

NASET LD Report #14

Social Skills and Academic Achievement

Introduction

Maria, a young girl with learning disabilities (LD), has struggled with peer interactions all her life. She avoids social situations, preferring to work and play on her own. This has begun to seriously affect her classwork, especially how she participates in group projects and pair work, and it's limiting her opportunities to learn from others and share her own knowledge and skills. Concerned, the members of Maria's IEP team meet to discuss ways to better support her. After careful consideration, they decide that she would benefit from a focused approach to improving her social skills.

Maria's IEP team understands that social skills form the backbone of personal and professional success. Social skills help us navigate such everyday interactions as a) exchanging greetings and holding conversations, b) starting friendships and maintaining them, and c) asking for help and instructing others. Maria's IEP team knows that her difficulties, left unattended, will continue to pose challenges for her both inside and outside the classroom. To help her reach her full potential, they decide that now is the time to act.

Maria is not the only one struggling. Research has consistently demonstrated that many children with LD may also have related social skill deficits. Kavale and Forness (1995), for instance, found that 75% of students with LD also show some difficulties in social skills that interfere with their ability to learn. The good news is that, for many of these children, social skills can be taught. Evidence-based methods for building social skills have been developed by teachers, psychologists, and researchers. One challenge, though, is getting this knowledge into the hands of people who can use it to help children like Maria. That is our goal with this issue of *Evidence for Education*.

This publication will first clarify what we mean when we talk about social skills and explore their impact on behavior and academics. Then we'll take a look at what the research has to say about social skills interventions and programs for children with disabilities.

Social Skills – What Are They?

Social skills are not the same thing as behavior. Rather, they are components of behavior that help an individual understand and adapt across a variety of social settings. Walker (1983) defines social skills as “a set of competencies that a) allow an individual to initiate and maintain positive social relationships, b) contribute to peer acceptance and to a satisfactory school adjustment, and c) allow an individual to cope effectively with the larger social environment” (p. 27). Social skills can also be defined within the context of social and emotional learning — recognizing and managing our emotions, developing caring and concern for others, establishing positive relationships, making responsible decisions, and handling challenging situations constructively and ethically (Zins, Weissbert, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). With this understanding, researchers and educators seek to evaluate and build students' social skills within a variety of social contexts.

The classroom is one such environment children must learn to navigate. Successful learning requires students to interact closely with teachers and peers. In addition to their general importance for daily interaction, social skills can have a big impact on a child's ability to succeed in an academic setting. The classroom becomes both a training ground for development of social skills and an arena in which those skills are put to use.

What the Research Says

Research on effective social skills instruction can provide guidance when trying to help children build social skills (Quinn et al., 2000; Sainato & Carta, 1992; Honig & Wittmer, 1996; Zirpoli & Melloy, 1997). Researchers have also studied particular social skill interventions in a variety of settings, as well as for children of different age levels and abilities¹. Findings suggest that quality interventions and related instructional strategies might:

Focus on social and emotional learning strategies that encourage reflection and self-awareness.

- Encourage children to consider how individual actions and words have consequences.
- Develop children's ability to take different perspectives and viewpoints.
- Teach students to think through situations and/or challenges by rehearsing possible outcomes.

Create opportunities to practice effective social skills both individually and in groups.

- Model effective social skills in the classroom and at home through praise, positive reinforcement, and correction and redirection of inappropriate behaviors.
- Discuss effective interactions with specific attention to the steps involved. For example, discuss the process of a conversation, showing how effective listening makes such interaction possible.
- Role-play scenarios that build social skills.

Adjust instructional strategies to address social skills deficits.

- Arrange the physical environment effectively.
- Clearly state instructional objectives and behavioral expectations throughout each lesson.
- Simulate "real life" challenges students may encounter at school, home, and in the community to place social skills in their practical contexts.

Tailor social skill interventions to individual student needs.

- Refer to assessment and diagnostic results when deciding upon an intervention.
- Investigate strategies designed to meet particular social skill deficits.
- Make sure the duration and intensity of the intervention are appropriate for the child's need.

Another thing research has shown us is that even the best interventions may fall short in achieving desired outcomes without a well-defined, systemic framework, or *program*, to support it. Such programs embed evidence-based interventions into a larger context that considers cultural and environmental issues that may be important factors in contributing to overall success (Greenberg, Domitrovich, & Bumbarger, 1999; Reed, Feibus, & Rosenfield, 1998). *School-Wide Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS)* is one such systemic program that addresses effective social skill interventions within broader school, district, and even state contexts (Colvin, Kame'enui, & Sugai, 1993; Todd, Horner, Sugai, & Sprague, 1999).

Within this approach, a team of educators agree upon a set of behavioral expectations as the cornerstone of a positive school culture, and social skills play a key role in helping students meet those expectations.

Adults support social skill development through modeling and positive reinforcement. Students may have additional opportunities, such as social skills clubs, to practice and understand positive interaction.

According to Bellini (2006), effective programs follow a series of steps. Beginning with an assessment of a student's social functioning, educators distinguish between those deficits that can be successfully addressed and those that are unlikely to respond to intervention. For example, the inability to ask a question may be due to either inadequate socialization or an aspect of a specific condition or disability. Such behavior may also be due to a performance problem, in which a student knows what to do, but uses an "inappropriate" response because it meets his/her needs. In any case, successful treatment begins with a thorough, individualized assessment, which then forms the basis for a specific intervention strategy. Educators then monitor student progress to modify or refine the intervention, if needed.

Many social skills curricula provide lesson plans and guidance for both individual and group activities. Most involve modeling successful social skills through activities, games, and role-play, with teachers and peers providing the necessary feedback that allows the student to rehearse interactions (Luiselli, McCarty, Coniglio, Zorrilla-Ramirez, & Putnam, 2005). In this way, students practice and internalize skills within the classroom, which can often lead to transfer of certain skills to other settings, especially when direct support is provided to promote the transfer of skills.

To illustrate how such a program might operate, let's take a look at Skillstreaming, developed by Dr. Arnold Goldstein and Dr. Ellen McGinnis for students displaying aggression, immaturity, withdrawal, or other problems (Gibbs, Potter, & Goldstein, 1995; Goldstein, 1999; McGinnis & Goldstein, 1997). The curriculum breaks a specific skill into small, incremental steps, and walks students through those steps to encourage reflection, discussion, understanding, and competency. This approach recognizes the complexity of certain social skills many of us take for granted and lays out the steps students must take along the way. The chart on the following page, taken directly from the *Skillstreaming* curriculum, shows how this process can be used to teach children how to ask a question (McGinnis & Goldstein, 1997, p. 99). The "trainer notes" provide suggested prompts or probes teachers may use to guide a students toward skill acquisition. Using this method, the program addresses 50 skill sets, organized by both the age/grade level of the child and by the complexity of skill to be acquired (e.g., listening attentively, convincing others).

As another example, let's take a look at Social Stories, an intervention designed to help children interpret challenging or confusing social situations by composing personal stories (Lorimer, Simpson, Myles, & Ganz, 2002; Sansosti & Powell-Smith, 2006). Each story breaks down a challenging social situation into clear steps, descriptions, and illustrations to help a child understand an entire situation (Ali & Frederickson, 2006). Teachers read the story with the student each day for a specific period of time. Stories can also be used to prompt the student when he or she displays the inappropriate behaviors being targeted. Social Stories are designed to help the student learn and internalize the messages and strategies found in the story and use them smoothly and automatically in his or her daily activities.

Evidence-Based Resources for Social Skill Acquisition

Here is a small sample of interventions and programs recommended by researchers and leading organizations such as the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, based on significant research and evaluation.

"Stop and Think" Social Skills Program (Knoff)

<http://www.projectachieve.info/project-achieve-program/project-achieve-overview.html>

Primary Mental Health Project (Cowen et al.)

http://www.sharingsuccess.org/code/eptw/pdf_profiles/pmhp.pdf

The EQUIP Program (Gibbs, Potter, & Goldstein)

<http://www.researchpress.com/product/item/4848/#5133>

The PREPARE Curriculum (Goldstein)
<http://www.researchpress.com/product/item/5063>

The Walker Social Skills Curriculum — The ACCESS Complete Program (Walker et al.)
<http://www.proedinc.com/customer/productView.aspx?ID=615>

I Can Problem Solve: Interpersonal Cognitive Problem Solving (ICPS) (Shure & Spivack)
<http://www.researchpress.com/product/item/4628>

Tough Kids Social Skills Book (Sheridan)
<http://www.researchpress.com/product/item/8447/>

Adapted from

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), *Social skills: Promoting positive behavior, academic success, and school safety*. Available online at:
http://www.nasponline.org/resources/factsheets/socialskills_fs.aspx

Conclusion

We know effective social skills are fundamental to smooth relationships and interactions. We also know how to support the development of social skills in children with and without disabilities. Effective social skills programs reflect, and draw upon, the resources of a school community and respond to the needs of individual students. Social skill interventions start with accurate diagnosis and continue by allowing students to practice positive social interactions in a step-by-step, decision-by-decision fashion.

Why is this important? There are many children who struggle daily to communicate and make sense of their social world. As an education community committed to the success of all students, we must help these children build the social skills they need to succeed in school and in life.

Additional Resources

PBIS | National Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports
<http://www.pbis.org>

LDonline | For learning disabilities
<http://www.ldonline.org/indepth/behavior>

NASP | National Association of School Psychologists
http://www.nasponline.org/resources/factsheets/socialskills_fs.aspx

CECP | Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice
<http://cecp.air.org/fba/default.asp>

CSEFEL | Center on the Social Emotional Foundations of Early Learning
<http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/>

TACSEI | Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention for Young Children
<http://www.challengingbehavior.org/>

Project REACH | Center for Promoting Research to Practice
<http://www.lehigh.edu/projectreach/>

The Behavior Home Page

<http://www.state.ky.us/agencies/behave/homepage.html>

Gray Center for Social Learning and Understanding

<http://www.thegraycenter.org/social-stories>

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