

Ask the Expert Q&A #9

Social Communication Instruction

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What is social communication?

Social communication instruction is about the nuances of the social acts that help individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) to communicate. When we communicate with individuals it is considered a very social behavior. When having a back and forth conversation with someone with emotions, non-verbal behavior, makes a conversation successful.

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Why is it important to consider social communication instruction in the classroom?

Social communication in the classroom is about all the opportunities kids have to work together, to communicate, to learn how to be in the same space and get along. These skills, very early on, build upon each other so that by the time the student is in middle and high school they are learning more advanced social skills which really show up when communicating. When a student is graduating from high school and going on to employment or post-secondary education, those communication skills and the ability to understand the differences between talking to an employee versus an employer or a parent versus a peer and just being able to negotiate these things make it a successful experience for them.

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What tips do you have for teachers who want to start incorporating social communication instruction into their classroom?

First, observe, look where there are deficits, is it with initiating conversation, is it with turn taking, is it that a student is monologuing and not knowing how to communicate with other people. If it is a nonverbal student, understand some of the emotion behind the body language, or if it's a modulating voice speaking to loudly or to softly or they are rude to adults, you want to also address this. Second, consider looking at what the expectations are for the situation -- in a classroom there are expectations on how you interact with an adult, the principle, and then with your peers, so setting those expectations and making sure that they are clear so the student knows what the boundaries are. You also want to consider the visual supports -- if social communication is difficult, visual supports lend themselves to understanding some of those nuances of communication whether it is the rules of interacting with other people. To do this you stand a couple feet away, don't lean into people, take turns, don't change the topic, don't go on and on about a topic, and read other people's body language. The other thing is practice -- the more you practice the better you get at anything, the same goes with communication and social skills. One of the best strategies is teaching in the moment, in school there are millions of opportunities to look at what social communication opportunities there are from the time the student walks into the classroom, navigating their day, leaving school, after school activities, community based instruction, there are tons of opportunities. If you see that something is going very well reinforce that, kids will understand that this is what the expectations are, and they are doing it well, they will continue this good behavior.

This Q&A has been taken from "Ask the Expert Series" which are short videos that discuss important topics for parents, educators, community members, and individuals with ASD and can be found on the VCU-ACE website: <https://vcuautismcenter.org/resources/asktheexpert/>