**Teaching Social Skills to Kids Who Don't Yet Have Them**

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Note from LD OnLine

This article, written by Dr. Mac, from the BehaviorAdvisor.com, applies to all students who have social skills difficulties. LD OnLine considers it particularly applicable to students who have learning disabilities and attention deficit disorder. Students with learning disabilities often have difficulties accurately perceiving what other people do, say, or demonstrate. They have difficulties with:

listening (understanding what someone has told them)

talking (saying what they mean)

noticing and interpreting facial expression and body language

planning and controlling what they do

These tips will help teachers who have students with learning disabilities in their classroom.

Do any of these comments sound familiar?

"I tell him to stop doing that, but he keeps on doing it. Darn. This kid must have been raised by wolves!"

"That kid knows how she is supposed to behave. She CHOOSES to misbehave."

"I ask him what he is supposed to be doing and he can tell me. He knows better, so why isn't he doing it?"

Yep. Some kids know "intellectually" what to do, but they've never "physically" done it before. It's difficult for all of us to all-of-the-sudden display a completely different behavior than we've been showing for years. Changing a habit is no easy task. To get an idea of what it's like, try this activity:

Do now activity (Yes!…right now.)

Cross your arms on your chest. Notice how one arm goes over the other with it's hand tucked under it's biceps (upper arm). At the same time, the hand of the lower arm has it's hand resting on top of the biceps of the other limb. OK, now unfold your arms and switch their positions so that the one that was on the bottom is now on the top (and vice versa). All right. It took you awhile, but you were able to do it. Feel a bit uncomfortable and odd? Now, uncross the arms and fold them again in the new way. Again. And again. In fact, for the rest of your life, do it this new way. Don't ever make a mistake or revert to the old way.

Think that'll be difficult? Yep. Now imagine what we are asking our socially unskilled kids to do. We're expecting them to immediately change a behavior that is indelibly etched into their brains, feels "comfortable," and has been "assigned" to them by others who have labeled them as the type of person who "does that thing." Kids who display the wrong behaviors as they interact with others will have a long and arduous path to travel as they work to change to "a better way." Thank goodness they have a patient and supportive teacher like you. You'll support them as they struggle to show the new behavior. You'll focus on progress rather than perfection, seeing evidence of the new rather than vestiges of the old.

Why don't our kids have social skills?

Social skills are those communication, problem-solving, decision making, self-management, and peer relations abilities that allow one to initiate and maintain positive social relationships with others. Deficits or excesses in social behavior interfere with learning, teaching, and the classroom's orchestration and climate. Social competence is linked to peer acceptance, teacher acceptance, inclusion success, and post school success.

Many of our youngsters never learned "appropriate behavior" for social settings-situations in which they must interact/cope with others. Perhaps they did not receive this guidance in the home, either because of lack of training by elders or another system of values & behaviors being taught. Perhaps they did have good role models in the home and neighborhood who promoted "appropriate" behavior, but didn't pick it up as well as most kids, just like some kids learn to read without formal instruction previous to school, and some need the structured process of reading instruction.

Displaying poor social skills is likely to get one rejected by others (other kids don't like them and won't associate with them). Others of our kids work hard to show the new and better behaviors they've been told to show, but are still rejected by others, perhaps due to past reputation or maybe because others don't like the awkward and unsure demonstration of the newly learned behaviors which don't appear "natural." At other times, our pupils may still fail because they have difficulty monitoring and controlling their behavior when unexpected reactions occur. They misread social cues given off by others. For example:

Not noticing the rejection actions by others that non-verbally/verbally say, "Get lost."

Viewing the positive social forays of others as being threatening. If rejected because of their behavior (past or present), they'll rarely-if ever-get the chance to display the "correct" behaviors under naturalistic circumstances and fail to incorporate them into their behavioral repertoire.

Others of our kids will not respond positively to social skills instruction because they don't see the skills as being necessary or useful. For example:

assisting the teacher

avoiding conflict with adults

disagreeing in a non-confrontational manner

The behaviors they display now seem just fine to them. They obtain the attention, objects or power they seek.

A note to teachers of students with Emotional & Behavioral Disorders (EBD)

If you are a teacher of students with behavior disorders, are you teaching social skills to your students? Are you doing so in structured daily lessons? If not, why not? The defining characteristic of kids with EBD is their inability to build and sustain positive relationships. Kids with EBD are 3 times more likely than general ed kids to be rejected because of their behavior. It's time to use more than point systems to "manage" the behavior of these pupils. We need more than "the curriculum of control." We must teach the skills we wish to see.

What exactly is social skills training?

If our kids don't have 'em, we've got to teach 'em. "Social skills training" is a general term for instruction conducted in (behavioral) areas that promotes more productive/positive interaction with others. We teach social skills to students who are, at present, socially unskilled in order to promote acceptance by teachers, other adults and peers. A social skills training program might include (among other things):

Manners and positive interaction with others

approaching others in social acceptable ways

asking for permission rather than acting

making and keeping friends

sharing toys/materials

Appropriate classroom behavior

work habits/academic survival skills

listening

attending to task

following directions

seeking attention properly

accepting the consequences of one's behavior

Better ways to handle frustration/anger

counting to 10 before reacting

distracting oneself to a pleasurable task

learning an internal dialog to cool oneself down and reflect upon the best course of action

Acceptable ways to resolve conflict with others

using words instead of physical contact

seeking the assistance of the teacher or conflict resolution team