

Teaching Social Skills to Students on the Autism Spectrum

Impairment in Social Skills

Social impairments are a primary feature of autism. The social impairments vary from nonexistent, to delayed, to inappropriate. Some of the skills that may be impaired include:

- Basic interactions with peers and/or adults
- Initiating, maintaining, and terminating conversations
- Cooperative play with peers
- Interpreting and using body language and facial expressions
- Appropriate social behaviors such as touching, personal space, etc.

Teaching these skills requires clear, systematic activities that are taught in a small group and generalized to daily settings. This packet includes information about developing appropriate goals, designing activities, and teaching social skills to students with autism. A reference list of recommended materials for your school to consider for purchase is also included.

Developing Goals

Goal writing starts with assessment. There are a few social skills assessments available, but many are not designed specifically for students with autism. Because of this, they do not break down the skills into small enough steps. I recommend the following assessments:

- Do Watch Listen Say by Kathleen Quill
- Assessment of Basic Learning and Language Skills by James Partington and Mark Sundberg
- Self-made checklists

From the assessment information, develop specific social goals. It will be easier to see progress on more specific goals. Consider the following areas and sample goals:

Social Interactions/Conversations

- TLW initiate to peers 3-5 times a day during structured groups
- TLW greet 3-5 peers by name each day upon entering the classroom
- TLW terminate an interaction with a verbalization or gesture
- TLW choose a topic from a topic board and start a conversation with a peer about that topic
- TLW use an appropriate distance and body language during interactions (including eye contact, gestures, and head nods)

Cooperative Play/Interactions

- TLW take turns with a peer during a preferred activity for 5-10 minutes
- TLW share preferred materials during a 10-15 minute play session
- TLW give 2-3 compliments or friendly statements to peers during play sessions

Emotions

- TLW identify emotions of others from picture cards and peers
- TLW use body language associated with specific emotions during interactions with peers
- TLW identify how self and peers feel during daily situations (i.e., computer will not work) and formulate a solution to problems associated with emotion (i.e., ask for help)

Creating Opportunities for Learning

One of the most difficult parts about teaching social skills is working lessons into the school day. This takes planning! Think about what times of the school day lend itself to social opportunities. This may mean that an assistant needs to stay with the student during lunch to foster appropriate skills; or in PE class, the goals are based on social interaction rather than skills.

Think about these times of the day:

- *Science lessons*- often provide hands-on lessons; students can share materials, take turns, ask/answer questions from peers, etc.
- *Lunch*- although this may be a noisy environment, students can have conversations, name peers, ask simple questions, attend to peers, etc. Consider a weekly lunch outside of the cafeteria with a few peers.
- *Math*- student can pass out books/papers, call on students to answer questions, take turns writing problems on a dry erase board, etc.
- *Art class*- students can share materials, give compliments, ask for help, ask peers questions about their work, etc.

Curriculum Ideas

The most important thing to remember about a social skills curriculum is that the skills need to be broken down into simple steps. For example, you will not teach a child to "have a conversation." You will teach a child to initiate, choose a topic, stay on topic, using listening skills, and terminate an interaction.

Concepts need to be presented visually as much as possible. Any visual supports or teaching materials need to be clear and concrete. Make sure you analyze any visuals from the student's perspective to ensure that they make sense. While

using visuals with the students, analyze his/her response to them. Change visuals as needed to make them more clear.

Present concepts in fun, interactive ways. Once learned, the skills can then be generalized into more natural settings.

For example:

- Role plays
- Sorting activities
- Games
- Arts/Crafts activities