



Autism Practice Brief

Autism Q&A: Social Skills

Social communication and social skill difficulties are core characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Deficits in social skills often have negative consequences that impact individuals' outcomes in inclusive learning opportunities in schools and inclusive engagement in the communities. Though this social component is a widely known hallmark of ASD, intervention to support individuals' mastery of these skills is still emerging in classroom and community environments across the country. Effective social skill training requires explicit instruction in social expectations and practice opportunities in a variety of natural settings with multiple peers and partners. Due to the wide range of abilities and needs in the area of social communication, social skills training requires a high level of individualization based on the learner as social skills are highly diverse and vary greatly depending on context. For example, what is considered an appropriate social skill in a rural high school may be quite different from a workplace in an urban community. Thus, social skill instruction must be tailored for both learner and context.

QUESTION: What are social skills?

ANSWER

Social skills are all the (usually unspoken) rules, customs, and abilities that guide our positive interactions with other people and the world around us. There are many social skills that cover everything from symbolic play to hygiene and from perspective taking to how to ask out a dating partner. These skills are what make us a functional and adaptive student, colleague, teacher, or individual. Most of us have never received formal instruction in social skills, but pick them up by observing others. However, the vast majority students with ASD do not learn these skills naturally by observation and require explicit instruction and practice to master them. Students in need of social skill development may display interfering behavior because

they lack the skills necessary to more appropriately get what they want or need in class. So, teaching social skills is a proactive way to address problem behavior in the classroom.

QUESTION: Who can teach social skills?

ANSWER

Because the scope of social skills is so large, many different people sometimes teach them in different settings. In school, it is common for a special education teacher or a speech pathologist to lead a "social skills group" that combines direct, explicit instruction with opportunities to practice and generalize these skills in more natural environments. However, that is by no means the only model for delivering social skills instruction. At some schools, the following staff have supported social skills in some ways:

- occupational therapists,
- school psychologists,
- general education teachers,
- health and PE teachers, and
- many other staff.

Regardless of the person leading social skill instruction, all staff have a role to play in supporting the learning and generalization of new social skills.

QUESTION: Which skills should I teach?

ANSWER

It can be overwhelming at first to even figure out where to start! There are so many skills to choose from that fall under the umbrella of social skills. Many commercially available social skills curricula offer a scope and sequence with lesson plans provided for teachers to "plug and play."

