they hear is not always the truth or may be a partial snippet of what is actually going on. Encourage students to practice empathy by rehearsing an internal script with the following questions: “Is this nice and kind? Would I like others to say this about me? If not, I don’t belong sharing it with others.”

Use of “I” Messages: The use of “I” messages is a well-known therapeutic technique that is in use with children, adults, and couples in counseling and can easily be applied unilaterally to social skills. Students should be encouraged to state how they feel (“I feel”)...why they feel that way (because) and what they need to solve the problem (“so I need the following help). In doing so, they are taught that they are responsible for solving behavioral issues and are not allowed to be angry and have other’s guess how they are feeling; thereby gaining the benefit of negative attention.

Not Using Destructive Messages: Students are encouraged to voice destructive messages that they may say to themselves: “I am stupid, nobody likes me, I can’t do it.” They are then encouraged to state alternative messages that they would state if they were speaking to their best friend. Over time, it is encouraged that they speak to themselves as a friend and rehearse these cognitive messages accordingly.

Where Do I Find Friendships?: Many students with social skills issues will tell you that they have friendships. When asked where are these friendships they will tell you school...however there is little if any carryover outside the classroom. A social skills lesson of where peers (typical and with social skills issues) of where friendships can be sought is useful to assist in securing friendships and carryover from school.

PARENTS ARE VITAL IN SOCIAL SKILL GROUPS: Without parents bringing social skills groups out of the classroom or school counseling office social skills are bound to be left as an experience that will not have any real-life application. Therefore, if you have social skills groups parents must know what is going on and be given an idea (homework if you will) of how to apply each of these skills at home. Ultimately, it is not one teacher, counselor, or parent that allows these social skills to foster or grow it is repetition in the real world that allows these important skills to take route.

In these days of standardized testing, policies and procedures and academic red tape it can be very easy to lose sight of social skills. Social skills can be placed to the back burner; as long as no negative behavioral issues occur it will not get in the way of grinding on academically. Yet, those that we find that are most successful have academic ability (as do our students) AND the ability to get along with others. It is these two factors in tandem that assure success...the ying and yang of balance for preparation for a student for the dynamic and fluid “real world” that they will eventually be entering.

About the Author

Brett J. Novick, MS, LMFT, CSSW holds a Masters Degree in Family Therapy as well as postgraduate certification in School Social Work and Educational Administration. He has been working in public school in New Jersey for the past 14 years. He also has conducted social skills groups for special education students in both public and private settings as well as acted as a consultant for various public school districts. Additionally, he works as an adjunct instructor at Rutgers University. Mr. Novick was awarded District Teacher of the Year in 2007-08, NJ School Counselor Human Rights Advocate of the Year in 2008 and in 2011 NJ State Council on Developmental Disabilities Inclusive Educator of the Year.