



Building Social Skills: A Resource for Educators

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Building Social Skills

Introduction and Rationale



Introduction and Rationale

“Persons with autism invariably experience difficulties with social skills. From an early age, these children seem unable to initiate and maintain social interactions. Vital social skills such as establishing eye contact or sharing joint attention may be lacking, ideosyncratic or severely impaired” (Machalicek, 2009).

Impairment in social interaction is a core diagnostic feature of autism (White, 2007). However, the observable signs of these challenges vary widely across individuals. Children may appear to be uninterested in people. They may manipulate objects, often in repetitive ways. Learning social interaction skills through observation can be quite limited when imitation skills are absent or delayed. Sharing interest in a toy or activity can be challenging and play skills often need to be taught specifically. For some children, language may be present, but there may still be challenges in maintaining a conversation. In addition, many individuals with autism have difficulty understanding that someone else may have different thoughts or preferences than their own and find facial expressions and body language difficult to interpret (Rogers, 2000).

Once children with ASD enter school, attention often shifts to academics and/or building independence in daily living skills. Yet, we know that one of the main roadblocks to success for adults on the autism spectrum is social impairment (Howlin, Goode, Hutton, & Rutter, 2004). When there are difficulties understanding the perspective of others or problems understanding language in general, day to day demands for interacting with others can be very stressful. Even for more able individuals or those with Asperger Syndrome, it is most often the social aspect of a job that is the critical indicator of success or failure in the workplace. Most children with autism will not acquire these essential skills without direct and explicit instruction. It is essential that we begin to address this issue in a more comprehensive way and include social communication in our individual education plans beginning in elementary school, and continuing our support in the intermediate and high school years.

The ultimate goal of any social skills training program is that the participants learn to use new skills in their day-to-day social environment. Since one of the common deficits of individuals with ASD is difficulty generalizing skills, this will need to be targeted directly. If these skills are not practised and reinforced in the real-life setting, it is unlikely that they will be maintained.

How can we do this? In inclusive school settings, teachers and resource teachers have many responsibilities and significant challenges to meet the needs of all the children in a classroom. What model or process would allow us to teach social skills in an efficient and effective way? Can we avoid a “drop in the bucket” or one time only approach and continue to support this learning over time? For typical children, social skills are learned over time with repeated practice. What does the research tell us about effective methods for teaching social skills to children with autism? How do we insure that the skills taught will become a part of the child’s repertoire after instruction has ended? What role can the Autism Consultant play in assisting schools who want to support the development of social skills in their students with ASD?

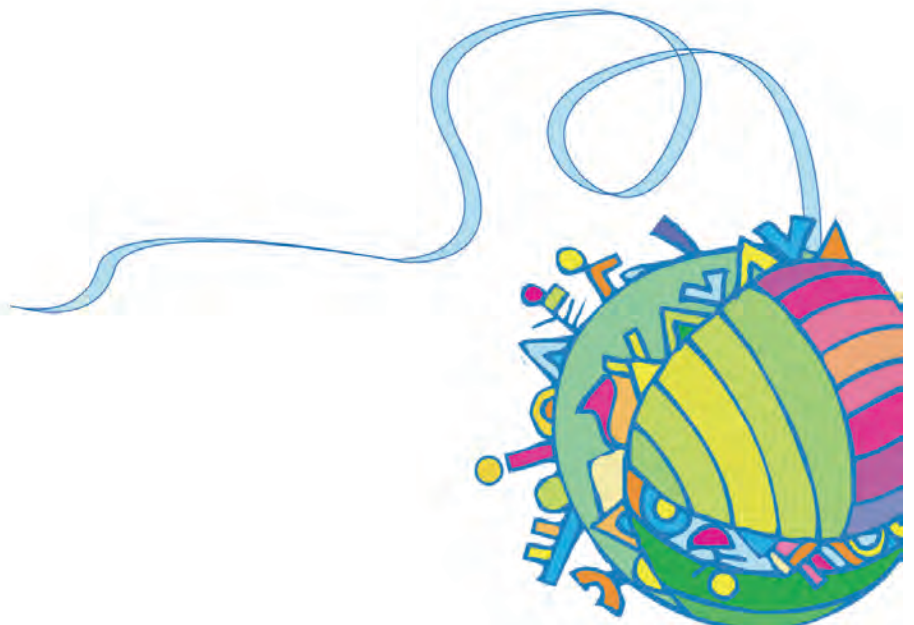
Our goal in creating this resource is to outline a process for schools that will enable them to conduct social skills groups. This model is based on initial support from an Autism Consultant that is gradually faded as the school staff take ownership of the program.

Developed by Autism Consultants actively supporting Prince Edward Island schools, this resource has been created to help answer some of these questions and provide a framework for furthering our knowledge in this area. It is hoped that the process and resources described here will encourage teachers to partner with Consultants to target the social skills needs of students on the autism spectrum as well as other children who may benefit.



Building Social Skills

Model



Model

Coaching Model

For educators, a traditional “pull-out” model for professional development may be facilitated by a knowledgeable professional. However, it is often not possible to provide follow-up or on-site feedback, and actual transfer of the skills into the classroom may be limited. The coaching model has been effectively used in educational, healthcare, and business settings and can be an efficient way to disseminate needed information. Our goal is not only to share essential information with the teacher, but to provide the support necessary for the teacher to become competent and confident in their skills. When successful, this process enables the teacher to not only continue the work, but to effectively model this for others.

In this proposed collaborative process, training for the teacher includes a combination of modeling, coaching, and feedback which occurs in the teacher’s current school setting. Over a 10-12 week period, the Autism Consultant facilitates the implementation of a social skills group, from the initial referral and assessment process, through lesson planning and progress monitoring. The Consultant first models the steps, and the teacher gradually assumes the leadership role, with the Consultant providing coaching and feedback. Over time, the Consultant fades on-site assistance, but still provides indirect assistance as needed. While this initially requires significant involvement on the part of all team members, it provides an opportunity to offer direct and effective social skills instruction to our students.

Teaching Method

The primary teaching method discussed here, structured group learning, has been selected based on the need for students with ASD to have opportunities to learn and practice specific pragmatic language and social interaction skills in a safe and welcoming environment. It is also hoped that bringing together students on the Autism Spectrum who have similar social needs will foster a sense of belonging and encourage friendships. The group model focuses on:

- instruction and explanation of the skill to be taught;
- modeling of the skill steps;

- role play with feedback; and
- practice both within and outside of the group. (Baker, 2003).

This structured group model is didactic, but does not preclude using play based activities to teach targeted skills. It allows the group facilitator to be flexible in selecting appropriate activities, based on the characteristics of the group and the similarities of their needs. It is essential to note that learning and practicing a new skill in a group lesson does not guarantee generalization to new situations. In order for the new skill to become part of the student's repertoire, we need to actively plan for that skill to be reinforced in naturally occurring routines. Providing opportunities for practice outside the group is as important as what is directly taught in the group.

Decisions

Who would be involved?

The student population targeted in this resource are students on the autism spectrum, who have adequate language but are struggling with some aspect of social interaction. Often, targeted skill deficits have been identified and included on the student's Individual Education Plan. Students with other special needs or who are more typically developing may also be considered for participation. More detail on selecting appropriate candidates for a group is included in the Planning Process section.

Current school staffing is often the primary factor in determining which staff will be able to commit to the development and implementation of a social skills group. The Resource Teacher or School Counselor may have the flexibility in their schedule to accommodate a weekly group. The support of school administration for the project is essential. The actual planning involves all team members, including the parents, in order to maximize effectiveness.

What is the time commitment?

The total time commitment is 1½ hours per week for 10 -12 weeks. Once planning and assessment are completed (2 weeks), the social skills group occurs weekly for 30-60 minutes, depending on the students involved. Forty five minutes per week is needed for planning, materials preparation, and follow-up. Involved staff and the administration must be willing to make the required time commitment in order to go forward.

This *Building Social Skills* resource outlines a step by step planning process for creating a social skills group with the support of an Autism Consultant. Assessment tools, sample lesson plans, and useful forms help guide the facilitator as well as suggest methods for measuring progress. Related reading is included to provide background information and recommended curriculum materials are listed.



Building Social Skills

Planning Process



Planning Process

Leadership Roles

Planning a social skills group requires commitment from team members including the consultant, group leader, and parents. Each member plays an integral role in the success of the group. The consultant's role is to coach the designated group leader in planning and implementing the social skills lessons. The group leader's role is to build skills in running an effective social skills group, as well as to maintain contact with parents and teachers. The parent's role is to help identify, maintain, and generalize target skills. Parent involvement is welcomed and recommended to enhance student learning and skill development.

Timeline

It is important to note that the following timeline is intended as a guide and will vary from school to school and group to group. The number and duration of group sessions must accommodate the needs of the group and will be determined by the team. The degree of Consultant support may also differ depending on the skills and experience of the participating teacher, as well as the needs and dynamics of the group. Parent participation is incorporated in the model and is an essential component to foster generalization of skills. Participation may be more direct or indirect but should be encouraged. It is important to bear in mind that the ultimate goal of this model is to empower the school to create and implement social skills groups independently. Regardless of the steps suggested in the following timeline guide, it is essential to ensure that school and board policies – particularly with respect to assessment, information sharing, and parent consent and involvement – are adhered to.

Sample Timeline

Process	Leader	Consultant	Parent
Week 1 (Planning)	Schedule team planning meeting to discuss process Identify times and location Provide information letter/permission form to parents Decide on participants and assessment	Provides overview of process and discuss team commitment Identify times and location Introduce Decision Grid Decide on participants and assessment	Attend/participate in planning meeting Participate in assessment Sign and return permission slip
Week 2 (Planning)	Complete assessment with student(s) as appropriate and share results with parents Identify and prioritize target skills based on assessment Prepare initial lesson	Review assessment results and identify priorities with team Identify and prioritize target skills based on assessment Prepare initial lesson	Review assessment results and identify priorities with team
Week 3 (Lesson 1)	Before first group meets, share plan with involved students Observe or assist with lesson Share practice activities with relevant staff and parents Review lesson and prepare next lesson	Before first group meets, share plan with involved students Model and teach the initial lesson Review lesson and discuss practice activities/ strategies with group leader Prepare next lesson	Provide recommended practice opportunities for the child and feedback
Week 4 - 5 (Lessons 2 - 3)	Observe/assist/facilitate with lesson Share practice activities with relevant staff and parents Review lesson and prepare next lesson	Model and teach the lesson Discuss practice activities/ strategie with group leader Review lesson and prepare next lesson	Provide recommended practice opportunities for the child and feedback

Process	Leader	Consultant	Parent
Week 6 - 7 (Lessons 4 - 5)	Facilitate lesson Share practice activities with relevant staff and parents Review lesson and prepare next lesson	Observe and provide feedback to leader Assist with lesson preparation	Provide recommended practice opportunities for the child and feedback

Week 8 - 9 (Lessons 6 - 7)	Facilitate lesson Share practice activities with relevant staff and parents Review lesson and prepare next lesson	Support group leader as requested	Provide recommended practice opportunities for the child and feedback
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Week 10 (Lesson 8)	Facilitate lesson Facilitate lesson Share practice activities with relevant staff and parents Review lesson and prepare next lesson	Support group leader as requested Observe final lesson and provide feedback.	Provide recommended practice opportunities for the child and feedback
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Week 11-12 (Follow-up)	Evaluation and assessment (as applicable) Schedule team meeting to review effectiveness and next steps Summary Notes to parents	Participate in team meeting	Participate in post assessment (as applicable) Participate in team meeting and provide feedback
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Group Composition

Choosing the members of a social skills group is an important process. A well-balanced, appropriately-sized group can open doors to real progress while an inappropriately matched group of students can hinder and even undo social learning. While there is no formula for a perfect group, there are some key elements that should be considered.

Leadership - The group should have one consistent designated leader to facilitate the group with the support of the Autism Consultant.

Size of group - An optimal group size is within the range of three to six students. Two students may not be enough to maximize practice opportunities and more than six can be too many to keep attention focused on the lesson and keep individual learning at a maximum.

Pre-requisite skills - All members of a social skills group should have functional language and the ability to follow one-step directions. Students should also have similar receptive language skills. Selected students should be capable of working in a small group and attending to a variety of tasks without disruptive behaviours. A student who requires frequent intervention due to disruptive behaviours may not be a good candidate.

Gender considerations - Depending on the age of the students, the gender balance of group members may be a factor to consider. Every attempt should be made to be sensitive to students' individual needs.

Age range - It is suggested that the age range between group members be kept to a maximum of two years as this is more likely to include students with similar levels of maturity and experience. If grouping students by grade, use K-3, 4-6, 7-9, 10-12 as a guideline.

Range of abilities - Many options exist regarding how to combine students with similar or differing levels of abilities. While our priority is the design of social skills groups for students on the Autism Spectrum, students with different diagnoses or even typically developing students can be included in a social skills group if the target skills are appropriate for all members. In some cases, groups have been formed across schools in order to create the best fit for students. Even when all members of a group have a similar diagnosis, the students can have a variety of skill levels. Whatever the group composition, flexibility, creativity and attention to individual needs can go a long way in preparing valuable and engaging lessons.

Scheduling Considerations

When scheduling a social skills group, it is important to identify the frequency and duration of each session in advance. Knowing the scheduling considerations allows for better planning and communication for everyone involved. The following are guidelines for successful scheduling:

- Establishing a consistent weekly schedule is important; students need to understand when and where the social skills group will meet.
- Sessions are held once a week for an estimated period of 6 to 8 weeks. Additional time will need to be scheduled for preparation and follow-up evaluations.
- Depending on the needs of the group, sessions can range from 30 minutes up to 60 minutes. Duration should be determined before the groups start and remain consistent for all sessions.
- An interview with the classroom teacher, parents, and the student to decide the best fit within the school schedule would be recommended.
- Sessions should be held in a quiet room with few distractions and interruptions.
- A table, flip chart, overhead projector, TV, DVD player, LCD projector and screen are equipment that may be required.
- Careful consideration should be given as to whether the group will meet during the school day or after school. If the group is meeting during the school day, approval should be requested for the class or activities the students may miss during the group.

In some situations, the group may include students from different schools. If this is the case, the following should be considered:

- When groups involve students from various schools, arrangements need to be made for transportation prior to the start of sessions.
- If school staff or parents are providing the transportation for the group, appropriate consent forms must be obtained.

Decision Grid

This grid can be used by school staff during the planning meetings in weeks one and two to gather and track information and decisions regarding the formation of

the social skills group. In the last two follow-up meetings, this grid can once again be used to help evaluate whether the initial decisions were effective or how certain decisions could have been made differently.

Decision Grid

Components	Planning Decisions	Follow-up Evaluation
Group Leader(s) and Team Members		
Potential Group Participants		
Level of Parent Participation	<input type="checkbox"/> Parent consent <input type="checkbox"/> Meeting participation <input type="checkbox"/> Interview <input type="checkbox"/> Assessment	
Group Structure	Grade Range _____ Age Range _____ Gender(s) _____ # of participants _____ Duration of each session _____ # of weeks _____ Location _____	
Skills Assessment		
Potential Target Skills		
Other Considerations		



Building Social Skills

Assessment



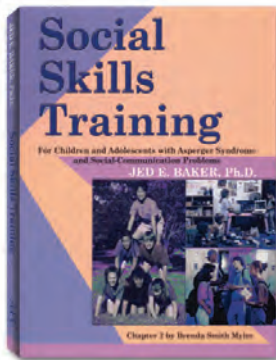
Assessment

Before beginning a social skills group, it is important to assess each student's social functioning to identify areas of strength and challenge. Direct observation, staff, parent and student interviews, social skills checklists and scales can be used to gather information. This information can provide a comprehensive overview of a student's social abilities, which can be used to design an appropriate social skills group.

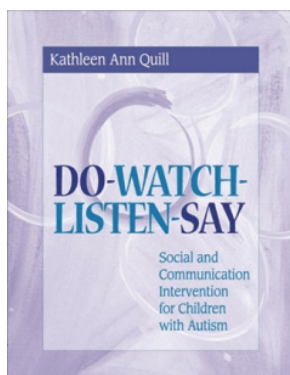
There may be many skills the student needs to learn based on assessment results. It is important to prioritize the skills the student needs to function appropriately in his/her present social environment. A small number of objectives (1-3) should be targeted during the social skills group to allow for meaningful practice and assimilation of the skill. Measurable objectives should be outlined for each goal so that progress can be accurately monitored.

Selected Assessment Resources

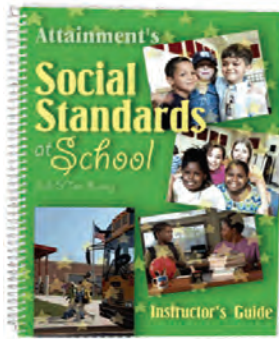
Many of the following resources include lesson plans to support skill development as well as social skills rating scales and checklists.



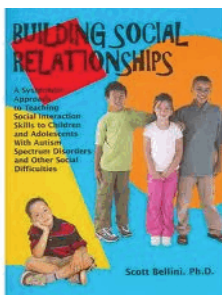
The *Social Skills Menu* created by Dr. Jed Baker (2003) will help to determine what to teach each student. The Menu consists of 70 different skills related to conversational skills, cooperative play, dealing with feelings of self and others, dealing with conflicts and teasing, and friendship management



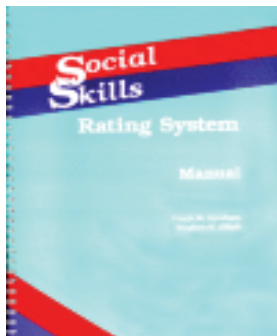
Kathleen Quill (2000) offers a social skills checklist for younger children with ASD. This checklist includes skills in order from least advanced to most advanced. It provides useful information regarding current level of functioning and suggests effective objectives.



A Progress Report to assess social skills is available in the book *Social Standards at School* (Kinney, J. & Kinney, T., 2005, pp. 150-151). This report assesses social skills in seven different areas. A rating key is provided and consists of four options for rating skills.



From *Building Social Relationships* by Scott Bellini, the Autism Social Skills Profile (ASSP) is a rating scale designed to identify specific deficits and assist with targeting intervention. It is a comprehensive measure of social functioning for both younger children and adolescents with ASD.



The Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) (Gresham & Elliot, 1990) is a norm-referenced assessment tool that focuses on social behaviour in pre-school, elementary, and secondary students. It evaluates areas of social strength and challenge. Rating scales are provided for the teacher, parent, and student. Cooperation, empathy, assertion, self-control, and responsibility are rated. Intervention can be planned based on results. This assessment is most useful for a comprehensive individualized plan.



Building Social Skills

Lesson Planning



Lesson Planning

Lesson planning includes coordinating curriculum materials and resources with the group leader and consultant. A simple lesson plan template is provided in the appendix. The following components are included:

- Leader and Consultant Names
- Participant Names
- Date
- Target Skill(s) or Objective
- Teaching Strategies
- Reinforcement
- Materials
- Evaluation
- Progress Monitoring
- Practice Opportunities

Lesson Sequence

The lesson plan examples reflect a general sequence to follow when teaching the group. The group often begins with a review of group rules or expectations and/or the previous week's skill. Often this first step is an opportunity for the students to share how they have done with practice activities since the last session. In the next steps, the skill to be taught is introduced, modeled and practiced, either through role play or video demonstration. Ways to practice the new skill are identified as well as concrete ways of tracking success for each student. It is often helpful to build in an opportunity for a shared activity at the end, such as game play or a snack to encourage group interaction and friendship building. Other examples are available in the resources listed.

Lesson Activities

Planning for a social skills group must be customized to the needs of the individuals in the group based on the assessments. Activities may need to be adapted and/or modified to meet the skill level of the participants involved in the group. Activities could include:

- interactive games
- role playing
- modeling

- videos
- discussion
- social stories or scripts

Visual Supports

Using visual supports with students diagnosed with ASD is an effective teaching strategy. Visual supports may include words, pictures, photos, picture symbols, signs or combinations of these. They augment instruction by making the information more concrete and can be individualized to meet the needs of the students in the group. The following are examples of visual supports:

- checklist
- written or picture schedules
- "break" card
- "wait" card
- turn taking card
- rules list

Textual cues can also be useful prompts when focusing on specific skills. These can be posted on a sentence strip on a nearby wall or easel to be easily used during the lesson. For non-readers, picture symbols may be added. Social scripts can also be used to introduce the verbal/textual cues. After practicing in the group, students learn to use the cued phrases to prompt themselves and others.

For example:

"Stop. Think. That's okay." can remind students what to do when they become frustrated. The strip would be posted and the sequence practiced during the lesson.

"One at a time, please." is used when there is simultaneous talking during a lesson. This cue helps in conversational turn taking by teaching students to respond correctly (i.e. be quiet when others speak) when the teacher points to or reads the cue

"It's only a game." or *"Good game!"* can be used to teach how to lose and win appropriately.

Other Materials

Additional material may be needed to make the lessons appealing to the group such as:

- individual folders
- pencil, paper, colored pencils, markers
- audio-visual equipment
- flip chart

Sample Lesson Plan #1

Social Skills Group

Date: Thursday October 8th

Target Skill: Asserting oneself (asking for what you want/need)

Participants: Johnny, Billy, Maria, Alicia

Grade: 3-4

Materials: Video, TV/VCR, white board markers

Activities: Story/discussion, video, list-making on white board, role plays, practice cards

PROCEDURE	EVALUATION/COMMENTS
<p>Step 1 - Review</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Discuss and/or practice skill</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Review homework cards</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Reinforcement</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p>	<p>Reviewed scenario (pushing in line)</p> <p>Points added to tally chart</p> <p>Maria and Johnny especially enjoy this part; lots of pride in turning in homework card</p>
<p>Step 2 - Introduce skill</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Discussion</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Activity sheet</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Game: _____</p> <p>X Other: <u>Story telling</u> _____</p>	<p>Told example story</p> <p>Discussed feelings involved</p> <p>Billy seemed distracted - perhaps too much talking, not enough visual</p> <p>Alicia: quite verbal, lots of participation</p>
<p>Step 3 - Model</p> <p>X Video</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Book, Comic or drawing</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Role play between adults</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Puppet show</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p>	<p>Used vdeo clip from "Charlotte's Web" movie ("Excuse me. That's mine!")</p> <p>Alll students enjoyed the clip; very attentive</p>
<p>Step 4 - Identify steps</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Discussion among students</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Activity sheet</p> <p>X Make a list on the whiteboard</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p>	<p>We listed the steps on the board (Get person's attention. Say what you need and wait); Billy, Alicia, Maria all shared ideas</p> <p>Johnny attended well</p> <p>Turn-taking for writing certain parts: maintained interest, but took longer for some than for others</p>
<p>Step 5 - Practice</p> <p>X Role play</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Game: _____</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p>	<p>All had a chance to role play (once in each role) and to watch</p> <p>All seemed to enjoy this (attentive)</p> <p>Reminders to check the white board helped</p>
<p>Step 6 - Additional Practice</p> <p>X Determine what to practice, how many times, with whom, where, etc.</p> <p>X Fill in practice cards (if being used)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p>	<p>Distribute Practice Tracking Cards</p> <p>Students enjoyed making this their own challenge</p> <p>Needed help defining the skill to be done</p>

Sample Lesson Plan #2 Play Group

Date: Thursday, February 20

Target Skill: Appropriate Play Skills (losing games appropriately)

Participants: Rosalyn, Marsha, Mike, Joey

Grades: 1-2

Materials: agenda, social story, structured games, reinforcers (stickers)

Activities: Review agenda, discussion, social story, role play, practice

PROCEDURE	EVALUATION/COMMENTS
<p>Step 1 - Review <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Discuss or practice previous lesson's skill <input type="checkbox"/> Review practice cards <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Review Agenda / today's lesson <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Reinforcement <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p>	<p>Previous week: conversational turn taking Reviewed agenda This week: 4 activities to obtain reinforcement Joey has a cold today, didn't respond to this activity</p>
<p>Step 2 - Introduce skill <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Discussion <input type="checkbox"/> Activity sheet <input type="checkbox"/> Game: _____ <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Other: <u>Social Story</u> _____</p>	<p>Discussed when people lose and how people react Joey seemed tired Marsha was quite verbal, lots of participation and examples</p>
<p>Step 3 - Model <input type="checkbox"/> Video <input type="checkbox"/> Book, Comic or drawing <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Role play between adults <input type="checkbox"/> Puppet show <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Other: <u>role play via social story</u> _____</p>	<p>All students enjoyed the role play</p>
<p>Step 4 - Identify steps <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Discussion among students <input type="checkbox"/> Activity sheet <input type="checkbox"/> Make a list on the whiteboard <input type="checkbox"/> Other: <u>referred back to social story and role play</u> _____</p>	<p>Referred back to the steps in the story Rosalyn, Mike shared ideas; Joey attended well Used the saying "it's only a game, there will be other games" instead of displaying signs of frustration (yelling, saying stupid, throwing).</p>
<p>Step 5 - Practice <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Role play <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Game: <u>card flip game, tic tac toe</u> <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p>	<p>All had a chance to role play once (how to lose appropriately) and then prompted during their game playing when necessary All seemed to enjoy this (attentive) Joey needed the most prompts</p>
<p>Step 6 - Additional Practice <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Determine what to practice, how many times, with whom, where, etc. <input type="checkbox"/> Practice cards (if used) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Other: <u>at recess, in class, at home</u> _____</p>	<p>All students to practice 1x/day at recess or in class during play time Needed help using the skill at home Will repeat lesson next week until all students able to complete (lose appropriately) without prompts</p>



Building Social Skills

Reinforcement and Generalization



Reinforcement and Generalization

Social interaction can be stressful and difficult for children with ASD, at least until they acquire sufficient skills and confidence. Reinforcement is one way to increase motivation and participation of all group members. Therefore, specific reinforcement strategies should be incorporated in the group and be determined prior to startup.

Building Motivation

Selecting teaching activities that are inherently motivating for the specific learners in the group is the first step. Using age appropriate and interesting materials while teaching the specific skill makes learning fun. For example, a grade 1-2 group might be interested in puppets, legos, a bean bag game, or a video featuring young children practicing the target skill. Older students may be more interested in sports, technology, or a board game. In addition, including a snack as part of the group can help keep interest high. Incorporating preferred activities as part of the lesson routine is fundamental to the success of the group.

Next, a decision needs to be made on reinforcement of the specific skill you are trying to teach. This level of reinforcement occurs both during the lesson as well as during the practice activities that follow. In order to be effective, reinforcement needs to be given to the student *immediately* after the target skill has been demonstrated. In general, we would always praise the learner very specifically as we provide the reinforcer (i.e. "That was great! You remembered to look at your partner! Here's your token/sticker/chip").

When we are first teaching the skill, we need to provide positive feedback every time the skill is demonstrated. Once the learner demonstrates the skill in other settings, this specific, concrete reinforcement can be gradually decreased until it occurs only as it would in naturally occurring situations. A few examples are provided below for your consideration and many other examples are in the recommended resources listed in the reference section.

Token System

One way to reward participants for appropriate behaviour within each group session is a token system. Tokens (in the form of poker chips, pennies, stickers, etc.) can be awarded to participants for good behaviours throughout the session

and then exchanged for a reward at the end of the session. The behaviour or skill that can earn the token should be clearly defined at the start of the lesson (i.e. wait for a turn; ask questions; raise hand; lose gracefully, etc.). Posting the skill(s) on the wall can remind or prompt the learners if needed. Rewards can be simple, such as colourful pencils, stickers, sport cards, small toys, comics, or candies.

For younger learners, a marble jar can provide a concrete reminder of skills demonstrated during the lesson. Place a large glass or plastic jar at the front of the lesson area. Each time a target behaviour is displayed by any one member of the group), a marble is placed in the jar and specific praise is provided. After the designated amount is reached, a concrete reinforcer can be offered. There are many variations to this approach (paper clips on a string, magnets on a window frame, etc.).

Generalization


Each skill taught in the group setting should be practised regularly between sessions to promote generalization. Practice can be in the form of self-monitoring checklists, picture reminder cards, adult-facilitated staged practice, or peer-mediated practice. In order to encourage generalization, practice should take place at school, at home, and in the community whenever possible. Care should be taken to make the practicing of skills motivating for students. This could mean setting up a reinforcement system for practicing the target skills.


To determine whether skills generalize to settings outside of the social skills group, some form of monitoring and follow-up assessment are necessary. The following samples provide suggestions to promote frequent practice of the newly-learned skills in the natural environment.

Self-monitoring

In this case, the students track their own behaviour. Teachers, parents, and other adults can remind the students from time to time to track their behaviour. The target behaviour is clearly defined, sometimes with some concrete examples. A simple tally count can be used for the student to mark each time he or she displays the target behaviour. A simple tally count might just mean a pencil mark or colouring in a box each time the student displays the target skill. The task card

or picture reminder can either be carried by the student, posted on a wall in an appropriate place, taped to the student’s desk, or attached to the student’s daily agenda. Its location can vary depending on the nature of the skill to be practised.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
20	 <p>Wave hi!</p>					8
19						9
18						10
17	16	15	14	13	12	11

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
20	 <p>Can I play with you?</p>					8
19						9
18						10
17	16	15	14	13	12	11

Cumulative point system: In order to maintain students’ motivation over the course of several weeks, a cumulative reward system can be set up. This can be tied into the students’ weekly skills practice. If a tally count is being kept each week as a part of the generalization plan, those “points” can be added each week to a cumulative chart.

The chart should be kept in a visible place in the room where the social skills group meets and can be decorated to be visually appealing: a large thermometer, a movable cut-out of a person climbing a mountain, etc. During the last session of the group, points can be counted up and a reward can be given (i.e. an ice cream party, a movie, etc.).

Group News

A weekly “newsletter” describes the target behaviour and ways to practice it. The newsletter can be filled out after each weekly session and passed out by the student to a variety of relevant adults: teacher, lunchroom monitor, parents, grandparents, bus driver, or soccer coach, for example. As mentioned above, the newsletter can be used in a variety of settings.



Building Social Skills

Evaluation



Evaluation

Evaluating success of the social skills group entails examining student progress directly as well as gathering school and parent perspectives. The last group session should be followed by post assessment using the same the tool(s) as the pre-assessment (e.g parent or teacher checklist, rating scale). A team meeting to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the process and the group is recommended. Input from participating students is also valuable. The Decision Grid below can be used again to guide this discussion and make recommendations for the future.

Components	Planning Decisions	Follow-up Evaluation
Group Leader(s) and Team Members		Consultant support adequate? Group Leader confident in facilitating independently? Team feedback?
Potential Group Participants		Group members were a good fit?
Level of Parent Participation	<input type="checkbox"/> Parent consent <input type="checkbox"/> Meeting participation <input type="checkbox"/> Interview <input type="checkbox"/> Assessment	Parent participation and feedback?
Group Structure	Grade Range _____ Age Range _____ Gender(s) _____ # of participants _____ Duration of each session _____ # of weeks _____ Location _____	Space and resources adequate? Scheduling issues?
Skills Assessment		Assessment appropriate, useful?
Potential Target Skills		Skills demonstrated in the group? Skills demonstrated outside the group? Reinforcement adequate?
Other Considerations		Student feedback and willingness to participate? Comments from other staff?



Building Social Skills

Summary



Summary

"Preliminary evidence indicates that high-functioning children with autism spectrum disorders who participate in social skills groups may increase their awareness of social cues and their understanding of how to interact appropriately with peers, but they may have difficulty learning to apply this knowledge in the context of everyday situations. Additional research with strong experimental designs is needed to confirm these findings."

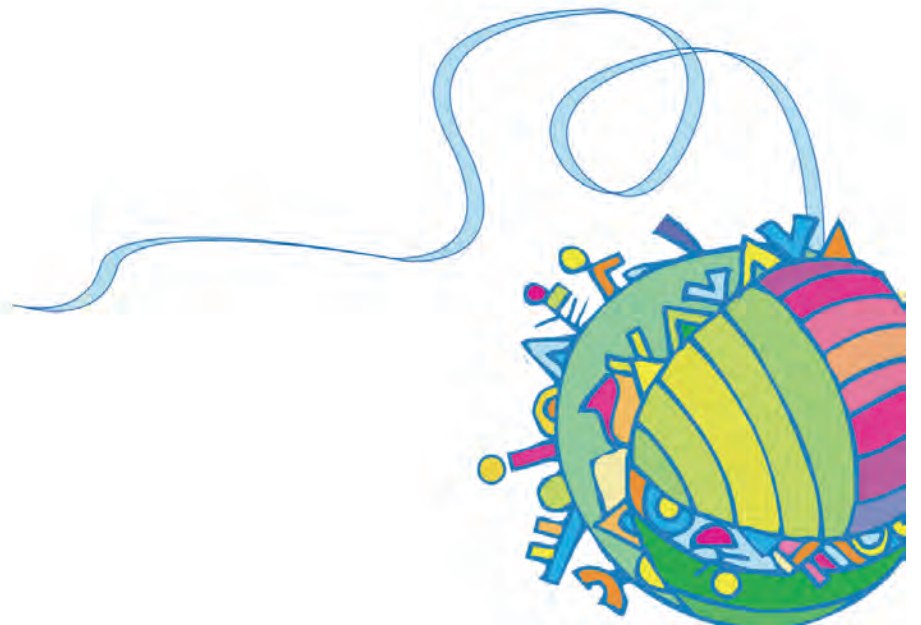
(Green et al, 2010)

The development of social interaction skills is complex and closely inter-related with communication skills. There is still much to be learned about how best to match social skill instruction with each learner's needs and what strategies help learners demonstrate skills after intervention. As more research becomes available, educators will be better able to guide their students in this critical area. In the meantime, the authors are hopeful that this resource will provide a starting point and a process to enable more schools to participate in supporting students with ASD.



Building Social Skills

References and Readings



References and Related Reading

The studies referenced below provide emerging evidence regarding the use of social skills training groups for children with ASD. This list is not exhaustive; other quality studies may exist that were not included.

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Building Social Skills

Appendices



Appendix I

Recommended Resources

The following resources are available in the board and department autism libraries.

Resource	Grade Level	Description
<p><i>Exploring Feelings Cognitive Behaviour Therapy To Manage Anger</i> Tony Attwood</p> <p><i>Exploring Feelings Cognitive Behaviour Therapy To Manage Anxiety</i> Tony Attwood</p>	<p>Age 9-12 (can be modified for older or younger students)</p>	<p>Encourages the child to make informed decisions about which responses to choose (walking away vs. hitting). The program includes six two-hour sessions with activities to explore feelings of being happy, relaxed, anxious or angry. Provides a teacher guide and student workbook to identify situations and find appropriate ways to respond. This program was originally designed as an intervention for children with Asperger's syndrome who have an anxiety disorder or anger management problem.</p>
<p><i>Social Skills Training</i> Jed Baker</p>	<p>Elementary and Secondary</p>	<p>A social skills curriculum covering assessment, teaching strategies, behavior management and peer acceptance through sensitivity training. Skills are broken down into six categories: Conversational Skills, Cooperative Play Skills, Friendship Management, Self-Regulation, Empathy, and Conflict Management. Includes over 70 lesson plans with reproducible handouts, as well as activity sheets for practicing and reinforcing the skill in the classroom and at home. Options for teaching one on one, small group, or in the general classroom.</p>
<p><i>Preparing for Life: the Complete Guide to Transitioning to Adulthood for those with Autism/Asperger's Syndrome</i> Jed Baker</p>	<p>Secondary to Adult</p>	<p>Covers a wide variety of issues faced by individuals across the spectrum, such as perspective-taking, nonverbal communication skills, conversational skills, and stress management. Provides methods for assessing social skill needs, instruction, and generalization. Includes a section on training peers to be more accepting of students with ASD.</p>

<p><i>The Incredible 5-Point Scale</i> Kari Dunn Buron</p>	Elementary	<p>Outlines a strategy geared toward more able children in a variety of situations. The 1-5 point scale can be applied to a variety of behaviours, such as anxiety, personal space, anger, voice volume, noise levels, etc. The book includes a story that can be personalized, visual scales, and tips on how to implement the strategy..</p>
<p><i>A 5 is against the Law!</i> Kari Dunn Buron</p>	Secondary	<p>Building on 'The Incredible 5 Point Scale' model, this book focuses on adolescents who have difficulty understanding and maintaining social boundaries. Provides many examples and hands-on activities and encourages the reader to apply the scale to his/her specific emotions and situations.</p>
<p><i>Super Skills, A Social Skills Group Program for Children with Asperger Syndrome, High Functioning Autism and Related Challenges</i> Judith Coucouvanis</p>	Elementary	<p>Series of social skills activities to help students with autism and other social deficits. Group lessons are organized under four types of skills for social success: fundamental skills, social initiation, getting along with others, and social responses. Each lesson is highly structured with practical checklists and other instruments for assessing students social skills levels and subsequent program planning.</p>
<p><i>The File Factor</i> Terese Dana and Bradford Meisel</p>	Grade 5-12	<p>Provides a way to work through disappointment by writing out situations in certain categories (e.g. having to wait, other people's decisions). This visual support prompts children to organize their emotions and situations, and through discussions with an adult, guide them to understand the reason behind the emotions they are feeling. This resource can be used to improve coping skills with children with emotional struggles.</p>
<p><i>What Do I Say?</i> Joan Green</p>	Elementary	<p>An interactive reading booklet that provides examples of appropriate social responses to common everyday situations.</p>

<p><i>My Book Full of Feelings</i> Amy V. Jaffe</p>	<p>Elementary</p>	<p>Teaches children to identify and respond appropriately to their emotions. This book is interactive and uses a dry-erase marker so that unique situations and solutions can be added and changed. Also included is a Communication Pad for tracking and sharing information between home and school.</p>
<p><i>Functional Independence Skills Handbook</i> William K. Killion</p>	<p>Elementary and Secondary</p>	<p>Assessment and curriculum for individuals with developmental disabilities. Focuses on activities from daily life in seven functional areas: adaptive behavior, affective (emotional), cognitive, sensorimotor, social, speech and language and vocational. Includes sample lesson plans for each item evaluated. Each lesson lists the specific task, prerequisite skills, concept, behavioral objective, materials, and a task analysis.</p>
<p><i>Social Standards at School</i> Judi and Tom Kinney</p>	<p>Mid-Elementary to Secondary</p>	<p>Focuses on 53 social skills that may occur during a typical school day (i.e. getting ready for school, classroom behavior, transitions, peer relationships and common etiquette). Each skill is broken down into five steps with teacher guidelines and benchmarks, problem-solving checklists, a script for teachers to follow when reviewing the skills with students and a student self monitoring page. Reproducible book with printable files available on WIN/MAC CD. Designed for more able children.</p>
<p><i>Self-Esteem Activities for Secondary Students with Special Needs</i> Darlene Mannix</p>	<p>Grades 4-12</p>	<p>Includes activities to develop a positive self-concept and healthy self-esteem. Includes 62 lesson plans and 200 reproducible activities. Materials are appropriate for resource settings, counseling sessions, and small and large groups. Each lesson includes learning objectives, introductory activities, student worksheets, discussion and review questions, journal-entry ideas.</p>

<p><i>Navigating the Social World. A Curriculum for Individuals with Asperger's Syndrome and Related Disorders</i> Jeanette McAfee</p>	<p>Secondary</p>	<p>Lesson activities and strategies to teach about emotions, recognizing stress and stress prevention and everyday social communication; Visula supports are provided</p>
<p><i>The Hidden Curriculum</i> Brenda Smith Myles Melissa L. Trautman, Rhonda L. Schelvan</p>	<p>Elementary and Secondary</p>	<p>Offers suggestions to teach subtle messages that most people learn automatically, but that have to be directly taught to individuals with social challenges. Includes a detailed list of curriculum items along with some strategies and sample worksheets (non-reproducible).</p>
<p><i>Do Watch Listen Say</i> Kathleen Quill</p>	<p>Elementary and some Secondary</p>	<p>Comprehensive intervention guide and activities, easily adapted for children who are non-verbal or use augmentative and alternative communication; includes an assessment tool, strategies to build social play , group, and communication skills. Also includes data collection forms and guidelines.</p>
<p><i>Autism and PDD Social Skills Lessons</i> Pam Britton Reese and Nena C. Challenner</p>	<p>Elementary and Secondary</p>	<p>Set of five 60-page books (School; Community; Home; Behavior; Getting Along) with 40 lessons in each book. The concise and expressive illustrations allow students to "read" the lesson along with the teacher. These books focus on skills necessary for successful inclusion of children. The lessons teach many unwritten rules (e.g. raise your hand, wait in line, etc.) that other children learn through observation. Includes progress forms and tracking sheets for individual or group lessons.</p>
<p><i>Promoting Social Success</i> Gary N Siperstein and Emily Paige Rickards</p>	<p>Elementary</p>	<p>Focuses on teaching children cognitive skills for appropriate social behavior. Includes 66 activity-based lessons on social skills, organized around topics that build on each other.</p>

<p><i>Teaching Play Skills</i> Melinda Jay Smith</p>	<p>Preschool and Elementary</p>	<p>This comprehensive manual addresses elements of play and how to incorporate these into the lives of children with developmental delays. Identifies methods of teaching play skills, including building with toys, games, music, sensory and physical play and imaginative play. Discusses peer interactions and the dynamics of playgroups for preschool and school age children.</p>
<p><i>Room 14: A Social Language Program</i> Carolyn C. Wilson</p>	<p>Grades K-4</p>	<p>Provides exercises and activities to and practice social situations (e.g. greetings, conversation, how to say no, how to complain, using self-control, being responsible). Activities can be used individually or in groups led by an adult.</p>
<p><i>Inside Out, What Makes a Person with Social Cognitive Deficits Tick?</i> Michelle Garcia Winner</p>	<p>Elementary and Secondary</p>	<p>Includes techniques to help students identify and overcome weaknesses, leading to the acquisition of skills such as initiating conversations or activities, listening and attending, understanding abstract language, taking others' perspectives, seeing the big picture, and using humor; demonstrates how to break down these skills into manageable concepts and suggests teaching methods. Includes reproducible worksheets.</p>
<p><i>Social Behavior Mapping</i> Michelle Garcia Winner</p>	<p>Grade 3-12</p>	<p>Uses a cognitive behavior strategy to teach specific relationships between behaviors, others' perspectives, others' actions, and the student's own emotions. <i>SBM</i> is a visual tool that displays abstract concepts through a flow chart. Includes a collection of over 50 Social Behavior Maps to cover a range of topics for home, community and the classroom. Most effective for children with good language skills.</p>
<p><i>Thinking about You, Thinking about Me</i> Michelle Garcia Winner</p>	<p>Elementary and Secondary</p>	<p>Addresses deficits in understanding the perspectives of others. Includes sample IEP goals and benchmarks, Social Behavior Mapping (visual ways to teach students the impact of behaviors on others with sample maps and instructions), Social Thinking Dynamic Assessment Protocol with templates, and concrete strategies</p>

Appendix II

Lesson Plan Social Skills Group

Date:

Target Skill:

Participants:

Grade:

Materials:

Activities:

PROCEDURE	EVALUATION/COMMENTS
<p>Step 1 - Review</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Discuss and/or practice skill <input type="checkbox"/> Review homework cards <input type="checkbox"/> Reinforcement <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ 	
<p>Step 2 - Introduce skill</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Discussion <input type="checkbox"/> Activity sheet <input type="checkbox"/> Game: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ 	
<p>Step 3 - Model</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Video <input type="checkbox"/> Book, Comic or drawing <input type="checkbox"/> Role play between adults <input type="checkbox"/> Puppet show <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ 	
<p>Step 4 - Identify steps</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Discussion among students <input type="checkbox"/> Activity sheet <input type="checkbox"/> Make a list on the whiteboard <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ 	
<p>Step 5 - Practice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> X Role play <input type="checkbox"/> Game: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ 	
<p>Step 6 - Additional Practice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> X Determine what to practice, how many times, with whom, where, etc. X Fill in practice cards (if being used) <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ 	

Appendix III

Decision Grid

Components	Planning Decisions	Follow-up Evaluation
Group Leader(s) and Team Members		
Potential Group Participants		
Level of Parent Participation	<input type="checkbox"/> Parent consent <input type="checkbox"/> Meeting participation <input type="checkbox"/> Interview <input type="checkbox"/> Assessment	
Group Structure	Grade Range _____ Age Range _____ Gender(s) _____ # of participants _____ Duration of each session _____ # of weeks _____ Location _____	
Skills Assessment		
Potential Target Skills		
Other Considerations		

Appendix V

My Group News!

Name: _____

Date: _____

Skill worked on today... _____

Ideas for practice at home and school...

Feedback - Have you noticed me doing this skill?

Keep encouraging practice every day!

Please fill out and return to _____.

Thank you.

