



AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER SERIES

Strategies for Social Skills for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Introduction

One of the most important areas for intervention for children with autism will be in the area of social skills development. Most students with ASD would like to be part of the social world around them. They have a need to interact socially and be involved with others. However, one of the defining characteristics of ASD is impairment in social interactions and social skills. Students with ASD have not automatically learned the rules of interaction with others, and they are unable to follow these unwritten rules of social behavior. This article will focus on this very important and relevant issue.

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Many people with ASD are operating on false perceptions that are rigid or overly literal. Recognizing these false perceptions can be very helpful in understanding the behavior and needs of these students in social situations.

The misperceptions include:

- rules apply in only a single situation
- everything someone says must be true
- when you do not know what to do, do nothing.

Imagine how overly literal misconceptions could seriously limit social interaction. It is a mistake to assume that students with ASD understand any situation or a social expectation. They may be using an ineffective method of interacting because they do not know another more appropriate one, or they may be unable to distinguish between situations in order to select an appropriate behavior.

Social skill development is an essential curricular area for students with ASD, as well as a crucial component of any intervention plan for changing problem behaviors. In order to help

students, it is necessary to carefully assess their social competencies to determine which social skills must be directly taught.

To develop social skills, students need to have the opportunity to participate and interact in a variety of natural environments where appropriate models, natural cues and stimuli, and functional reinforcers are available. Placement within integrated environments provides this access to peer models and social opportunities. However, access to models and opportunities to develop social skills is not usually enough. In general, people with ASD need explicit teaching to develop social skills and understanding of social situations. There are a variety of promising practices for supporting students with ASD in developing social skills.

Using social stories

One of the most helpful methods for teaching social skills is the use of social stories, a strategy developed by Carol Gray. A social story is a description of a social situation that includes the social cues and appropriate responses, and that is written for a specific situation for the individual student. The story can be used for a variety of purposes, including:

- facilitating the inclusion of students in regular education classes
- introducing changes and new routines
- explaining reasons for the behavior of others
- teaching situation-specific social skills
- assisting in teaching new academic skills

Social stories can be created by parents, teachers, and other service providers. They are useful with students who have a level of cognitive functioning that allows them to understand the story. Non-readers can listen to social stories on cassette tapes. To be effective, a social story should describe a situation from the perspective of the student, direct the student to do the appropriate behavior, and be in the voice of the student (i.e., from the “I” perspective).

The process begins with identifying student needs through observation and assessment. Once a difficult situation is identified, the author observes the situation and tries to understand the perspective of the student in terms of what will be seen, heard, and felt. The author then writes the story at an appropriate comprehension level and from the perspective of the student, and includes descriptive, directive, and perspective statements. (Descriptive sentences provide information on the setting, activity, and people involved; directive statements are positive statements about the desired response for a given situation.

There are three basic approaches for implementing a social story:

- For a student who reads independently, the story is read twice by an adult, followed by the student reading it back. Then the student reads it daily.
- If the student does not read, the story may be recorded on a cassette tape with a signal (i.e., bell) to turn the pages. The student is taught to “read” the story, and reads it daily. Symbols, drawings, or photographs can be included in the story to support meaning for the student.
- To incorporate modeling, the story can be videotaped. The story is read aloud on a videotape, with one page on the screen at a time.

Teaching Key Social Rules

Developing an understanding of the basic rules associated with a given situation will help the child to adapt to the social context, and may prevent increased anxiety and reduce the reliance on inappropriate coping behaviors. Critical social skills for which students with ASD will likely need some type of direct instruction include:

- **Waiting**—Visual cues such as an object, pictures, and written words can provide concrete information to make waiting less abstract and more specific to the situation.
- **Taking turns**—This can be taught through the use of social stories as well as a picture or pictograph to cue the child. It may also be necessary to provide some instruction and rehearsal in turn-taking activities.
- **Transitions**—Using social stories and providing warnings with visual cues, such as symbols that are understood by the student, can help the student make the transition from one activity to another. Transitions can be particularly difficult if the student has not completed the activity; the student may need to be prepared for the possibility of having to finish later.
- **Changing the topic in conversation**—Some students may stay on one topic and appear unable or unwilling to talk about anything else. Staying with one behavior or topic in this way is referred to as perseveration. Visual rules, established time limits, and setting a time and place to engage in a favorite topic may help in teaching students when they need to end or change the topic.
- **Finishing**—It may help to teach students to use environmental cues, such as observing and following the behavior of other children. It may also be necessary to use a timer, and a method for checking their own work.
- **Initiating**—Social stories combined with photographs or pictures can be particularly useful for teaching a student how to approach others, ask for something, get into a game, say hello, and leave a situation if upset.
- **Being flexible**—Visual systems can be used to explain changes in a concrete way. If sequenced schedules or picture routines are used, a specific picture or symbol can be removed or crossed out, and another put in its place.
- **Being quiet**—Visual supports may be helpful in teaching the specific behaviors for being quiet, and teaching rules for specific situations.

Using Cognitive Picture Rehearsal

Another instructional strategy for teaching social skills that presents information in a visual format is Cognitive Picture Rehearsal. This method involves presenting a sequence of behaviors in the form of pictures or pictographs with an accompanying script. The student is guided through repeated practice of the sequence of behaviors.

Using Peer Support

Peers can assist students with ASD in developing social skills. It may be helpful to educate the peers first, so that they better understand the behavior of the autistic student. For example, the teacher may need to interpret the non-verbal communication, or explain that a specific activity is difficult for the student, and identify what peers can do to help. This can be done informally or in a more structured manner.

Young children can be shown how to use specific prompts to initiate and maintain interaction with a classmate with ASD. They may also need help communicating with the student. Peers

should be reinforced for their role, just as the student with ASD is reinforced for social interactions.

Peers can be helped to develop strategies to enhance the social competence of the child with ASD. Pivotal Response Training (PRT) is one technique that has been used during recess breaks and has been successful in increasing interactions, initiation, varied toy play, and language use. PRT involves teaching typical peers to use strategies to:

- gain attention
- give choices to maintain motivation
- vary toys
- model social behavior
- reinforce attempts
- encourage conversation
- extend conversation
- take turns
- narrate play

Students can be provided with information on ASD and tips for interacting with the student with ASD. It is important that parents be involved in the decision to discuss ASD with their child's peers. They may wish to preview any materials or may want to be involved in the presentation.

Using social skills training groups

Students with ASD may also benefit from social skill instruction within a small-group structured format. There are a variety of social skills training programs and resources available. Promising programs include an assessment that is used to identify skills for instruction. Lessons follow a similar format in each of the social skills curricula:

- identifying the skill and skill components, and when it is used
- modeling the skill
- role play
- opportunities to practice
- strategies for generalization

Although these curricula are not developed specifically for children with ASD, they can be used in combination with appropriate adaptations and supports. In addition, there may need to be a particular emphasis on the strategies for facilitating generalization of targeted skills.

Integrated play groups

Integrated play groups can provide opportunities for younger students with ASD to interact with their age peers, and create a natural environment for incidental teaching of social skills. Play groups provide natural situations in which children with ASD use language to express wants, practice being near other children, and imitate social interactions between non-disabled peers.

Teaching self-monitoring/managing skills

The ultimate goal for all students, including those with ASD, is to increase independent participation in a variety of environments with effective social skills. One way to increase independence in higher-functioning students with ASD is to teach self-management procedures, in which students monitor their own behavior in order to earn positive reinforcement. Studies have shown that in the process of the student collecting his or her own self-monitoring data, the desired behavior increases. The accuracy of the self-monitoring may not be as important as the process and awareness it builds in the student.

The process for teaching self-management is as follows:

1. Define the target behavior that the student will self-monitor.
2. Identify reinforcers that function successfully for the individual.
3. Create a self-monitoring method for the student to collect data (e.g., a chart, stickers, or some kind of low-tech counter device).
4. Teach the student the target behavior and how to use the self-monitoring method to record the performance of the behavior.
5. Increase the student's independence by gradually reducing adult intervention and having the student self-manage behavior.

Supporting the Development of Friendships

Optimally, the aim of developing specific social skills is to enable the student to interact with others in a variety of settings, and to facilitate the development of social opportunities and relationships. Students who demonstrate basic social skills may still have difficulty establishing connections with other children and maintaining interactions with peers. Teachers and parents may facilitate further social interaction through:

- encouraging a friend to play with the child at home
- helping the student join school clubs with support as needed to participate
- teaching the child to observe other children to follow what to do
- encouraging co-operative games
- modeling how to relate to the child, and educating other students in the class
- encouraging prospective friendships
- providing enjoyment at break times
- doing projects and activities that illustrate the qualities of a good friend
- helping the student to understand emotions through direct teaching of how to read people's faces and body language and respond to cues that indicate different emotions

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