

Autism Q&A Fact Sheet

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."

Students need both direct instruction and opportunities for “teachable moments” and practice in natural settings to acquire and generalize new skills. Also, it is important to remember that good social skills, like all specialized instruction, should be individualized to the student’s needs. So, the student’s IEP goals are a good place to start. Also, the state of Minnesota Region 10 Low Incidence ASD project has created an inventory checklist called, “Moving Toward Functional Social Competence” that is a useful tool for identifying where students’ areas of need lie.

http://region10projects.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Social_Skills_Checklist.pdf

QUESTION: Where can I find the time for social skills?

ANSWER

With all of the competing demands for instructional and planning time, finding a niche to teach social skills can be one of the biggest hurdles to clear, since students are typically pulled out of academic or enrichment content instruction. This is also true in secondary settings where any additional instruction risks preventing students from accessing electives. Sometimes, looking at alternative times to pull students out of class to teach social skills can be most helpful. These times could include:

- lunch,
- before and after school, and
- during nonacademic study times

Additionally, looking for opportunities to plan for social skills instruction to occur during academic times can be very effective. For all social skills instruction, pairing direct instruction with opportunities to practice skills in multiple, natural environments will be most effective.

QUESTION: How am I going to teach social skills?

ANSWER

Preparing to teach social skills requires a team effort from all the staff that work with a student. Related service providers such as speech-language pathologists and occupational therapists are important contacts that can help lend their expertise. Speech-language pathologists are experts in communication that can help lead school teams in areas of social communication and pragmatic language,

including augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices if needed. Occupational therapists have extensive toolkits for supporting students’ adaptive skills, which can include such diverse topics as hygiene, task independence, and cognitive flexibility. Often these professionals can be consulted for ideas and staff support even if the student does not receive direct services in these areas. Check with your school division regarding their current practices. Also, many commercially available social skills curricula are available that have been studied through research for specific age groups and populations.

You can find a list of them here:

http://www.nasponline.org/resources/factsheets/socialskills_fs.aspx

Current Research:

- Albrecht, S. F., Mathur, S. R., Jones, R. E., & Alazemi, S. (2015). A School-wide Three-tiered Program of Social Skills Intervention: Results of a Three-year Cohort Study. *Education & Treatment Of Children*, 38(4), 565-586.
- Laugeson, E., Ellingsen, R., Sanderson, J., Tucci, L., & Bates, S. (2014). The ABC’s of Teaching Social Skills to Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder in the Classroom: The UCLA PEERS Program. *Journal Of Autism & Developmental Disorders*, 44(9), 2244-2256. doi:10.1007/s10803-014-2108-8.
- Laugeson, E., Gantman, A., Kapp, S., Orenski, K., & Ellingsen, R. (2015). A Randomized Controlled Trial to Improve Social Skills in Young Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder: The UCLA PEERS Program. *Journal Of Autism & Developmental Disorders*, 45(12), 3978-3989. doi:10.1007/s10803-015-2504-8.
- McMahon, C., & Solomon, M. (2015). Brief Report: Parent-Adolescent Informant Discrepancies of Social Skill Importance and Social Skill Engagement for Higher-Functioning Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Journal Of Autism & Developmental Disorders*, 45(10), 3396-3403. doi:10.1007/s10803-015-2494-6.
- Plavnick, J., Kaid, T., & MacFarland, M. (2015). Effects of a School-Based Social Skills Training Program for Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Intellectual Disability. *Journal Of Autism & Developmental Disorders*, 45(9), 2674-2690. doi:10.1007/s10803-015-2434-5.
- Waugh, C., & Peskin, J. (2015). Improving the Social Skills of Children with HFASD: An Intervention Study. *Journal Of Autism & Developmental Disorders*, 45(9), 2961-2980. doi:10.1007/s10803-015-2459-9

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