

Building Social Competence in Children with Asperger's Disorder

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Social skills, or demonstrating competent interactions with other people, are very important in our day-to-day functioning. While social skills come naturally to many children, those with Asperger's Disorder can struggle significantly in this area. Researchers have identified that children with Asperger's are often rejected by their peers and are frequently teased or bullied. This can lead to isolation, low self esteem and even sadness or a mood disorder. These children often have difficulty among several areas of social functioning, which can impede their ability to develop and manage friendships and other important relationships. For example, problems are often observed with sustaining reciprocal conversations, or in other words, carrying on a back and forth dialogue in which ideas and emotions are shared and responded to appropriately. Problems are also evident in understanding and using nonverbal communication, such as gestures, facial expression, tone of voice and proximity. Children with Asperger's may also have difficulty interpreting abstract language, such as subtle jokes or idioms, and they may not understand what others are thinking or how they are feeling. Even if a child understands a social situation, he or she may not respond appropriately. Given the critical importance of effective social skills, children with Asperger's may benefit from various interventions aimed at improving social functioning.

Social Skills Techniques

One key treatment component for a child with Asperger's is social skills training (SST). SST explicitly teaches children how to understand and manage social situations. Complicated social scenarios are broken down into smaller steps and children are taught what to do, when they should do it and why it is helpful. First, a new skill is modeled for a child. Then a child practices the new skill with coaching – getting feedback on his or her technique. Learning new social routines requires repetition, and with practice, skills become more natural over time. At The Help Group's Village Glen School, SST is included as a part of the daily curriculum. With their peers, students are able to practice a range of skills, such as learning how to initiate a conversation, cooperate in a group activity, handle stress or respond to bullies. Throughout the day, since all staff are aware of the skills being targeted, students are encouraged to practice new skills across multiple settings. Parents are also informed of the lessons each week, including the steps their child is taught to perform the skill, and are given suggestions to help their child practice at home. For example, an SST lesson in school might include steps to take if a child is being bullied. An adult would model a response, and then the child would practice the same response. As skills build, one child may role play being the bully while another practices how to respond appropriately. If a similar situation were to come up at school or at home, a teacher or parent would then encourage the child to use the new techniques they have learned. This team approach to SST encourages consistency and repetition, which are both important teaching strategies.

Creating Social Learning Opportunities

After, or in conjunction with more formal methods of SST, children need additional opportunities to practice newly learned social skills. These experiences often need to be structured, and some level of facilitation needs to be provided in order for a child to be able to generalize the skills that he or she learned during SST. If a child misses social cues, they also miss the lesson associated with that experience. If placed in a group activity, a child with Asperger's cannot be expected to learn from his or her peers directly. Skilled facilitation is an important teaching component to help a child learn from the environment. Facilitators identify skills that are in development and utilize strategies geared to enhance their progression. This involves coaching and prompting at an optimal level, where the facilitator adjusts the amount of guidance to match the child's current performance. Lev Vygotsky termed this the "Zone of Proximal Development." If, for example, a child is working on introducing himself to a new friend, and learns "Hi my name is Justin, what's your name?" then therapists should provide only the amount of prompting needed to encourage the child to use the line of introduction. If on the other hand the child has

not learned how to introduce himself, more intensive teaching such as modeling and repetition might be the best technique.

To address the need for additional social learning opportunities, The Help Group's Kids Like Me program offers a range of activities designed to teach and boost social skills, as well as to increase self esteem. After school enrichment classes such as guitar, photography, martial arts and graphic design are offered to build recreation and leisure interaction with peers in a motivating setting. During classes, when a child is interested in studying a song on the guitar it creates new learning opportunities that may not have been available before. The child may watch the teacher, imitate the teacher's actions and be more responsive to prompting, such as using the teacher's name, making eye contact or waiting for a turn to play. Children who are less socially motivated, are often more easily engaged by others, and more available for social learning in the context of a stimulating and rewarding activity.

At home, parents must also create experiences that help to build social competence. Some examples include increasing interactive and enjoyable one-on-one time with your child, structuring play dates, using social stories and coaching your child step by step through confusing social experiences. Here are a few actionable steps to helping your child understand the complexities of social interaction:

- Assess your child's understanding of a challenging social situation. Ask your child what happened, how he or she responded and why he or she thinks other children responded the way that they did.
- Gather other perspectives about the situation to compare to your child's understanding.
- Identify any gaps in knowledge, such as why another child responded the way that they did or how your child could have responded differently.
- Use a Social Story™ to help your child understand the different pieces of a situation and to tie them together so they can understand the big picture. More information about Social Stories can be found on Carol Grey's website, <http://www.thegraycenter.org/>.

Building social competence in a child with Asperger's requires a team approach across multiple settings. With consistency and practice, an effective treatment plan will help new skills emerge, leading to more positive social experiences.