

Social Skills: Promoting Positive Behavior, Academic Success, and School Safety

Good social skills are critical to successful functioning in life. These skills enable us to know what to say, how to make good choices, and how to behave in diverse situations. The extent to which children and adolescents possess good social skills can influence their academic performance, behavior, social and family relationships, and involvement in extracurricular activities. Social skills are also linked to the quality of the school environment and school safety.

While most children pick up positive skills through their everyday interactions with adults and peers, it is important that educators and parents reinforce this casual learning with direct and indirect instruction. We must also recognize when and where children pick up behaviors that might be detrimental to their development or safety. In the past, schools have relied exclusively on families to teach children important interpersonal and conflict resolution skills. However, increased negative societal influences and demands on family life make it imperative that schools partner with parents to facilitate this social learning process. This is particularly true today given the critical role that social skills play in maintaining a positive school environment and reducing school violence.

Consequences of Good Social Skills

With a full repertoire of social skills, students will have the ability to make social choices that will strengthen their interpersonal relationships and facilitate success in school. Some consequences of good social skills include:

- Positive and safe school environment.
- Child resiliency in the face of future crises or other stressful life events.
- Students who seek appropriate and safe avenues for aggression and frustration.
- Children who take personal responsibility for promoting school safety.

Consequences of Poor Social Skills

Students with poor social skills have been shown to:

- Experience difficulties in interpersonal relationships with parents, teachers, and peers.
- Evoke highly negative responses from others that lead to high levels of peer rejection. Peer rejection has been linked on several occasions with school violence.
- Show signs of depression, aggression and anxiety.
- Demonstrate poor academic performance as an indirect consequence.
- Show a higher incidence of involvement in the criminal justice system as adults.

Impact on School Safety

Given the demonstrated relationship between social skills and school safety, schools are increasingly seeking ways to help students develop positive social skills, both in school and in the community. Social skills related to school safety include:

- Anger management
- Recognizing/understanding others' point of view
- Social problem solving
- Peer negotiation
- Conflict management

- Peer resistance skills
- Active listening
- Effective communication
- Increased acceptance and tolerance of diverse groups

In isolation, social skills are not sufficient to ensure school safety; interventions should not be limited to student instruction and training. Change in the school culture should be facilitated by infusing social skills training into a comprehensive system of school safety and discipline policies, emphasizing relationship-building between students and faculty (teachers and administrators) and between schools and families, and providing effective behavior management and academic instruction.

Defining Types of Social Skills

While there are hundreds of important social skills for students to learn, we can organize them into skill areas to make it easier to identify and determine appropriate interventions. For example, the "Stop and Think" program organizes skills into four areas:

1. **Survival skills** (e.g., listening, following directions, ignoring distractions, using nice or brave talk, rewarding yourself)
2. **Interpersonal skills** (e.g., sharing, asking for permission, joining an activity, waiting your turn)
3. **Problem-solving skills** (e.g., asking for help, apologizing, accepting consequences, deciding what to do)
4. **Conflict resolution skills** (e.g., dealing with teasing, losing, accusations, being left out, peer pressure)

Identifying Social Skills Deficits

Prior to determining the best means to help a student develop better social skills, it is important to understand specifically what a student can and can't do. It is crucial to assess and classify the nature of a child's social skill deficits in order to devise and implement the most appropriate intervention.

Children may experience difficulty performing a skill:

- **Due to lack of knowledge** (acquisition deficits), e.g., the child does not know the skills or does not discriminate when a skill is appropriate. For example, a child grabs a pencil from a peer in class when she needs one because she does not know how to appropriately ask to borrow it.
- **Consistently despite knowledge** (performance deficits), e.g., the child knows how to perform the skills but fails to do so consistently or at an acceptable level of competence. For example, although the child understands that he should raise his hand to speak in class, and does so much of the time, he will sometimes blurt out a comment without raising his hand.
- **To a sufficient degree or level of strength** (fluency deficits), e.g., the child knows how to perform skill and is motivated to perform, but demonstrates inadequate performance due to lack of practice or adequate feedback. For example, a student has learned what to say and do when confronted with bullying behavior, but her responses are not yet strong enough to be successful.
- **Due to competing skill deficits or behaviors**, e.g., internal or external factors interfere with the child demonstrating a learned skill appropriately. For example, depression, anxiety, hyperactivity, or negative motivation can interfere with demonstration of appropriate conflict resolution skills, even though the skills have been taught and learned.

Social Skills Interventions

Effective social skills programs are comprised of two essential elements: a teaching process that uses a behavioral/social learning approach and a universal language or set of steps that facilitates the learning of new behavior. Interventions can be implemented at a school-wide, specific setting, classroom, or individual level, but at all levels the emphasis is on teaching the desired skill, not punishing negative behaviors.

Facilitate learning through normal activities. Teachers and parents must take advantage of incidental learning, in which naturally occurring behaviors or events are used to teach and reinforce appropriate social behavior. Adults can reinforce demonstrated positive social skills by praising children when they behave correctly, or offer alternatives to poor decisions to teach the more appropriate behavior. It may be necessary when working with children who have particular difficulty to intentionally "catch" them doing the right thing or devise situations in which they can make a good choice.

Address environmental factors. The school or home environment can affect a child's ability to learn and perform good social skills. If a child is experiencing difficulty demonstrating a particular skill, it is best to first evaluate the environment to determine what might interfere with the child's appropriate acquisition of that skill. For instance, a student may be unruly at the beginning of the day because the teacher needs to establish more specific routines for coming into class, hanging up coats, checking in, etc. Addressing environmental obstacles like this also will benefit all children in that environment.

Address individual factors. Some children need more intensive, personalized training because of individual factors, such as a disability. These interventions might be aimed at children experiencing a specific difficulty or those who have previously been identified as at risk for behavior problems. For example, studies have shown that children with mild disabilities tend to exhibit deficient social skills and excess problem behaviors more than students without such disabilities. Interventions aimed at at-risk students are based on individual assessment of the particular child's skills and deficits. Selected interventions aim to prevent existing behavior problems from developing into more serious ones.

Social skills training should:

- Focus on facilitating the desirable behavior as well as eliminating the undesirable behavior.
- Emphasize the learning, performance, generalization, and maintenance of appropriate behaviors through modeling, coaching, and role-playing. It is also crucial to provide students with immediate performance feedback.
- Employ primarily positive strategies and add punitive strategies only if the positive approach is unsuccessful and the behavior is of a serious and/or dangerous nature.
- Provide training and practice opportunities in a wide range of settings with different groups and individuals in order to encourage students to generalize new skills to multiple, real life situations.
- Draw on assessment strategies, including functional assessments of behavior, to identify those children in need of more intensive interventions as well as target skills for instruction.
- Look to enhance social skills by increasing the frequency of an appropriate behavior in a particular situation. This should take place in "normal" environments to address the naturally occurring causes and consequences.

When planning social skills training programs, schools should:

- Include parents and other caregivers, both to help develop and select interventions and as significant participants in interventions. (Parents and caregivers can help reinforce the skills

taught at school to further promote generalization across settings.)

- Focus on all age groups, including children below the age of 9 who are often bypassed due to the erroneous belief that they will "grow out of it."
- Avoid a "one size fits all" approach and adapt the intervention to meet the individual or particular group needs. Students who speak English as a Second Language might need intensive social skill instruction to promote acculturation and peer acceptance. Children with disabilities might need adaptive curriculum and learning strategies. Most children will need a combination of different strategies that are matched to their particular deficits and backgrounds.

Examples of evidence-based social skills programs

Often school administrators or mental health professionals opt to introduce one of the many empirically supported, commercially published programs into their schools. Effective existing social skills training programs include:

- **"Stop and Think" Social Skills Program** (Knoff): Part of Project ACHIEVE (Knoff and Batsche). Has demonstrated success in reducing student discipline referrals to the principal's office, school suspensions, and expulsions; fostering positive school climates and prosocial interactions; increasing students' on-task behavior; and improving academic performance. <http://www.projectachieve.info>
- **Primary Mental Health Project** (Cowen et al.) Targets children K-3 and addresses social and emotional problems that interfere with effective learning. It has been shown to improve learning and social skills, reduce acting, shyness and anxious behaviors, and increase frustration tolerances. <http://www.sharingsuccess.org/code/eptw/profiles/48.html>
- **The EQUIP Program** (Gibbs, Potter, & Goldstein) Offers a three-part intervention method for working with antisocial or behavior disordered adolescents. The approach includes training in moral judgment, anger management/correction of thinking errors, and prosocial skills. <http://www.researchpress.com/scripts/product.asp?item=4848#5134>
- **The PREPARE Curriculum** (Goldstein) Presents a series of 10 course-length interventions grouped into three areas: reducing aggression, reducing stress, and reducing prejudice. It is designed for use with middle school and high school students but can be adapted for use with younger students. <http://www.researchpress.com/scripts/product.asp?item=5063>
- **The ACCEPTS Program** (Walker et al) Offers a complete curriculum for teaching effective social skills to students at middle and high school levels. The program teaches peer-to-peer skills, skills for relating to adults, and self-management skills. <http://www.proedinc.com/customer/productView.aspx?ID=625&SearchWord=ACCEPTS%20PROGRAM>