

# ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

Behavior Intervention and Support Module:  
Social Skills Instruction

Lou Denti, Ph.D.  
Special Education Program  
California State University, Monterey Bay

## ~ Module 3, Session 6 ~ Lecture Notes

### Introduction

Positive behavior support encourages students and teachers to take more responsibility for their behavior in order to create a personalized and safe learning environment for all students.

Social skills instruction aligns itself with the tenets of positive behavior support. It empowers students by teaching communication and interaction skills that can be used across different settings. Social skills instruction includes viable teaching methods of guided and independent practice to ensure the student learns the specific skill.

The adage “you can give a person a fish or teach them how to fish” applies nicely to social skills instruction. As educators we can tell students what to do and what not to do (the fish) or we can provide social skill instruction, wherein students assume responsibility for their actions (teaching them to fish). Gene Bedley, a wonderful consultant said it best “Responsibility finds a way—irresponsibility finds excuses”.

### Social and Emotional Needs of Adolescents

Adolescence can be time of exploration, joy and excitement. It is a time for a young person to try out different roles and ideas, and to push against the norms of institutions and society. It can also be a time filled with anxiety, confusion, and worry. In fact, when we look at some of the affective characteristics of adolescent students they include:

- Difficulty in choosing from alternatives
- Feelings of inadequacy
- Immaturity
- Inflexibility towards ideas
- Frustration with self
- Inner rage
- High distractibility
- Passive or active aggression

- Secondary emotional problems
- Major cognitive deficits

Students with serious learning problems often exhibit one or more of the characteristics on the list. As a result peers view them as less popular. Teachers view them as less cooperative, less accepting of responsibility, less socially acceptable, and aggressive. Parents think that they are unable to control their impulses, exhibit poor judgment and are less considerate. It becomes readily apparent that social skills training can be a benefit for these students. When adopting or using a social skills program it is important to keep the following in mind:

- A social skills training is not a panacea, a cure or a fix. It requires expert teaching and monitoring.
- Proper training is essential.
- Parents and teachers should be informed of the social skills training offered at your school or in your classroom because of differing belief systems regarding affective education.
- The social skills program should be aligned with the principles of positive behavior support, not just an add-on to your curriculum.
- The program should promote intrinsic motivation and self-control.

### **Social Skills Instruction**

The purpose of social skills instruction is to:

- Learn about personal responsibility
- Develop coping skills
- Develop positive interaction and communication skills
- Build self-esteem and clarify values

A good social skills curriculum teaches students to:

- Stop and think before they act
- Evaluate options in order to make good choices
- Follow through on their choices to change behavior

The objectives of a social skills program are to:

- Increase each student's understanding of other people, especially their thoughts and feelings.
- Increase each student's respect and concern for self and others.
- Understand and accept individual differences, including his/her own unique characteristics.
- Have the ability to solve interpersonal problems by being able to define social problems, to suggest alternative solutions to problems.
- Understand the consequences for all involved of alternative solutions.

## Teaching New Social Behaviors

When teaching new social skills nothing should be taken for granted. Explicit teaching, re-teaching, and monitoring are essential if students are to incorporate new skills into their interpersonal repertoire. Most social skills programs include the following elements:

- Modeling competent use of new behaviors.

Successful teaching includes modeling proper and improper use of the behavior or skill set. The notion here is to model the right—wrong—right way.

- Role-playing or practicing the use of the social skill.

When role-playing make sure there are specific guidelines in order to make the experience as real to life as possible.

- Constructive feedback given to students regarding the adequacy of their performance of the social skill.

Be as clear, specific, and encouraging when providing feedback.

- For generalization and maintenance students are encouraged to use their new behaviors in many different settings.

Support in the classroom, at home, and in peer groups optimizes positive outcomes.

## What Supports Social Skills Instruction?

*Cooperative Learning*—structured cooperative academic groups are ideal vehicles for the application and generalization phase of social skill instruction.

*Cooperative Group Games*—cooperative physical education and social games, and class projects reinforce the social skills being taught.

*Peer Mediation*—peer tutoring, peer counseling and conflict managers are proactive roles students can play to practice interpersonal skills.

*Direct Instruction Groups*—evaluate student proficiency level on academic tasks and develop skill groups to ensure student success. These groups reduce competition and reinforce positive social interaction.

*Self-esteem Activities*—find a program a series of activities or exercises geared toward student empowerment. It can be as simple as a greeting response at the door to a more

elaborate set purchased materials. All students need to feel as if they belong, are competent, and make a difference.

### **Social Skills Program Selection**

When selecting a social skills program be mindful of the population of students you are working with. Some social skills programs are tailored for aggressive very antisocial students while others are developed for students with serious behavior disorders. Think about the following questions and use them as a selection criteria:

- Does it have an organized set of materials, activities, as well as good learning strategies?
- Is it sensitive to cultural differences?
- Is it teacher friendly with an explicit lesson design and teaching approach?
- Does each lesson have a clear beginning, middle, and end in a specified time period i.e., 45 minutes?
- Does it meet the needs of your student population?
- Does it have some kind of ongoing assessment or evaluation component?
- Does the material provide sufficient practice activities?
- Does it clearly promote generalization across persons and places?
- Is there some independent practice or homework?
- Can you incorporate elements of the program into your content area classes?