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Teaching Social Skills

By Christine D. Bremer and John Smith

Introduction

To achieve the best outcomes possible, transition-age youth need specific skills in areas such as math, literacy, and independent living. However, skills in these areas will not assure successful outcomes in the absence of adequate social skills. Social skills form the basis for social competence. Gresham, Sugai, and Horner (2001) define five dimensions of social skills: (a) peer relational skills, (b) self-management skills, (c) academic skills, (d) compliance skills, and (e) assertion skills (pp. 333-334). They define social competence as "the degree to which students are able to establish and maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships, gain peer acceptance, establish and maintain friendships, and terminate negative or pernicious interpersonal relationships" (p. 331). This brief reviews research on the importance of social skills for youth and highlights strategies for teaching social skills to youth with disabilities.

Why are Social Skills Important?

Effective social problem solving requires reading one's own and others' feelings, and being able to accurately label and express those feelings. Such skills are aspects of social and emotional learning (Zins, et al., 1998, p. 19). Well-developed social skills can help youth with disabilities develop strong and positive peer relationships, succeed in school, and begin to successfully explore adult roles such as employee, co-worker/colleague, and community member. Social skills also support the positive development of healthy adult relationships with family members and peers. Hair, Jager, and Garrett (2002) observe that adolescents who have strong social skills, particularly in the areas of conflict resolution, emotional intimacy, and the use of pro-social behaviors, are more likely to be accepted by peers, develop friendships, maintain stronger relationships with parents and peers, be viewed as effective problem solvers, cultivate greater interest in school, and perform better academically (p. 3). Adequate social skills need to be acquired while students are still enrolled in school and further supported and refined in postsecondary, community, and work settings.

The role of social skills at school

Gresham, Sugai, and Horner (2001) note that deficits in social skills are key criteria in defining many high-incidence disabilities that hinder students' academic progress, such as specific learning disabilities, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), mental retardation, and emotional disturbance (p. 332). Therefore, helping students learn social skills is a proactive approach to minimizing the impact of these types of disabilities on school success.

When social skills are absent, educators cannot fully engage students in a variety of learning experiences, especially those that are cooperative. As secondary teachers increasingly use cooperative learning strategies across their curriculum, the need for students to have strong social skills is evident. To participate fully in cooperative

learning, some students with disabilities need training in skills such as giving and receiving feedback, listening, and appropriate self-disclosure.

Social skills in the community and workplace

In community life, appropriate social behavior may be even more important than academic or job skills in determining whether one is perceived as a competent individual (Black & Langone, 1997). For example, Holmes and Fillary (2000) investigated the ability of adults with mild intellectual disabilities to appropriately engage in the "small talk" that is part of any workplace. They noted that workers with intellectual disabilities who demonstrate competence in social skills are generally perceived more positively than those who lack such skills, regardless of task-related skill level (Holmes & Fillary, p. 274). The notion that competence in using social skills will lead to positive perceptions of persons with disabilities can be extended to other community settings such as postsecondary education, neighborhoods, and places of worship.

Instructional Strategies for Teaching Social Skills to Adolescents With Disabilities

Anyone who has tried to improve another person's social skills knows there are significant challenges to such an endeavor. Problems that interfere with the effectiveness of social skill interventions may include oppositional behavior, conduct problems, negative influences from peer groups, substance abuse, family difficulties, and limited cognitive abilities (Hansen, Nangle, & Meyer, 1998).

Why would adolescents want to improve their social skills? Most likely, they seek to (a) avoid the negative consequences of inadequate social skills, including loneliness, job loss, or embarrassment at school or work; and (b) enjoy the benefits of having good social skills, such as friendship, acceptance from others, and good relationships at school and work. Nonetheless, students must see the need for the skills being taught. In a school setting, teachers may ask students to identify the social skills necessary for achieving goals important to them. Based on such discussions, students and teachers can jointly select one or two skills to work on at a time.

Using Cooperative Learning Strategies to Enhance Social Skill Development

The social skills needed by transition-age youth include those needed in school, workplace, and community (see Table 1). Classroom teachers can help students practice social skills needed in nonschool settings by teaching these skills in the context of cooperative or work-based learning settings. Because students need social skills to learn effectively in cooperative settings, many excellent ideas for teaching social skills have been developed to support cooperative learning and can be found in cooperative learning curricula and resources.

Once students move into the workforce, they need additional skills. Some skills can be learned on-the-job. Holmes and Fillary (2000) note:

> When we join a new workplace we need to learn not only the technical terminology and the in-group jargon, we also need to acquire the norms for interaction—the appropriate ways of addressing and referring to people, the acceptable level of informality in meetings of different sizes, and involving people of different status (p. 275).

Choosing and Implementing Programs

Dozens of programs have been developed to teach social and emotional skills and knowledge. A recent comprehensive review of social and emotional learning (SEL) programs is available from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). *Safe and Sound: An Educational Leader's Guide to Evidence-Based Social and Emotional Learning* (SEL) Programs describes and rates available evidence-based programs. It can be downloaded from the CASEL Web site at *http://www.casel.org*, which includes other helpful information about social and emotional learning.

According to CASEL (2003), implementation of a social and emotional learning program is aided by taking the following steps:

1. Establishing a steering committee;
2. Conducting a needs and readiness assessment and coordinating efforts;
3. Selecting a program;
4. Developing a plan for first-year implementation;
5. Reviewing, piloting, planning for expansion, and focusing on professional development and supervision; and
6. Monitoring the implementation process and evaluating program impact.

Creating a Positive School Climate

Consistent and effective use of acquired social skills is more likely to occur in schools having a positive social atmosphere. Most adults can think of a situation in which they didn't feel valued and, as a result, did not respond appropriately or compassionately to others. Schools can ensure that all students know they are valued and respected

Table 1. Social Skills Needed by Transition-Age Students

Dimensions of Social Skills
(Categories from Gresham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001)

	Peer relational skills	Self-management skills	Academic skills	Compliance skills	Assertion skills
General Social Skills					
Being on time		X		X	
Using appropriate loudness and tone of voice		X			
Encouraging everyone to participate	X				
Learning and using peoples' names	X				
Looking at the person who is speaking	X				
Making eye contact with others when speaking	X				
Checking one's own understanding and asking appropriate questions			X		X
Describing one's own feelings when appropriate	X	X			X
Keeping remarks to an appropriate length		X	X	X	
Building on others' comments and ideas	X		X		
Supporting others, both verbally and nonverbally	X				
Asking for direction or assistance		X	X		
Participating appropriately in small talk	X				
Initiating and responding to humor	X				
Additional Social Skills Needed for Cooperative Learning					
Moving into work groups without disturbing others				X	
Staying with one's own group		X		X	
Keeping hands and feet to oneself		X		X	
Respecting time limits		X		X	
Setting group norms, such as "no put downs"				X	
Staying on the topic		X	X		
Offering to explain or clarify			X		X
Criticizing ideas, not people	X				X
Including everyone	X				
Additional Social Skills Needed for Work Environments					
Giving and responding to instructions				X	X
Greeting customers	X				
Responding to criticism				X	X

Teaching Social Skills Through Role Playing and Observation

Role playing is a helpful technique for engaging student interest and providing opportunities for practice and feedback. One way to establish motivation and to inject some humor into the learning process is to ask students to role play a situation in which the identified skill is lacking. Role playing allows students to take on roles, provide feedback to one another, and practice new skills. Role playing enables students to simulate a wide range of school, community, and workplace interactions. For students with intellectual disabilities, role playing can provide an opportunity to practice appropriate small talk, a social skill that is key to acceptance in the workplace.

Holmes and Fillary (2000) suggest extensive use of role-playing exercises to help young adults with mental retardation develop automaticity with small talk appropriate to the workplace. They suggest the following:

- Practicing automatic and brief responses for greetings and farewells. Responses should be brief, appropriate, and unelaborated. To "how" questions (e.g., "How are you doing?") an appropriate response is "Fine" or "Great." To "what" questions (e.g., "What's up?), an appropriate response is "Not much." The ability to use automatic and appropriate responses can be helpful in getting off to a good start in a new workplace.
- Practicing extending small talk by learning to add questions like "How about you?" or "What about you?" or "What have you been doing?" to the above responses.
- Role playing an interaction that includes acting out social errors, spotting the errors, and correcting them in a subsequent role play (with more able young adults). Examples of errors include inappropriate topics for small talk; inappropriately long response or no response when one is needed; inappropriately detailed response; and use of a small-talk formula when it is not appropriate (p. 288).

members of a learning community by taking the following steps to create a positive school climate (Curtis, 2003):

- Learn and use students' names and know something about each student. This can be difficult in secondary schools; using nametags or assigned seating at the beginning of each term can be helpful.
- Hold daily classroom meetings each morning to help build a sense of community and provide opportunities for conversation among students.
- Provide unstructured time (e.g., recess) when students can practice their social skills with peers and experience feedback.
- Encourage journal writing to improve self-awareness.
- Provide opportunities for students to participate noncompetitively (without tryouts or auditions) in extracurricular activities. Avoid unnecessary competition among students.
- Provide ways for students to provide feedback regarding their experience at school, and show them that their input is taken seriously.
- Make a point of connecting briefly and informally, over a period of several days, with individual students who are having difficulties. This establishes a relationship that will be helpful if the student's situation requires a more formal discussion at another time.

School size also has an impact on student attitudes and behaviors. Research indicates that secondary students fare better socially and emotionally in schools with, at most, 800 students. Smaller schools foster greater participation in extracurricular activities, better attendance, lower dropout rates, and fewer behavior problems (vandalism, aggression, theft, substance abuse, and gang participation). Teachers in small schools are more likely than their counterparts in large schools to use teaching methods that support the development of social skills, such as cooperative learning and multiage grouping (Cotton, 1996).

To be effective and worthwhile, social-skills training must result in skills that (a) are socially relevant in the individual's life (social validity), (b) are used in a variety of situations (generalization), and (c) are maintained over time (treatment adherence) (Hansen, Nangle, & Meyer 1998). Such skills will be most consistently employed in a setting that is supportive and respectful of each person's individuality.

Conclusion

In summary, social skills are pivotal to successful transition to adult life for youth with disabilities. Cooperative learning, role-playing, and participation in social and emotional learning programs foster the acquisition of these skills. In addition, a positive school climate supports social learning by providing an environment in which all students are valued and respected.

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