9. Teaching Social Skills

Students with learning and behavior problems often have social skills deficits as well (Anderson, Nelson, Fox, & Gruber, 1988; Melloy, Davis, Wehby, Murry, & Lieber, 1998; Sugai & Lewis, 1996; Sabornie & Beard, 1990). The long-term outcomes for students whose social skills problems go unremediated include: cycles of failure, peer rejection, poor school outcomes, and adjustment problems as adults (Anderson et al., 1988; Cartledge & Kiarie, 2001; Gresham, 2002; Kamps & Kay, 2002; Kauffman, Mostert, Trent, & Hallahan, 1998; Melloy, et al., 1998; Rutherford, Quinn, & Mathur, 1996; Warger & Rutherford, 1996). Instructing students in social skills can have important preventative effects. There is compelling evidence that addressing social skills in the classroom can lead to increased academic performance (Sugai & Lewis, 1996; Warger & Rutherford, 1996), lessen the occurrence of behavior problems (Anderson, et al., 1988; Kamps & Kay, 2002; Sugai & Lewis, 1996) and improve the student’s interpersonal relationships with peers and adults (Kamps & Kay, 2002; Rutherford, Quinn, & Mathur, 1996; Sabornie & Beard, 1990; Sugai & Lewis, 1996; Warger & Rutherford, 1996).

There are various reasons why students may not perform appropriate social skills; they do not know a skill or because they do not know how or when to use it (Gresham, 2002; Quinn et al., 2000; Sabornie & Beard, 1990). Thus, two ultimate goals of teaching social skills are to increase performance of appropriate social skills and to decrease problem behaviors; in essence, the new behaviors should replace the inappropriate behaviors (Anderson et al., 1988; Gresham, 2002; Kamps & Kay, 2002; Sugai & Lewis, 1996; Warger & Rutherford, 1996). Social skills that teachers may want to work on with their students include: self-control, listening, problem solving, negotiating, working together, taking turns, conflict management, encouraging others, and giving positive feedback (Quinn, Osher, Warger, Hanley, Bader, & Hoffman, 2000; Sugai &
Lewis, 1996; Walker & Walker, 1991). The selection of specific skills should be based on strengths and weaknesses of individual students. Clearly, these are skills that can affect students’ success in school settings, relationships, and as they transition into adulthood and the work world.

There are a number of ways that teachers can work social skills instruction into the classroom and the school day. Social skills can be taught as a separate subject using direct instruction or through cooperative learning, or the skills can be integrated into the academic curriculum (Anderson et al., 1988; Carter & Sugai, 1988; Cartledge & Kiarie, 2001; Kamps & Kay, 2002; Melloy et al., 1998; Prater, Bruhl, & Serna, 1998; Sugai & Lewis, 1996; Warger & Rutherford, 1996). Students can be taught skills individually, in small groups, or as part of whole-class or whole-school instruction (Gresham, 2002; Kamps & Kay, 2002; Kauffman et al., 1998; Quinn, Osher, Hoffman, & Hanley 1998; Walker & Walker, 1991). There is mounting empirical evidence to support the effects of an integration of social skills and academics. In addition to the many available packaged social skills curricula, teachers can develop their own social skills instruction programs, based upon content/procedures found in effective programs of instruction. These characteristics include: (a) strategies that properly identify and describe the skills to be taught, (b) approaches that meet the needs of the students to be taught, (c) opportunities for teacher to model of the skill, (d) opportunities for student rehearsal with teacher feedback, strategies that include generalization training, and finally (e) ongoing evaluation of the skills in practice (Melloy et al., 1998; Rutherford, Quinn, & Mathur, 1996; Sabornie & Beard, 1990; Schumaker & Hazel, 1984). Regardless of what program is selected for use, modification, or development, it is important for teachers and schools to put time and effort into planning for and implementing its use (Sugai & Lewis, 1996).
Research shows that effective social skills instruction programs reflect the following methods of instruction to teach skills that students then have an opportunity to practice, use in daily situations and, in turn, maintain as part of their overall behavior. To begin teaching social skills, teachers first identify students’ social skill deficits (Gresham, 2002; Kamps & Kay, 2002; Kauffman et al., 1998; Quinn et al., 2000; Sugai & Lewis, 1996). The social skills to be taught should be selected on the basis of the likelihood they will be elicited and reinforced in the natural environment. Each lesson should be aimed at teaching a specific social skill, which, if it is complex, may include several component skills (Kamps & Kay, 2002). There are a number of steps for teaching an identified social skill. They include:

- clearly introducing and defining the skill;
- modeling the skill and the sequence of steps students must use to perform it;
- having students rehearse or roll play the behavior for the whole group and in pairs to practice using the skill;
- reviewing the skill during social activities that naturally occur during the school day or in situations that have been created to allow students to practice the skill so that it will transfer to new settings and situations;
- providing individualized feedback or reflection to students when they attempt the new skill;
- prompting students to use the skill at an appropriate time or to remind of the steps to perform the skill; and
- reinforcing the students when they use it appropriately to help motivate students to maintain the skill (Anderson, et al., 1988; Carter & Sugai, 1988; Cartledge & Kiarie, 2001; Gresham, 2002; Kamps & Kay, 2002; Kauffman, et al., 1998;

- directly teaching students “self-talk” strategies to prompt, encourage, and reinforce themselves for engaging in positive social behavior.

Utilizing methods that incorporate these steps increases the likelihood that students will continue to use the newly acquired skills in appropriate situations that occur in their natural environments, thus generalizing them into their set of skills they know how to use consistently (Carter & Sugai, 1988; Sabornie & Beard, 1990; Sugai & Lewis, 1996). Programs of instruction are even more effective when it is possible to involve the families in setting and enforcing expectations for appropriate behaviors and reinforcing their use at home (Kamps & Kay, 2002). Teachers should consistently evaluate the effectiveness of their social skills instruction and make any adjustments to the curricula based on the results of such evaluations (Kamps & Kay, 2002). Finally, social skills should be incorporated into school-wide programs of positive behavior support.

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References and Additional Sources of Information


