**Social Skills**

with Rebecca Hartzell

**Related Recommendations**: Autism, Self-Esteem, Attentional Disorders, Behavior Management and Intervention

**Contents**

Further Evaluation

Instruction/Training

Promoting and Modeling Social Behavior in the School Setting

Activities

**Further Evaluation**

Refer student for comprehensive social skills evaluation. This would include a multi-component assessment that includes direct observation of social skills demonstrated by the child in naturally occurring environments with typically developing peers. It may also be helpful to ask teachers, parents, and students to identify areas of concern using a social skills rating scale to assess particular behaviors of most concern (e.g. taking turns, expressing feelings, following rules, conflict resolution). This will provide information necessary to make an individualized plan targeting the social areas of greatest concern.

The information gathered from observations and social skills rating scales will help ascertain whether or not a more in-depth social skills assessment is warranted. Share the results of assessments with the school counselor or psychologist.

**Instruction/Training**

Refer the student for a social skills intervention that will specifically address the social skills she is lacking. A social skills assessment involving direct observation will be necessary to ascertain the target behaviors. An individualized approach will likely require identification of social opportunities, materials, and peers necessary to implement specific strategies to improve social competence.

Use evidence-based strategies to provide relevant instruction to meet the student’s specific social needs. Teach social skills directly, as she will not learn them through observation. The components of this type of program might include social stories, video modeling, physical arrangement, group interventions, and prompting in the natural environment.

Recognize that the student will have trouble understanding subtle cues inherent in nonverbal communication. Teach the student how to recognize situations in which nonverbal cues are used, such as conversations, conflicts, and competitive play. Help her learn to interpret facial expressions, body language, and gestures through observing modeled behavior, watching videotapes, and role playing.

Traditional behavior modification techniques can be effective in identifying antecedent conditions that lead to problematic social interaction, and identifying consequences that may reinforce such behavior. This will allow for individualized instruction to teach the skills necessary to change social behavior. Reinforce positive social interaction through replacement behaviors that provide the same reinforcement that were reinforcing the social behaviors of concern. For example, if the child is hitting children to gain attention of peers, a replacement behavior for initiation with peers could provide that same reinforcement.

The student has cognitive difficulty with Theory of Mind [interpreting facial expressions, understanding body language, moderating her tone of voice, and observing personal space]. Engage in play with typically developing peers, and focus on teaching interpretation of nonverbal cues and appropriate social conventions (e.g., not standing too close to someone when speaking, abandoning a topic when peer appears bored, listening to peer responses). Video modeling is an effective strategy for allowing a student to go back and observe an interaction, identifying social cues that may have been missed in the initial interaction.

The student has difficulty interpreting new environments and adapting to new situations. Prepare her ahead of time for any changes in the schedule or routine that will occur during the day through visual schedules that can be manipulated and changed by the student. Priming is an effective strategy to introduce new environments or experiences. Students can practice requesting a break when new situations or experiences become too stimulating or difficult.

Assume the role of a positive coach with the student. Help her figure out what is going on in various social settings and how to deal with new situations.

Use the following techniques to enhance the student’s social skills: (a) use evidence based strategies to teach social behaviors directly because the student will not instinctively develop important social skills (b) prepare the student for new situations before they arise, (c) teach replacement behaviors when the student responds inappropriately, (d) prompt student to respond in an appropriate way to common questions and situations and review problematic interactions, (e) provide clear and explicit responses to both appropriate and inappropriate responses, (f) avoid threats, (g) assist the student in new or complex social situations, (h) recognize and reinforce effort, (i) discuss unacceptable behaviors in nonjudgmental ways, and (k) consider helping the student to join group activities that will allow for natural social practice.

Students’ preferences regarding help with social problems frequently differ from those chosen by teachers (Pavir & Monda-Amaya, 2001). Accordingly, before taking action to help the student in social interactions, conduct a private conference with her in which you ask about her social concerns and perceptions of social problems at school. Ask guiding questions to help her generate strategies that might be useful in improving or resolving situations of concern.

As the student has not improved her social functioning just by inclusion in a general education classroom, she requires explicit instruction and intervention in social skills. Continued placement in the general education classroom will provide her with the social context in which to observe and practice the social skills she learns. However, development of social competency must be taught and reinforced using a systematic approach.

Provide a program to teach problem-solving in social situations including specific training in (a) identifying and defining the problem, (b) generating a variety of alternative solutions, (c) identifying the most likely outcomes of each alternative, and (d) selecting and implementing the appropriate solution.

Teach the student the SLAM strategy (McIntosh, Vaughn, & Bennerson, 1995) for responding to negative feedback or comments from others. The components of the strategy are:

1. **S**top whatever you are doing when someone is trying to give you feedback,
2. **L**ook the person in the eye when he or she is speaking to you even if you don’t like what he or she is saying,
3. **A**sk the person a question to clarify what he or she is saying, and
4. **M**ake an appropriate response to the person to indicate how you intend to change or what you want him or her to understand about your situation.

This strategy incorporates practice and rehearsal regarding the problems students are experiencing and may be taught in a small group.

Help the student improve social appropriateness by imagining how other people will react to her words and behavior. Teach the student to consider another person's possible reaction before she speaks or acts. Instruct student how to maintain eye contact with a person when speaking. Allow for opportunities for students to practice conflict resolution in a way that is instructional, safe, and productive.

**Promoting and Modeling Social Behavior in the School Setting**

Establish classroom rules for social interactions. Discuss and provide examples of appropriate and inappropriate comments. Make sure that the students understand the importance of respecting others. Post the rules on the wall along with the pre-established positive and negative consequences.

Help prevent social problems from arising by establishing rules regarding respect and acceptance in student interactions within the classroom. Promote this behavior among students by modeling it and by facilitating discussions about respect, acceptance, and individual differences.

Provide the student with practice in rehearsing what she will say in a situation before it occurs. Have student talk through possible difficulties of an interaction. For example, if the student wants to join a group of students on the playground, have her think of exactly what she will say, before walking over to the group.

Use live demonstrations, films, and videotapes of other students spontaneously using the behaviors targeted for intervention. Use videotapes of the student behaving in ways that illustrate the behavioral problem and, during training, videotapes of the student demonstrating the replacement behavior.

Each time the teacher witnesses the student making an attempt to cope with a social problem in a positive way, provide verbal reinforcement and encouragement. When appropriate, ask the student what actions appeared to be most effective and what actions were less effective, and the student’s perceptions of the reasons for the differences.

Engage the whole class or small groups of students in problem-solving sessions regarding social situations. Encourage the student to participate so that you can ascertain her perspective but do not focus on problems specific to the student.

Praise the student for behaviors such as helping, sharing, or saying something nice to another person. Prompt social interaction when appropriate. Through role modeling, teach her how to compliment other people sincerely.

Have the student work on a project with a peer who will model positive social interactions and overlook any odd social behaviors.

Ask the physical education teacher or the parents to help the student develop skill in a one-to-one sport, such as tennis or handball. Provide opportunities for the student to play with others, practice calm responses when losing, and good sportsmanship when winning.

**Activities**

Create situations that allow the student to have successful social experiences. For example, select a peer who would like to play a game with the student on the playground during recess. Before child goes to play, have the child watch a video of an appropriate social interaction on the playground. Instruct child to identify elements of successful social skills, and encourage child to implement such skills on the playground.

Use highly structured cooperative learning groups to help the student participate in positive social interactions. Make sure that all students in the group know their responsibilities and how to accomplish them.

Encourage the student to join and participate in a school club or organization in which she is interested. Before child attends sessions of the club, have the student create a social story of appropriate verbal interaction in this particular setting.

Teach the student or ask the physical education teacher to teach the student the rules and skills of a game. Identify several skills that can be learned during this game (e.g. bouncing a ball, taking turns, good sportsmanship), and reinforce identified behaviors during the game. Select a game that the student will be able to participate in during recess or after school.

Improve the student's social skills by having her participate in a team sport with a coach who is aware of the student's difficulties and is able to provide a supportive positive learning experience.

Use the student's involvement in athletics to train socially acceptable behaviors. If possible, enlist the aid of the physical education teacher and/or coach. Provide regular feedback to the student about how her behavior and actions in physical education or on a team were received. When negative behaviors occur, brainstorm alternative behaviors with the student.

Use prompt cards to initiate interactions or to plan a typical conversation that might occur on the playground or at lunch. Have the child use the cards to role play common scenarios that occur in a school setting.

Facilitate opportunities to engage with a peer that is kind and possesses good social skills. Ensure that the activities are reinforcing to both children, and that the activities are cooperative in nature. Provide reinforcement to both students for appropriate and successful social interaction.

Have student self-record how many interactions she initiates in a week and allow her to earn a preferred activity based on reaching her goal of successful social interaction.