



## FACT SHEET NUMBER 11

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### DIRECT SOCIAL SKILLS INSTRUCTION

Because disturbances in relatedness and interpersonal/social skills are a fundamental part of autism, these behaviors are not automatically learned by persons with autism as they are by other children. Social relatedness and interpersonal behaviors must be assessed, deficit areas targeted, and interventions planned and implemented. Student social skills improve most rapidly and are maintained over time when intervention is organized and consistent.

#### Step 1: Assessment.

**Observe the student to determine in what social situations s/he has problems. Basic question: What does the student do, or what is it about the student, that is inappropriate to the situation and causes interaction to be misinterpreted or discontinued?**

A. Typically, lists of communicative behaviors are helpful in targeting and objectively describing particular social behaviors. Consider the following social behavioral lists from Wehman, Renzaglia, and Bates (1985), *Functional Living Skills for Moderately and Severely Handicapped Individuals*.

Table 5.1 Verbal social-interpersonal behavior

SOCIAL BEHAVIOR	NATURE OF VERBAL INTERACTION	
	Initiate (examples)	Receive (examples)
1. Greetings	"Hello Tom."	"Hi, how are you?"
2. Praise	"That's a nice shirt you have on."	"Thank you."
3. Positive Information	"I got paid today."	"That's nice."
4. Negative Information	"I lost my glasses."	"I'm sorry to hear that."
5. Neutral Information	"I watched TV last night."	"What did you see?"
6. Negative feedback	"You can't go to the store."	"Why?"
7. Criticism	"You're late for work."	"I'm sorry. I'll be here on time tomorrow."
8. Demands	"Please take off your hat."	"OK, I will."
9. Requests (questions)	"What would you like to drink?"	"I'll have a large 7-Up."

**Description**

1. Latency (time between)	In conversation, latency should be short (1-2 seconds). In hostile situations, longer response latency may help diffuse anger (e.g., count to 10 before responding).
2. Volume	Volume of voice should be neither too loud nor too soft. Volume should also be geared to the situation (e.g., church or public park).
3. Modulation (affect of voice)	Voice quality should fluctuate up and down rather than maintain a constant tone.
4. Fluency (smoothness of)	The verbal delivery of a message should be smooth and not characterized by frequent interruptions (e.g., uh, um).
5. Duration (length of response)	The duration of a response should be sufficiently long to deliver the intended message.

Table 5.2 Nonverbal social-interpersonal skills

**Social Behavior Examples**

1. Eye contact	Looks at person when talking or listening.
2. Facial expression	Smiles when happy or hears good news; frowns when sad or hears sad news
3. Posture	Sits or stands upright; does not slouch
4. Interpersonal distance	Stands an appropriate distance from other person when speaking or listening
5. Physical appearance	Wears clothing that is in style and is appropriate for the occasion. Also has hairstyle that is similar to same age, non-handicapped peers.
6. Hygiene	Maintains neat and clean appearance by bathing regularly, using deodorant, brushing teeth, shaving, and combing hair.
7. Physical contact	Does not touch or hug strangers, shakes someone's hand when being introduced or saying good-bye, refrains from excessive hand shaking, and reserves more intimate physical contact (e.g., embracing) for close friends or relatives.
8. Cooperative work and play	Participates willingly with other people in completing household chores and work assignments. Engages in cooperative and/or competitive social/leisure activities.

9. Social anonymity	Sits or walks within an interpersonal context without drawing undue attention to oneself. Sits in doctor's office waiting room and looks at a magazine. Walks through the park or mall on a Saturday afternoon with other non-handicapped persons.
10. Independent play/leisure	Attends spectator events in the community; plays solitaire game activities in the presence of other people.

In addition, be aware of the following:

- Vocalization: aberrant, "social" intent, cease momentarily in response to sound.
- Use of body: unusual movement, fluidity.
- Social attachments: to people/objects, intensity, context, resistance to removal.
- Presence of peer relationships: selectivity or specificity.
- Presence of relationships with adults: selectivity or specificity.
- Response to social situations: withdrawal, unawareness, pushiness, ability to read listener cues, appropriate social scripts, empathy for listener viewpoint, variety of age appropriate interests.
- Interfering behaviors: nasal hygiene, staring, fidgeting, interrupting, touching, etc.
- Ability to "shift gears" with the conversational flow.
- Appropriate termination of conversations.
- Ability to judge context and select appropriate content: can alter mannerisms and speech to fit conversation with authority figures versus peers, can tell when to back off, etc.
- Communicative intent matches the function: student means it as it came out or can rephrase to match his intent.

**B.** Observe non-disabled students of your student's same age and slightly older. Look for commonly occurring social situations, and try to jot down reoccurring phrases, body postures, gestures, proximity, etc. This will be an ongoing activity, as you will be expanding your student's social repertoire through the years. Watch for situations such as "hanging out", shopping at the mall or snack bar, game playing in p.e., and at recess, walking down the hallway at school, lunchroom interactions, bus behavior, grooming activity in the restroom, indoor recesses during bad weather, going to the dance, etc.

**C.** Write out a social script for each of the social situations you wish to teach.

**D.** Write out "rules lists" as needed for social situations you wish to teach. A rules list is a list of hard and fast rules which the student commits to memory, and which can be carried with him if need be. Examples: Never curse at a teacher or in front of a teacher. Stand one arm length away from other people. When the bell rings, go to your next class. Only touch another person if that person said it's okay to do so.

**E.** Refer to the menu of reinforcers for your student. Be ready to reinforce him for practicing new social behaviors.

**Step 2: Discrete trial instruction.**

**Begin intervention by organizing short periods of the day so that the student practices desirable behaviors in a controlled setting and is reinforced for right behavior.**

**A.** Try one five-minute session each half hour initially. Set up social situations in which he goes through a social script with an adult. Reinforce him for participating in the script, whether or not you had to prompt him. Model the posturing, gestures, facial expressions, pauses, etc., and require the student to imitate.

**B.** After the student appears to have the social script memorized, tell him you will "mess it up" a little. Most students prefer to be warned that there will be a change. This may necessitate a rule which states that it's okay that some social situations change, and he must remain calm when that happens. Help the student work through new responses (judgment), or assist by feeding him the new response and discussing it afterwards.

**C.** Select one or two peers and teach them how to follow a social script. Introduce them to the training sessions. Have the peers go through the script while your student watches, then have your student go through the script with each of the peers. This procedure is essentially the same as a joint action routine or old fashioned role playing. The students may enjoy being videotaped so that they can watch themselves act right socially.

**Step 3: Natural setting**

**Normal social behaviors must occur in the environments in which the child lives and interacts. The student with autism will learn most rapidly and maintain behaviors better when instruction is moved into the locations in which they naturally occur.**

**A.** When the student appears to be comfortable using a social script within the discrete training session, begin to move the group out of the classroom and practice the script in the place it will likely happen. Example: For "hanging out" scripts, go out into the student commons where the kids hang out after lunch. Initially, go there to practice when no one else is there.

**B.** The next step is to have established peers practice with your student in the natural environment during time periods when other peers are present. You will want to monitor the interactions from a distance to determine where the scripts break down.

**C.** Return to the last successful level of interactions if the situation has broken down. Return to the deserted location or to the classroom to practice.

1. Go back to a written script, and cue your student to keep to it.
2. Reinforce for appropriately going through the script.
3. Return to the natural situation with adult in attendance. If this is embarrassing to your student, tell him he has a choice: you will leave the area if he behaves socially appropriately.
4. Again return to the natural situation at the natural time. Reinforce for following the script appropriately and for making judgments about unexpected changes.

**D.** Recheck social scripts periodically. Try not to wait until you hear negative reports of your student's behavior from peers or other adults. Every social script needs to be updated, adjusted, or thrown out as the circumstances indicate. New scripts must be directly instructed to replace old discarded scripts.

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