Social Skills Instruction

Having strong social skills is essential to a child's academic and personal success. These skills guide children's everyday interactions and the extent to which they possess them can influence what they say, how they behave, and even the choices that they make. When children and adolescents struggle with social skills, they face challenges both inside and outside of the classroom.

Social competence is "the ability to obtain successful outcomes from interactions with others" (Spence, 2003, p. 84) or social functioning. Social competence requires students to adapt to different social contexts, and know appropriate behavior and communication skills in a variety of situations. Social competence has been shown to have a long-term effect on psychological, academic, and adaptive functioning (Elliot, Malecki, & Demaray, 2001). Social skills are one essential component of social competence. They represent the skills which, if present, lead a person to be socially competent.

Navigating everyday interactions can be especially difficult when a person has not learned social skills; interactions with both peers and adults are hindered. According to Otten and Tuttle (2011), students with poor social and behavioral skills are at risk for a staggering number of problems that have a negative impact on not only themselves, but society as well. Some of these problems include school dropout, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, delinquency, and aggression. According to Spence (2003), research evidence shows that social skill deficits are associated with a wide variety of emotional and behavioral problems. Therefore, social skills instruction is a frequent part of the prevention and treatment of these disorders (Spence, 2003).

Typically K-12 education has presumed that students learn social skills informally from family and community experience as well as experiences in schools, and thus when a student does not demonstrate these skills he or she was often punished. However recently schools have begun to recognize that some students either have not been exposed to situations in order to learn social skills or simply have not learned these skills. As a result schools have been moving toward assessing and providing instruction social skills for all students, as well as providing remedial instruction for those having skill deficits or difficulty with these skills.

What are Social Skills?

Social skills are "a set of competencies that allow an individual to initiate and maintain positive social relationships, contribute to peer acceptance and a satisfactory school adjustment, and allow an individual to cope effectively with the larger social environment" (Steedly, Schwartz, Levin, & Luke, 2008, p. 2). Social skills are specific, socially acceptable, learned behaviors, which allow people to interact in positive ways and assist in avoiding negative responses from others (Cartledge & Milburn, 1995). They are the skills needed for productive, positive interactions.

What are Social Skills Curricula?

There have been many efforts to identify the social skills individuals may need to successfully interact in various situations. These essential social skills when combined into an organized structure are called a social skills curriculum. These curricula may be targeted to specific ages, or to specific situations, but most often cover a wide range of possible skills needed in day to day life. Although the intentional teaching of social skills has not been a strong focus for many schools given their focus on academics and the presumption that these skills would be learned informally, many schools have now adopted school or district-wide social skills curricula, which are parallel to curricula in other areas such as math, reading, or science studies.

A variety of social skills programs have also been published. Almost all include a curriculum, but some also include teaching strategies or activities and lesson

plans. Some representative programs which have been used successfully in schools are listed here (no specific endorsement of these programs should be implied):

• A Curriculum for Children's Effective Peer and Teacher Skills (ACCEPTS: Walker et al., 1988) includes social scripts involving making friends, classroom skills, interaction skills, and coping skills that are all taught in a direct instruction format.

• The EQUIP: Teaching Youth to Think and Act Responsibly Through a Peer Helping Approach (Gibbs, Potter, & Goldstein, 1995) program involves a tri-fold intervention encompassing training in moral judgment, anger management/correction of thinking errors, and prosocial skills.

• The PREPARE Curriculum: Teaching Prosocial Competencies (Goldstein, 1999) involves ten courses designed to reduce aggression, stress, and prejudice.

• Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS; Kusche & Greenberg, 1997) is

a curriculum based on neurodevelopmental principles that emphasizes self-control, emotional understanding, self-esteem, peer relations, and problem-solving.

• The Second Step (Committee for Children, 2011) program has modules appropriate for preschool through middle school students that focus on teaching social-emotional skills, such as empathy, emotion management, and problem-solving.

• Skillstreaming (McGinnis, 2011) is a program that aims to improve aggression, withdrawal, and conflicts through modeling, role playing, performance feedback, and generalization.

• Stop and Think (Knoff, 2001), which uses role-playing and group activities to help students learn interpersonal, survival, problem-solving, and conflict resolution skills.

For more information on these and a few other examples of social skills programs, see the Resource Brief entitled Examples of Social Skills Curricula described at the end of this document.

What is Social Skills Instruction?

Social skills instruction is the deliberate effort by educators to teach social skills to students, typically based on an assessment of needed skills, and then employing an identified curriculum. As with teaching any curricula, there may be many differing strategies or methods for teaching social skills. It may be important for educators to provide explanations about the reasons the skills are important (motivation), direct teaching of the skills, opportunities to practice with guidance, and independent practice, as well as positive feedback for improvement.

Building & Sustaining Student Engagement
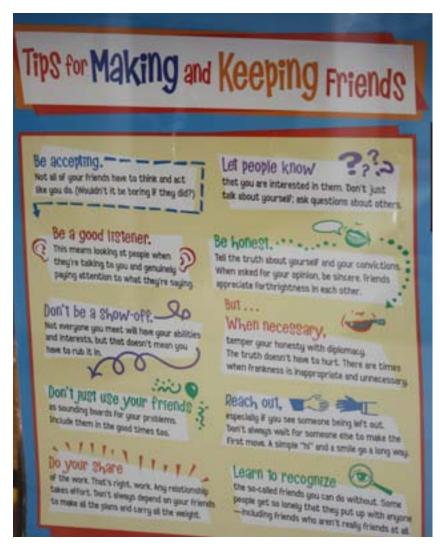
Implementing Social Skills Instruction

Social skills instruction, or training, has traditionally been taught to students with emotional, behavioral, and learning disorders (Maag, 2006), autism spectrum disorders, or other disabilities, but can be taught to student that would benefit from instruction. Social skills instruction is implemented with students who need more intensive interventions to learn and practice social skills. These supports can be modified depending on how much guidance the student needs. According to Maag (2005), there is not just one intervention technique to train social skills, but many based on the child's pattern of deficits. Research on effective social skills instruction suggests that quality interventions and strategies encourage reflection and self-awareness by focusing on social and emotional learning (SEL) strategies. In addition, these techniques create opportunities by practicing effective social skills, both individually and in groups, and allow for the adjustment of instructional strategies used to address the deficit. Finally, these strategies allow the educator to customize the intervention to address the specific needs of any student (Steedly et al., 2008).

While social skills instruction can be used to help individual students who may be at risk or already showing skill deficits, it can also be implemented in small or classroom wide groups, as well as at a school-wide level. Using a preventive approach for all students can help social and behavioral problems from developing. Schools can use a systematic, integrated approach to social skills instruction and school-

wide discipline that targets the entire school, classrooms, and individuals. An example of a school-wide, evidence-based program that includes effective social skills interventions is Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports

(PBIS) [See strategy brief on PBIS]. As a part of this approach, social skills for various situations within a school are directly taught to students, modeled, and demonstrated. Social skills are then reinforced when they occur (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2011).

What Do We Know About Social Skills Instruction?

In an analysis of six meta-analyses, Gresham, Cook, Crews, & Kern (2004) found a 64% improvement rate showing that social skills in-

struction is an effective intervention strategy for students with emotional or behavioral disorders. Also, analyses showed that social skills training is effective across a range of behaviors including external aggressive behaviors, internalizing behaviors, and antisocial behaviors (Gresham et al., 2004). Gresham and colleagues do caution, however, that social skills training should not be used as a single intervention for students with emotional or behavioral disorders, but rather it should be one part of a comprehensive intervention program for these students.

In another study with elementary age children, students received instruction in social skills through small groups. Results of the study showed lasting decreases in disruptive behaviors at school and negative social interactions on the playground. Students were also engaged academically more of the time and demonstrated the newly acquired skills in multiple settings (Lane et al., 2003). Effective social skills allow students to form healthy relationships and interactions.

While it has been shown that social skills instruction can have a positive effect on some students struggling with interpersonal relationships and behavior, there has been long-standing controversy surrounding the issue of "generalization" of social skill instruction (Beelmann, Pfingsten, & Lösel, 1994; Singh Deitz, Epstein,

& Singh, 1991). Generalization is when skills taught in a structured classroom environment extend to the other environments where skills could or should be used. According to a review of reviews on social skills training, Maag (2006) states that a lack of generalization was a prominent negative finding. However, he cites several ways he feels that social skills instruction could be improved to emphasize generalization.

Another possible question that arises from social skill instruction is whether or not the specific social skills in a curriculum are essential to success, and whether the social skills taught will, in fact, enhance the quality of student lives (Maag, 2006). This concern is referred to as "social validity" (Maag, 2006). According to Maag (2006), generalization will be enhanced when students see the relevance (or validity) of using these skills in their everyday lives. He goes on to state that programming generalization also requires identifying and teaching students replacement behaviors, which are appropriate behaviors that serve the same function as the socially inappropriate behavior. In particular, Maag indicates that this strategy is especially important for students with emotional and behavioral disorders. Generalization is also more likely to occur if the peer group is included in the instruction and the target student is reinforced for performing a socially appropriate behavior (Maag, 2006).

Meta-analyses of the literature on social skills training show that this training has not "produced large, socially important, long-term, or generalized changes in social competence of students with high-incidence disabilities" (Gresham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001, p. 331). Nevertheless, a study conducted by Lo, Loe, and Cartledge (2002), found that a combina-

tion of small group and classroom-based social skills instruction for elementary age students who were at risk for emotional or behavioral disorders did produce moderate reductions in antisocial behaviors when the students were engaged in small group activities.

Although the general construct of teaching social skills instruction is research-based (i.e., composed of elements that have been researched) and not evidence-based (i.e., rigorous, randomized studies demonstrating effectiveness over and above a control group), teaching social competence is an evidence-based practice (Gresham et al., 2004) which should be a part of social skills training. There are individual programs and components of social skills training that are evidence-based and effective in reducing behavior or discipline problems. Many research studies have been conducted, but the results have been inconclusive, with generalization being an issue (Maag, 2006).

Maximizing the Impact of Social Skills Instruction

Social skills instruction began in the 1970s, but it has changed considerably since then. Some recently developed programs have become more effective by redesigning curricula to meet the needs of students to engage in more intense and frequent practice and to provide opportunities to generalize the skills to other social settings (Chen, 2006).

Modeling, role play, coaching, behavioral rehearsal, feedback and reinforcement of specific skills have been found to be effective in producing short-term benefits (Gresham, 1981; Gresham, 1985; McIntosh, Vaughn, & Zaragoza, 1991), but the generalization and longevity of results may continue to be issues.

Indeed, benefits of social skills instruction may be maximized when social skills training is embedded in the school culture (Maag, 2006). According to Maag (2005),
"School administrators would have to create

and nurture a culture in which SST (social skills training) would be an important and ongoing component of the curriculum that benefits not only target [high need] students, but also their peers because it facilitates a more supportive and inclusive student body." (p. 169)

In addition, effective change using social skills training also needs to include interventions that reduce inhibiting and competing behaviors (Spence, 2003). For adolescents it more difficult for them to choose appropriate social behaviors because engaging in the inappropriate social behaviors is attractive due to rewards or reinforcements from peers.

Benefits of Social Skill Instruction

Despite the difficulties in program generalization, social skills training is considered an important component of treatment and prevention of many mental health problems (Spence, 2003) It has been used extensively in special education programs to assist students with social competence. According to Canter and Wright (2002), social skills instruction can be used as a positive discipline strategy, one that can help students with emotional/behavioral disorders and social skills deficits. In addition, specific social skill instruction on topics which might have lead to disciplinary action could be a useful alternative to suspension or expulsion, and might prevent future problems.

Conclusion

Social skills instruction has been found to have a positive impact on students. While there has been some controversy over the long term impact of social skills instruction and its generalization to other settings, it has resulted in improved behavior at school and should be a part of efforts to improve school climate and behavior at school, particularly for those students who have not learned these skills informally. Additionally specific social skills instruction can be used as an alternative disciplinary consequence for inappropriate behavior at school although there is not currently enough research studies to say this is an evidence-based practice by itself. More research on this basic strategy is needed. Social skills training alone is not likely to produce significant or lasting changes in social behavior or competence, although it is likely to increase student knowledge and awareness and should be viewed as one component of a larger behavioral intervention system. Social skills instruction continues to be an important component of a multi-method approach to the treatment of emotional and behavioral disorders (Spence, 2003), and has strong logical support as an educational intervention.

See also the Resource Brief:

O'Connor, A., Strawhun, J., Hoff, N., & Peterson, R. L. (2014, September). Examples of social skills curricula and programs. Resource brief. Lincoln, NE: Student Engagement Project, University of Nebraska. http://k12engagement.unl.edu/resources-social-skills-curricula.

Recommended Citation for this Brief:

Strawhun, J., O'Connor, A., Norris, L., & Peterson, R. L. (2013, September). Social skills instruction. Strategy brief. Lincoln, NE: Student Engagement Project, University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the Nebraska Department of Education. http://k12engagement.unl.edu/social-skills-instruction.

References on Social Skills Instruction

Beelmann, A., Pfingsten, U., & Lösel, F. (1994). The effects of training social competence in children: a meta-analysis of recent evaluation studies. Journal of Clinical Child Psychology, 23, 260-271.

Canter, A., & Wright, B. (2002). Challenging behavior & effective discipline for all students: Best practice strategies for educators. Retrieved from http://www.behavioralinstitute.org/FreeDownloads/TIPS/Challenging%20Behavior%20effective%20discipline.pdf

Cartledge, G., & Milburn, J. F. (1995). Teaching social skills to children: Innovative approaches (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Pergam-on.

Chen, K. (2006). Social skills intervention for students with emotional/behavioral disorders: A literature review from the American perspective. Educational Research and Reviews, 1(3), 143-149.

Committee for Children. (2011). Second Step: A violence prevention curriculum. Seattle, WA: Committee for Children.

Elliott, S. N., Malecki, C. K., & Demaray, M. K. (2001). New directions in social skills assessment and intervention for elementary and middle school students. Exceptionality, 9, 19-32.

Gibbs, J. C., Potter, G. B., & Goldstein, A. P. (1995). The EQUIP program: Teaching youth to think and act responsibly through a peer-helping approach. Champaign, IL: Research Press.

Goldstein, A. P. (1999). The Prepare Curriculum: Teaching prosocial competencies (Rev. ed.). Champaign, IL: Research Press.

Gresham, F. M. (1981). Assessment of children's social skills. Journal of School Psychology, 19, 120-133.

Gresham, F. M. (1985). Behavior disorder assessment: Conceptual, definitional, and practical considerations. School Psychology Review, 14, 495-509.

Gresham, F. M., Cook, C. R., Crews, S. D., & Kern, L. (2004). Social skills training for children and youth with emotional and behavioral disorders: Validity considerations and future directions. Behavioral Disorders, 30(1), 32-46.

Gresham, F. M., Sugai, G., & Horner, R. H. (2001). Interpreting outcomes of social skills training for students with high-incidence disabilities. Exceptional Children, 67(3), 331-344.

Knoff, H. (2001). The Stop and Think Social Skills Program. Dallas, TX: Sopris West.

Kusche, C. A., & Greenberg, M. T. (1997). PATHS: Promoting alternative thinking strategies. South Deerfield, MA: Channing-Bete.

Lane, K. L., Wehby, J., Menzies, H. M., Doukas, G. L., Munton, S. M., & Gregg, R. M. (2003). Social skills instruction for students at risk for antisocial behavior: The effects of small-group instruction. Behavioral Disorders, 28(3), 229-248.

Lo, Y., Loe, S. A., & Cartledge, G. (2002). The effects of social skills instruction on the social behaviors of students at risk for emotional or behavioral disorders. Behavioral Disorders, 27(4), 371-385.

Maag, J. W. (2005). Social skills training for youth with emotional and behavioral disorders and learning disabilities: Problems, conclusions, and suggestion. Exceptionality, 13(3), 155-172.

Maag, J. W. (2006). Social skills training for students with emotional and behavioral disorders: A review of reviews. Behavioral Disorders, 32(1), 5-17.

McGinnis, E. (2011). Skillstreaming the adolescent: A guide for teaching prosocial skills. Champaign, IL: Research Press.

McIntosh, R., Vaughn, S., & Zaragoza, N. (1991). A review of social interventions for students with learning disabilities. Journal of Learning Disabilities, 24, 451-458.

Otten, K., & Tuttle, J. (2011). How to reach and teach children with challenging behavior: Practical, ready-to-use interventions that work. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. (2011). School-wide PBIS. Retrieved from http://www.pbis.org/school/default.aspx

Singh, N. N., Deitz, D. D., Epstein, M. H., & Singh, J. (1991). Social behavior of students who are seriously emotionally disturbed: A quantitative analysis of intervention studies. Behavior Modification, 15, 74-94.

Spence, S. H. (2003). Social skills training with children and young people: Theory, evidence and practice. Child and Adolescent Mental Health, 8(2), 84-96.

Steedly, K. M., Schwartz, A., Levin, M., & Luke, S. D. (2008). Social skills and academic achievement. Evidence for Education, 3(2), 1-7.

Walker, H., McConnell, S., Holmes, D., Todis, B., Walker, J., & Golden, N. (1988). The Walker Social Skills Curriculum: A Curriculum for Children's Effective Peer and Teacher Skills (ACCEPTS). Austin, TX: Pro-ed.