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Social Skills and Academic Achievement

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MARIA, A YOUNG GIRL with learning disabilities (LD), has struggled with peer interactions all her life. She avoids social situations, preferring to work and play on her own. This has begun to seriously affect her classwork, especially how she participates in group projects and pair work, *and* it's limiting her opportunities to learn from others and share her own knowledge and skills. Concerned, the members of Maria's IEP team meet to discuss ways to better support her. After careful consideration, they decide that she would benefit from a focused approach to improving her social skills.

Maria's IEP team understands that social skills form the backbone of personal and professional success. Social skills help us navigate such everyday interactions as exchanging greetings, holding conversations, starting and maintaining friendships, asking for help, and instructing others. Maria's IEP team knows that her difficulties, left unattended, will continue to pose challenges for her both inside and outside the classroom. To help her reach her full potential, they decide that now is the time to act.

Maria is not the only one struggling. Research has consistently demonstrated that many children with LD may also have related social skill deficits. Kavale and Forness (1995), for instance, found that 75% of students with LD also show some difficulties in social skills that interfere with their ability to learn. The good news is that, for many of these children, social skills *can* be taught. Evidence-based methods for building social skills have been developed by teachers, psychologists, and researchers. One challenge, though, is getting this knowledge into the hands of people who can use it to help children like Maria. That is our goal with this issue of *Evidence for Education*.

This publication will first clarify what we mean when we talk about social skills and explore their impact on behavior and academics. Then we'll take a look at what the research has to say about social skills interventions and programs for children with disabilities. This *Evidence for Education* will wrap up with examples of interventions that can be applied in both classroom and home settings.

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Social Skills – What Are They?

SOCIAL SKILLS ARE *not* the same thing as behavior. Rather, they are components of behavior that help an individual understand and adapt across a variety of social settings. Walker (1983) defines social skills as "a set of competencies that a) allow an individual to initiate and maintain positive social relationships, b) contribute to peer acceptance and to a satisfactory school adjustment, and c) allow an individual to cope effectively with the larger social environment" (p. 27). Social skills can also be defined within the context of social and emotional learning — recognizing and managing our emotions, developing caring and concern for others, establishing positive relationships, making responsible decisions, and handling challenging situations constructively and ethically (Zins, Weissbert, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). With this understanding, researchers and educators seek to evaluate and build students' social skills within a variety of social contexts.
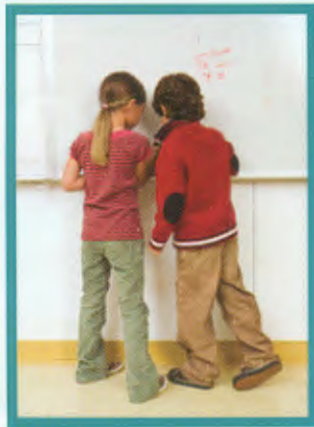
The classroom is one such environment children must learn to navigate. Successful learning requires students to interact closely with teachers and peers. In addition to their general importance for daily interaction, social skills can have a big impact on a child's ability to succeed in an academic setting. The classroom becomes both a training ground for development of social skills *and* an arena in which those skills are put to use.

What the Research Says

RESEARCH ON EFFECTIVE social skills instruction can provide guidance when trying to help children build social skills (Quinn et al., 2000; Sainato & Carta, 1992; Honig & Wittmer, 1996; Zirpoli & Melloy, 1997). Researchers have also studied particular social skill interventions in a variety of settings, as well as for children of different age levels and abilities.[1] Findings suggest that quality interventions and related instructional strategies might:

Focus on social and emotional learning strategies that encourage reflection and self-awareness.

- Encourage children to consider how individual actions and words have consequences.

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[1] Several meta-analyses have been conducted in an attempt to consolidate findings from the vast body of research on social skills (full citations can be found in the *References* section): Beelmann, Pfingsten, & Losel (1994); Bellini, Peters, Benner, & Hopf (2007); Forness & Kavale (1996); Kavale & Mostert (2004); and Quinn, Kavale, Mathur, Rutherford, & Forness (1999).

- Develop children's ability to take different perspectives and viewpoints.
- Teach students to think through situations and/or challenges by rehearsing possible outcomes.

Create opportunities to practice effective social skills both individually and in groups.

- Model effective social skills in the classroom and at home through praise, positive reinforcement, and correction and redirection of inappropriate behaviors.
- Discuss effective interactions with specific attention to the steps involved. For example, discuss the process of a conversation, showing how effective listening makes such interaction possible.
- Role-play scenarios that build social skills.

Adjust instructional strategies to address social skills deficits.

- Arrange the physical environment effectively.
- Clearly state instructional objectives and behavioral expectations throughout each lesson.
- Simulate "real life" challenges students may encounter at school, home, and in the community to place social skills in their practical contexts.

Tailor social skill interventions to individual student needs.

- Refer to assessment and diagnostic results when deciding upon an intervention.
- Investigate strategies designed to meet particular social skill deficits.
- Make sure the duration and intensity of the intervention are appropriate for the child's need.

Another thing research has shown us is that even the best interventions may fall short in achieving desired outcomes without a well-defined, systemic framework, or *program,* to support it. Such programs embed evidence-based interventions into a larger context that considers cultural and environmental issues that may be important factors in contributing to overall success (Greenberg, Domitrovich, & Bumbarger, 1999; Reed, Feibus, & Rosenfield, 1998). *School-Wide Positive Behavior Intervention and Support* (PBIS) is one such systemic program that addresses effective social skill interventions within broader school, district, and even state contexts (Colvin, Kame'enui, & Sugai, 1993; Todd, Horner, Sugai, & Sprague, 1999).

Positive Behavioral Support is featured in a series of modules produced by the Online Academy at the University of Kansas. Module 5 presents intervention strategies specifically designed to support social skills. View the module at:
http://onlineacademy.org/modules/a205/index.html

Within this approach, a school team agrees upon a set of behavioral expectations as the cornerstone of a positive school culture, and social skills play a key role in helping students meet those expectations. Adults support social skill development through modeling and positive reinforcement. Students may have additional opportunities, such as social skills clubs, to practice and understand positive interaction.

According to Bellini (2006), effective programs follow a series of steps. Beginning with an assessment of a student's social functioning, educators distinguish between those deficits that can be successfully addressed and those that are unlikely to respond to intervention. For example, the inability to ask a question may be due to either inadequate socialization or an aspect of a specific condition or disability. Such behavior may also be due to a performance problem, in which a student knows what to do, but uses an "inappropriate" response because it meets his/her needs. In any case, successful treatment begins with a thorough, individualized assessment, which then forms the basis for a specific intervention strategy. Educators then monitor student progress to modify or refine the intervention, if needed.

Many social skills curricula provide lesson plans and guidance for both individual and group activities. Most involve modeling successful social skills through activities, games, and role-play, with teachers and peers providing the necessary feedback that allows the student to rehearse interactions (Luiselli, McCarty, Coniglio, Zorrila-Ramirez, & Putnam, 2005). In this way, students practice and internalize skills within the classroom, which can often lead to transfer of certain skills to other settings, especially when direct support is provided to promote the transfer of skills.

To illustrate how such a program might operate, let's take a look at *Skillstreaming*, developed by Dr. Arnold Goldstein and Dr. Ellen McGinnis for students displaying aggression, immaturity, withdrawal, or other problems (Gibbs, Potter, & Goldstein, 1995; Goldstein, 1999; McGinnis & Goldstein, 1997). The curriculum breaks a specific skill into small, incremental steps, and walks students through those steps to encourage reflection, discussion, understanding, and competency. This approach recognizes the complexity of certain social skills many of us take for granted and lays out the steps students must take along the way. The chart on the right, taken directly from the *Skillstreaming* curriculum, shows how this process can be used to teach children how to ask a question (McGinnis & Goldstein, 1997, p. 99). The "trainer notes" provide suggested prompts or probes teachers may use to guide a students toward skill acquisition. Using this method, the program addresses 50 skill sets, organized by both the age/grade level of the child and by the complexity of skill to be acquired (e.g., listening attentively, convincing others).

As another example, let's take a look at *Social Stories™*, an intervention designed to help children interpret

Group 1: Beginning Social Skills

SKILL 4: ASKING A QUESTION

Steps:	Trainer Notes:
1. Decide what you'd like to know more about.	Ask about something you don't understand, something you did not hear, or something confusing.
2. Decide whom to ask.	
3. Think about different ways to ask your question and pick one way.	Think about who has the best information on the topic; consider asking several people.
4. Pick the right time and place to ask your question.	Think about wording; raise your hand; ask nonchallengingly.
5. Ask your question.	Wait for a pause; wait for privacy.

Suggestions for modeling:

- School or neighborhood: Main actor asks teacher to explain something he/she finds unclear.

- Home: Main actor asks mother to explain new curfew decisions.

- Peer group: Main actor asks classmate about missed school-work.

Comments:

Trainers are advised to model only single, answerable questions. In role-plays, trainees should be instructed to do likewise.

From McGinnis, E., & Goldstein, A. (1997). Skillstreaming the elementary school child: New strategies and perspectives for teaching prosocial skills. Champaign, IL: Research Press.

challenging or confusing social situations by composing personal stories (Lorimer, Simpson, Myles, & Ganz, 2002; Sansosti & Powell-Smith, 2006). Each story breaks down a challenging social situation into clear steps, descriptions, and illustrations to help a child understand an entire scenario (Ali & Frederickson, 2006). Teachers read the story with the student each day for a specific period of time. Stories can also be used to prompt the student when he or she displays the inappropriate behaviors being targeted. *Social Stories™* are designed to help the student learn and internalize the messages and strategies found in the story and use them smoothly and automatically in his or her daily activities. The chart below demonstrates how a story might break down a social situation — in this case, the end of recess — to help a child like Maria understand and meet expectations.

What About Maria? Putting Programs Into Practice

SKILLSTREAMING AND SOCIAL STORIES™ are just two of the research-based social skills curricula upon which programs can be based. But what do these programs look

like for children in schools? How can parents support the work of teachers and specialists helping children learn social skills? Let's return to Maria's experience….

We left off with Maria's IEP team having decided that Maria would benefit from an intervention to help her improve her social skills. But what intervention? To find out more, they observe Maria, gather information about her interactions, and talk with her to get her perspective. They discover that Maria interacts relatively well with smaller groups of individuals she has known since kindergarten, but pulls away when the group contains newcomers. When she does interact with classmates, her ideas seem vague or off topic, and are not integrated into project work unless someone re-states the ideas for her. Maria's parents agree, saying that she will not talk when strangers are present and that they have to re-state what Maria has said in many social settings. From these observations, the group sees that Maria has difficulty connecting with others who are not already a part of the world she understands.

The IEP team decides to use *Social Stories™* to help Maria allow new people into her social world so that she can participate successfully in group work. Her teachers work with her to create the story. Maria types the story on the computer and inserts pictures onto each page digitally. She crafts the story to look like a book, with special paper and a cover design with pictures of herself.

Maria's story? It goes like this:

Page 1. Maria is pictured talking with one of her teachers. The caption reads, "Sometimes my teachers ask me to work with other students I don't know."

Page 2: Maria is pictured again, this time with a nervous look on her face. The caption reads, "That makes me nervous."

Page 3: A group of students is shown sitting at a table, with Maria standing a few steps away. The caption reads, "I practice saying hello three times before I join the group."

Social Stories™

Descriptive Sentence
The bell rings for the children to come in from recess. The children go to their classroom where the teacher reads a story.

Directive Sentence
I am playing during recess. The bell rings for me to come in. I stop playing and line up to come in. I follow the other children and quietly go to the classroom. When we get to the classroom, I go to my desk and sit down. I listen as my teacher reads a story.

Perspective Sentence
When the bell rings for recess to end, the teacher is happy to see all the children line up quietly and walk to their classroom. Many children are excited that they get to hear a story. The teacher likes to see the children listen. The teacher likes it when children are quiet during the story.

Control Sentence
To remember that the bell means it's time for recess to end, I think of a teapot. I know that, when it whistles, the water is done. The bell is like the whistle; when it rings, recess is done.

Adapted from Goldberg Edelson (1995).

Three balloon quotes illustrate Maria rehearsing her greeting.

Page 4: The group sees Maria, says hello, and points to an empty chair. The caption reads, "The other students ask me to join them."

Page 5: Maria sits down and says hello. The caption reads, "I say hello to them, and they smile at me."

Page 6: Maria is talking with her group. The caption reads, "They make me feel comfortable and welcome."

Page 7: Maria and one of her teachers are smiling together. The caption reads, "My teachers are proud of me when I work with people I do not know."

Each day for a month, Maria and her special education teacher spend the first five minutes reading the book together in Maria's favorite spot. Maria enjoys her book and carries it to all of her classes. She also has a copy at home that her parents read with her after dinner and use to discuss how the day went.

Within a few weeks, the team sees improvements in Maria's interactions with strangers. She engages more in group activities. She also demonstrates the strategies in her social story. Maria tells her teacher that, before she enters a group, she thinks "hello" to herself three times, and then sits in the available chair. Her parents say that she has done the same at home. In fact, Maria says she likes working with her new friends.

Conclusion

WE KNOW EFFECTIVE social skills are fundamental to smooth relationships and interactions. We also know how to support the development of social skills in children with and without disabilities. Effective social skills programs reflect, and draw upon, the resources of a school community and respond to the needs of individual students. Social skill interventions start with accurate diagnosis and continue by allowing students to practice positive social interactions in a step-by-step, decision-by-decision fashion. Maria's story exemplifies how an effective intervention should proceed — a team of experts, with input from parents and families, identifies a social skill deficit, chooses a strategy specific to the child and the situation, and continually monitors and evaluates the child's progress.

Why is this important? There are many children like Maria who struggle daily to communicate and make sense of their social world. As an education community committed to the success of all students, we must help these children build the social skills they need to succeed in school and in life.

Evidence-Based Resources for Social Skill Acquisition

Here is a small sample of interventions and programs recommended by researchers and leading organizations such as the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, based on significant research and evaluation.

- *"Stop and Think" Social Skills Program* (Knoff)
  http://www.projectachieve.info/productsandresources/thestopthinksocialskillsprogramschool.html

- *Primary Mental Health Project* (Cowen et al.)
  http://www.sharingsuccess.org/code/eptw/pdf_profiles/pmhp.pdf

- *The EQUIP Program* (Gibbs, Potter, & Goldstein)
  http://www.researchpress.com/product/item/4848/#5133

- *The PREPARE Curriculum* (Goldstein)
  http://www.researchpress.com/product/item/5063

- *The Walker Social Skills Curriculum — The ACCESS Complete Program* (Walker et al.)
  http://www.proedinc.com/customer/productView.aspx?ID=615

- *I Can Problem Solve: Interpersonal Cognitive Problem Solving (ICPS)* (Shure & Spivack)
  http://www.researchpress.com/product/item/4628

- *Tough Kids Social Skills Book* (Sheridan)
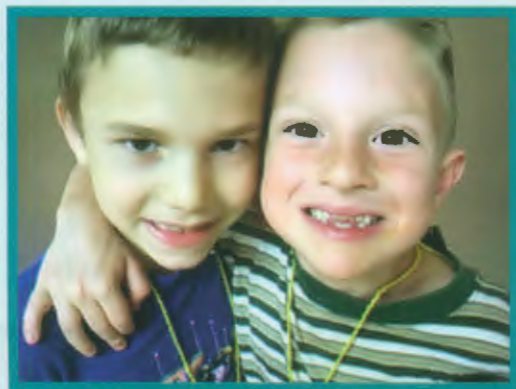 http://store.cambiumlearning.com/ProductPage.aspx?parentID=019001453&functionID=009000008

Adapted from The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), *Social skills: Promoting positive behavior, academic success, and school safety:*
http://www.nasponline.org/resources/factsheets/socialskills_fs.aspx

Additional Resources...

- **National Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports**
  http://www.pbis.org

- **LD Online (Learning Disabilities)**
  http://www.ldonline.org/indepth/behavior

- **National Association of School Psychologists**
  http://www.nasponline.org/resources/factsheets/socialskills_fs.aspx

- **Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice (CECP)**
  http://cecp.air.org/fba/default.asp

- **Center On the Social Emotional Foundations of Early Learning (CSEFEL)**
  http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel

- **Center for Evidence-Based Practice: Young Children with Challenging Behavior**
  http://challengingbehavior.fmhi.usf.edu/

- **Center for Promoting Research to Practice Project REACH**
  http://www.lehigh.edu/projectreach/

- **The Behavior Home Page**
  http://www.state.ky.us/agencies/behave/homepage.html

- **Gray Center for Social Learning and Understanding**
  http://www.thegraycenter.org/socialstories.cfm

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