



Social Skills *for* **Students**

With **Autism Spectrum Disorders**

and **Other Developmental Disabilities**



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Table of Contents



| | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Acknowledgments | v |
| Foreword by Michael Wehmeyer | vii |
| Preface..... | ix |
| Chapter 1: Proactive Instruction for Social Competence | 1 |
| Chapter 2: Supporting Students With Disabilities in the Inclusive Classroom | 21 |
| Chapter 3: Engaging Students in Learning Activities and Teaching Social Behaviors | 33 |
| Chapter 4: Direct Instruction of Social Skills..... | 55 |
| Chapter 5: Social Skills Lesson Plans for Students in Elementary School (1-50) | 89 |
| Appendix: Forms..... | 293 |
| References | 307 |

Preface



Many descriptions of autism and Asperger's describe people like me as "not wanting contact with others" or "preferring to play alone." I cannot speak for those other kids, but I'd like to be very clear about my own feelings: *I did not ever want to be alone* . . . I played by myself because I was a failure at playing with others.

John Elder Robinson

Look Me in the Eye: My Life With Asperger's, p. 211

The purpose of this social skills teaching framework is to address the social competence needs of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and other developmental disabilities. Today, many students with disabilities are educated alongside their typically developing peers in general education classrooms, with limited pullout for specialized instruction. Many of today's students receive support from special education teachers and paraprofessionals serving students with a wide range of disabilities. A typical elementary special education teacher might serve one or two students with ASD, two students with significant support needs, four students with mild/moderate intellectual disabilities, four students with behavioral disorders, and additional students with learning disabilities—all part of a 20-plus student caseload.

This updated edition of *Social Skills for School and Community* (Sargent, 1998) places a greater focus on teaching social skills in inclusive settings. Strategies for teaching students with ASD often are also effective in addressing the social skills needs of students with other disabilities and those who are "at risk." The earlier versions of these materials have been used successfully with young children considered to be at risk, students with

Chapter 1

Proactive Instruction for Social Competence



Teaching social skills to elementary students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and other developmental disabilities can be both a vexing and a rewarding endeavor for educators. *Social skills instruction* is a complex process requiring individual and group strategies, repetition, and persistence. Despite its challenges, social skills instruction holds promise for improving the social competence of children and youth with ASD and other developmental disabilities; sufficient evidence demonstrates that social skills can be taught and the lives of these students enhanced. Although the title of these books focuses on students with ASD and developmental disabilities, these lesson plans are also extremely effective and appropriate for students with intellectual disability and are thus referenced throughout the text.

Rationale

For most children, social competence develops through incidental learning and intellectual maturation. Unfortunately, children and youth with ASD and intellectual disabilities are notoriously inadequate in their incidental learning ability (Freedman & Silverman, 2008; Gumpel, Tappe, & Arki, 2000; Hume, Bellini, & Pratt, 2005; Simpson, 2005). They commonly exhibit learning deficits in areas of reciprocal communication, discrimination, attention, memory, and generalization (Ellis, 1963; Fisher & Zeaman, 1973; Zeaman & House, 1963) which contribute to impaired social affect, social skills, and social cognition. Consequently, children with ASD and intellectual disabilities fail to accrue acceptance by peers and adults. Moreover, many children with these disabilities incur social rejection as a result of exhibiting awkward, interfering, and socially unacceptable behaviors.

The long-term consequences of social rejection and poor social competence are many. Early studies indicated that individuals identified during childhood as social isolates

Chapter 2

Supporting Students With Disabilities in the Inclusive Classroom



Positive and supportive learning environments are necessary for students with and without disabilities to acquire, use, and expand the elements of social competence. The challenge is creating and sustaining positive settings and actions that support skill acquisition, acceptance, friendships, and self-efficacy for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and developmental disabilities. What do effective inclusive practices look like? How can teachers develop a supportive classroom environment?

Support for Inclusive Practices

During the latter part of the 20th century, a number of approaches to serving students with ASD and developmental disabilities took hold in schools in the United States. One practice that evolved over time is *inclusive education*. Inclusive education has a philosophical, legal, and research base of support.

Philosophically, inclusive education has its roots in the normalization principle (Nirje, 1969) but came to the forefront when it became based on the principle of equality (Villa & Thousand, 2005). The *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) case ruling confirmed civil rights for students. Many researchers took the *Brown* case principle of “separate but not equal” and applied it to students with disabilities educated in segregated environments; Zions (2005) stated “the only way for students with disabilities to receive an equal education is to have them taught with general education students” (p. 4).

Legal mandates for students with disabilities (i.e., Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, IDEA, 2006; No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 2006) to interact with students without disabilities and to have access to the general education curriculum have helped to support and increase inclusive education for all students. As well, research over the past decade supports inclusive education by providing evidence of the benefits of inclusive practices for students with and without disabilities. Downing and Peckham-Hardin

Chapter 3

Engaging Students in Learning Activities and Teaching Social Behaviors



Engaging Students in Learning Activities

There are a variety of ways teachers engage students in learning and social activities. Because of the diversity of students in inclusive general education classrooms, teachers need to respond to different levels of ability. Within any one lesson a teacher may need to use varying questions, simplify some of the materials, include higher order thinking skills within the group activity, and/or break the task down into more manageable parts. Differentiated teaching strategies such as tiered or multilevel instruction can help teachers include students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and developmental disabilities. Teachers also can engage these students in learning by incorporating student interests, using student-selected outcomes, offering choices in learning activities, and pairing or grouping students for cooperative activities.

Specific strategies that have been identified in the literature to support students are teacher and peer-mediated procedures (Hyatt & Filler, 2007) and structured social environments (e.g., instructing a small group of students in social skills; Thiemann & Goldstein, 2004). To create supportive environments and increase the social interactions and skills of students with ASD and developmental disabilities, teachers often use a variety of these methods in their inclusive classrooms (Carter & Kennedy, 2006; Gordon et al., 2005; McDonnell, Mathot-Buckner, Thorson, & Fister, 2001; Thiemann & Goldstein, 2004).

Teacher-Facilitated and Teacher-Mediated Strategies

Teachers can create environments that facilitate positive social interactions and help to develop social skills and friendships using a variety of methods (see box, “Teaching Methods That Help Students Build Social Skills”). In their review of the literature on

Chapter 4

Direct Instruction of Social Skills



Most children learn social skills through imitating other children, their parents, and the other adults they encounter during the course of daily living. Except for some intensive instruction and reinforcement by parents on manners, much of what children learn in the social area can be described as incidental. Unfortunately, children with disabilities, especially children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and other developmental disabilities, are notoriously inadequate in their incidental learning. As a consequence, they are often deficient in social skills (see Table 4-1) and fail to accrue acceptance by peers and adults. In addition, many children with disabilities tend to incur social rejection as a result of exhibiting interfering and socially unacceptable behaviors. These conditions affecting the lives of students with disabilities contributes to the need to teach them social skills.

Attending to Learner Characteristics

Whether taught in groups or individually, children and youth with ASD and other developmental disabilities have unique learning characteristics that must be addressed and accommodated during instruction. Individuals with ASD perceive the world differently from their typically developing peers, and generally are not proficient in recognizing or understanding the thinking of others. They are often visual learners who require interventions that tap into their strengths and special interests. Students with intellectual disabilities have difficulty with memory, problem solving, and generalizing learning. Teachers need to bear these learning characteristics in mind when developing small-group lessons and follow-up procedures. Strategies that respond to attention, discrimination, memory, and generalization deficiencies specifically address the needs of students with intellectual disabilities. The use of pictures, drawings, or video is generally regarded to be helpful in teaching students with ASD.

Chapter 5

Social Skills Lesson Plans for Students in Elementary School



| | | |
|----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 1 | Classroom Rules: Paying Attention to the Teacher, Getting the Teacher's Attention, Asking Questions..... | 91 |
| 2 | Responding to Questions From a Teacher or Other Adult..... | 97 |
| 3 | Active Listening in the Classroom..... | 101 |
| 4 | Classroom Rules: Sitting in Your Own Space..... | 105 |
| 5 | Keeping Your Desk in Order..... | 109 |
| 6 | Saying "Please" and "Thank You"..... | 113 |
| 7 | Requesting a Preferred Activity..... | 117 |
| 8 | Hallway Etiquette: Staying in Line, Entering a Room/Area..... | 121 |
| 9 | Riding the School Bus..... | 125 |
| 10 | Being Patient: Learning How to Wait..... | 129 |
| 11 | Using the Restroom..... | 133 |
| 12 | Appropriate Classroom Participation..... | 137 |
| 13 | Cafeteria Rules: Going Through the Lunch Line and Sitting With Peers..... | 141 |
| 14 | Cafeteria Rules: Table Manners and Having a Conversation..... | 145 |
| 15 | Greeting Teachers and Other Adults..... | 149 |
| 16 | Greeting Peers and Friends..... | 153 |
| 17 | Using Classroom Materials: Sharing, Taking Care of Supplies, and Requesting Materials From Others..... | 157 |
| 18 | Active Listening to Peers..... | 161 |
| 19 | Recognizing and Reporting Emergencies..... | 165 |
| 20 | What to Do if You Get Hurt..... | 169 |
| 21 | What to Do if You Hurt Someone Else..... | 173 |
| 22 | Coping With Sensory Issues..... | 177 |
| 23 | Problem Solving..... | 181 |
| 24 | Telling the Truth..... | 185 |
| 25 | Being a Friend: Accepting Ideas Different From Your Own..... | 189 |