

Social Skill Training — the Hidden Curriculum

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While the need for social skill training has been well documented for children within the Autistic Spectrum and with other neurodevelopmental disorders, no formal curriculum has been developed. More and more educational programs are now finding that teaching social skills is as relevant to a child's overall growth and development as is teaching math and reading. Social skills have, in fact, become the hidden curriculum. Training programs are being implemented in an effort to reduce behavior problems and to improve a child's overall adaptive functioning. Without improved social functioning, children will not be able to achieve their full potential. Research has shown that poor social skills interfere with success in higher education, job maintenance and in overall satisfaction with life.

It is beyond the scope of this article to present a detailed social skill curriculum. However, there are several "golden rules" for social facilitation that are easily implemented by anyone and can dramatically change a child's social functioning.

Six Golden Rules of Social Skills Facilitation

1. REINFORCE, REINFORCE, REINFORCE!!!

When starting any social skills training program, it is important to remember that this isn't necessarily easy or fun for the child. It underscores a deficit, which can lead to children not wanting to participate in such a program. Therefore, a key component of any social program is increasing the amount of positive feedback given. Every social attempt should be reinforced! For example, when a child walks into the middle of a basketball game, interrupts and says, "my favorite ice cream is chocolate," — instead of telling the child how inappropriate his or her behavior was, the interaction should start off with a positive statement — "I'm glad you want to share something with your classmates." Then a corrective statement can be made. In this manner, the child begins to understand that he or she did something right in the interaction, and this helps build his or her self-esteem in regard to social abilities.

2. ALWAYS TELL THE CHILD WHAT TO DO, NOT WHAT NOT TO DO!!

We have gotten into the habit speaking to children in the negative — "don't jump in the puddle," don't run with scissors." For most children, such statements may be easy to understand, but for children who tend to think concrete and literally interpret language, "don't jump in the puddle" can mean sit in puddle, splash in the puddle, walk in the puddle. It is much easier to say, "walk around the puddle." This is clear and concrete and ensures the child's ability to understand what is expected of them.

3. BEGIN YOUR PROGRAM AT A POINT WHERE THE CHILD WILL INITIALLY ACHIEVE SUCCESS.

If you start where a child will achieve success, the child will be more likely to enjoy the training program and will feel a greater sense of ease and accomplishment.

4. WHEN PROBLEM SOLVING WITH A CHILD, ALWAYS GIVE THEM TIME TO THINK OF AN ALTERNATIVE SOLUTION.

Too often, we ask children what else they could have done, but we don't wait for them to answer. When we wait, the child is more likely to generate an appropriate solution. The facilitator's response should be, "oh, I love your idea. You came up with a really smart solution." When the child generates the solution, they "own it" and when its their idea, they are more likely to use that strategy.

5. FACILITATE!

Don't assume that just by being exposed to social situations the child will learn, model or generalize from that experience. You must **ACTIVELY TEACH** the skills that you want the child to display. The behaviors must be taught, explained to the child (provide a rationale), explained by the child, practiced, reinforced and generalized.

6. SOCIAL FEEDBACK LOOP.

This is one of the most important rules for improving social skills, but it is too often left out of training programs. When intervening with children, we tend to end our statements with how the behavior affected others. For example, "That hurt my feelings." For children who have difficulty understanding that others feel and think differently than they do, these statements often carry very little weight. The child may understand that it's bad to hurt other's feeling, but not understand why. When we use a social feedback loop, we bring the social consequences back to the child. That is, how will hurting other people's feelings affect the child who did the hurting? In order to get the children motivated to change, they must see that their behavior feeds back on them. For example: "When you hit Alyssa, you hurt her, and when you hurt her, she won't want to play with you anymore. When you hit people, they won't want to be your friend." This way, children see how their behavior feed backs onto them.

Regardless of a particular curriculum used, these six golden rules are imperative to any successful social skill training program. When used in a consistent fashion, these rules can serve to improve the social functioning of all children with neurodevelopmental disorders and allow them to achieve their potential in all areas.

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