

### What is it?

Social skills are skills that make it possible for children and adolescents to get along with others, to gain acceptance as learning and play partners, and to develop and keep friendships. Social skills include 1) social behaviors, such as maintaining eye contact, taking turns, and asking before taking another child's play materials, 2) emotional and behavior regulation skills that make it possible for children to inhibit disruptive behavior; 3) social-cognitive processes that children utilize to solve social problems, such as attending to and interpreting social cues to understand others' intentions; and 4) social knowledge, for example, understanding what it means to be a friend. Social skills *instruction* refers to the systematic application of instructional procedures to teach social skills. Educators sometimes use other terms, such as "violence prevention" and "character education", to refer to instructional programs that include the teaching of social skills.

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and situations that teachers should target. Assessing students' perceptions of their own social skills by administering a self-report social skills measure (Gresham & Elliot, 1990) can also be useful in confirming the need for social skills instruction and in clarifying the nature of the child's skill limitations.

Among students with learning disabilities (LD), social skills limitations are quite common, affecting, according to different estimates, between 35% and 75% of these students (Bryan, 1998; Kavale & Forness, 1996). Not surprisingly, students with LD often experience social rejection or neglect by peers (Margalit, 1994), have difficulty forming and keeping friendships (Wiener, 2002), and often report feelings of loneliness (Margalit & Al-Yagon, 2002). Moreover, because social skills are important for working collaboratively with classmates on academic tasks, and because social difficulties can be a source of distress that "spills over" onto other areas of functioning, limitations in social skills can contribute to students' academic difficulties.

### For whom is it intended?

Social skills instruction is intended for students of all ages who are experiencing difficulties in social functioning. How do teachers determine that a particular student needs instruction? If a student has an Individual Education Plan (IEP), it may include an objective of a social nature. Alternatively, parents may have pointed out to the teacher that the student is having social difficulties. Often, teachers decide on the basis of informal observations of students' social behavior. For example, a teacher may observe that an elementary student often argues with classmates because he always wants to dictate how the game is played, or that a middle school student is on the margins of established peer groups and often makes irritating or provocative comments. In addition to informal observation, more formal assessment techniques, such as standardized social skills and behavior problem checklists for teachers and parents (e.g., Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1986; Gresham & Elliot, 1990; Walker & McConnell, 1988), are available. In particular, social skills checklists can be useful for identifying students with social skills limitations and pinpointing the types of behavior

### How does it work?

At present, there is wide variability in the implementation of social skills instruction, making it hard to describe a typical instructional program. This heterogeneity in current practice is not surprising, given that in contrast to academic subject areas, social skills instruction is usually not mandated, and teachers are rarely held accountable for evaluating instructional outcomes. However, teachers are not without guidance in making several critical decisions when they implement an instructional program:

**Who receives instruction:** Teachers need to decide whether to provide social skills instruction only to students who have identified social skills limitations or, alternatively, to the entire class. The most beneficial practice may be to embed intensive instruction of selected students in a class-wide instructional program (Siperstein & Rickards, 2003). The class-wide component provides the entire class with norms, a vocabulary, and a climate that is conducive for addressing social problems whenever they arise and for supporting social skills acquisition by individual students. At the same time, more intensive instruction of selected students ensures that their individual skill limitations will be addressed.



### ***Formality of the lessons and curriculum:***

Teachers need to decide whether to implement a formal program of social skills lessons, limit the scope of the intervention to informal instruction as “teachable moments” arise, or offer a mixture of the two. The most beneficial practice may be to combine formal and informal instruction. Providing a formal series of social skills lessons ensures that a fixed set of skills will be covered, while informal instruction can be helpful for working with students on transfer of skills to “real-life” situations.

***Scope of the intervention environment:*** Most social skills training interventions take place within a single environment, for example, an elementary school student’s main classroom, or a middle school health class. Although expanding the scope of an instructional intervention beyond a single setting may be challenging, doing so is the best approach for fostering the transfer and generalization of skills. Some social skills programs offer a school-wide instructional component and/or procedures to extend social skills instruction to settings in school such as gym, art class, recess, or the cafeteria. (See Elias, et al., 1997, for examples of programs.) A few social skills instructional programs (e.g., Kusche & Greenberg, 1994; Ramsey & Beland, 1995) attempt to bridge home and school by offering training, supplementary materials, or consultation to parents.

## ***How practical is it?***

Although teachers have available a wealth of published curricula for all age groups, obstacles exist to easy implementation of social skills instruction. First, the growing emphasis on high stakes academic testing is likely to create pressure on teachers to allocate more of their limited instructional and planning time to academic subjects. Second, when teachers utilize published social skills curricula, they may find it challenging to adapt and customize a packaged program to the specific needs of their individual students. Third, the teacher may have limited opportunities to observe students’ interactions with peers in key environments within and outside school and to intervene directly within those environments.

## ***How effective is it?***

The field of social skills instruction is gradually moving toward greater rigor in the evaluation of programs, even though numerous social skills intervention programs still lack data to support their efficacy. Researchers have reported that some social skills interventions have had a positive impact on students’

functioning. For example, researchers found evidence that the Second Step Program reduced the frequency of aggressive behavior in the cafeteria and playground (Grossman, Neckerman, & Koepsell, 1997). Researchers have also found that participation in social skills instructional programs appeared to benefit students with LD (see review by McIntosh, Vaughn, & Zaragoza, 1991; Greenberg, Kusche, Cook, & Quamma, 1995), and behavior disorders (Greenberg and The Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 1997) by increasing their performance of socially appropriate behavior and/or contributing to greater acceptance by peers.

However, when researchers have reviewed the results of many social skills instructional intervention studies, using the technique of meta-analysis, they have found that social skills instruction for these students has not fulfilled its promise. On the basis of a meta-analysis of data from 52 research studies of the effectiveness of social skills training for students with LD, Kavale and Forness (1995) concluded that social skills instruction has produced only inconsistent and limited gains, not dramatic improvements in these students’ social behavior. Similarly, a meta-analysis of 35 research studies that examined the impact of social skills instructional interventions on students with behavior disorders found similarly modest results (Kavale, Mathur, Forness, & Quinn, 1997).

Moreover, research findings are limited in identifying the components that contribute to successful social skills programs. McIntosh, et al. (1991) reported that the programs with successful outcomes lasted longer (up to 24 weeks) than those with less successful outcomes. However, Kavale and Forness (1995) failed to find a relationship between duration and the level of effectiveness of programs. McIntosh, et al., also reported that many of the programs that were effective included a cognitive instructional component—for example, teaching students a series of problem-solving steps to follow in responding to a social problem.

In light of the limited and inconsistent results from social skills instructional interventions and the gaps in our knowledge of the features of successful programs, we cannot definitively conclude that social skills instruction has been effective in improving the social functioning of students with LD or other special needs. We cannot, however, advocate for a moratorium on social skills training. Students with LD have a great need for this type of training, and there is some evidence that students benefit. Clearly, further research is needed, utilizing a variety of approaches and more rigorous procedures than those used in many of the existing studies (Gersten, Lloyd, &

Baker, 2000). For the time being, teachers need to be vigilant, and in a “decision-making mode” when they plan and deliver social skills training to their students. Specifically, they should:

- Work with other teachers, specialists, and paraprofessionals to ensure that social skills instruction extends to multiple locations and settings.
- Compare different social skills training packages and curricula before selecting one. Choose the curriculum that best suits students’ identified needs, considering, for example, the student’s potential level of independence and the curriculum’s age-appropriateness.
- Carefully assess students’ social skills prior to initiating training to identify student-specific goals, and periodically re-evaluate whether progress is occurring.
- Be sure to plan actively to promote students’ transfer and generalization of skills to key situations and settings inside and outside of the classroom, and periodically monitor students’ performance in these situations and settings.
- If training may not be having the desired effect, develop a working hypothesis for why it’s not working, and revise the instructional plan accordingly. For example, is the student’s learning style at odds with the way instruction has been presented? Does the child need help with additional skills that haven’t been addressed? Is the problem less a skill deficit and more a motivational issue?
- Consider and address environmental barriers that may be interfering with student progress, such as antecedents and features of the setting that trigger maladaptive social behavior, and identify and mobilize potential environmental supports for skill acquisition, such as peers.

## What questions remain?

More research is needed to demonstrate the efficacy of social skills instructional programs and techniques, particularly for students with particular characteristics and needs. Furthermore, critical questions remain concerning social skills instruction for students with LD. What is the optimal balance between formal lessons and “on the spot” coaching? How much emphasis should there be on teaching specific behavioral strategies for particular social situations, as opposed to teaching a process-oriented

approach in which students learn problem-solving skills that they can apply to a variety of situations? What features of social skills instructional programs are most likely to benefit students with particular types of learning disabilities? Finally, more must be learned regarding best practices for integrating class-wide instruction with the intensive training of individual students.

Despite many new developments in the field and evidence that instructional interventions benefit some students, effective social skills instruction is still a work in progress. Addressing the instructional needs of students with LD requires teachers to be proactive and creative. Teachers can make a difference by adapting existing techniques and curricula for students with LD and by continually reevaluating and modifying their instructional activities, with the aim of improving their students’ real-life social functioning.

## How do I learn more?

The following sources discuss and/or provide examples of social skills training and intervention procedures:

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