

SOCIAL SKILLS

Social skills are not a matter of chance. The skills for getting along with others can be modeled and taught. Not only are children able to learn pro-social behaviors, it has been my experience that they are eager to learn them. Although some periods of social difficulty are an inevitable part of growing up for everyone, some children experience these social difficulties as a way of life. These are the children who spend every recess alone. They may endure almost daily episodes of being teased and getting into fights. They are rarely invited to out of school parties. It is these children who benefit from social skills training.

Problems getting along with others usually stem from one of two sources. The child has too much of certain behaviors (crying, hitting, sulking) and/or not enough of other behaviors (listening, asking for help, sharing). Often children are told to “behave” or “be nice” in social situations and they promise they will. Children who fail to keep their promise to “be good” may have reasons for failure. For instance, the child may not know the appropriate behavior; he/she may know the behavior but lack practice in both the behavior and in relating to others; or his/her emotional responses may prevent proper social responses. Sometime a child knows a social skill, but does not know when to use it because of problems reading social cues.

Good social skills groups give thoughtful, sustained and systematic attention to a child’s social and emotional learning. Social skills groups aim to help children become knowledgeable, responsible and caring individuals. Knowledge of prosocial skills includes empathy, anger management and problem solving. Social skills development helps children become responsible for choosing actions and behaviors that serve their own interests as well as the interests of others. Social skills development helps them see beyond themselves to appreciate the concerns of others and become caring individuals. Social skills groups use modeling, role-playing and feedback to help children learn. First the social skill is broken into parts and children see several examples of people (models) using the skill. Next group members rehearse and practice the skill they have observed. The group gives feedback to a member after each practice session. Social skills groups generally meet once or twice a week for four to six weeks. Children leave each session with homework sheets. Homework sheets inform parents and teachers which skill is being practiced and how it has been taught. The skills never become part of the child’s repertoire unless he/she is able to use them during “real time”. Parents and teachers are encouraged to help children by noticing when and how a skill has been used and giving positive feedback whenever possible.

Social and emotional issues are at the heart of many problem behaviors that plague families and communities. Unattended these issues can negatively effect a child’s hope and opportunities. Fortunately, pro-social skills can be easily taught to children of all ages. The beginning of the school year is a great time to enroll in social skills classes. It’s a fresh start for children and teachers are always happy to help prevent social problems for any member of the class.

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