



PROJECT ACCESS FACT SHEET #18



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NO TIME TO TEACH SOCIAL SKILLS? THINK AGAIN

Dear Project ACCESS,

I have a secondary level student with high functioning autism. Our team knows it is crucial to teach social skills, but we can't find the time during our busy school day. Any suggestion?

*Sincerely,
 Harried in Missouri*

Dear Harried,

We know what you mean—it is hard to find time to provide social skill training during the school day. Between a busy class schedule and therapies, it is easy to feel like there is no time left. You can squeeze in the time, though. Luckily, it is better to teach social skills in context. In fact, this is one area that is better taught in the natural setting. The key is to think of already existing opportunities that can be used to teach and/or support social skill development for this student. Here are a few suggestions:

Think Small

Small group settings are ideal set-tings for teaching students essential social skills, like initiating and negotiating with peers, sharing, using appropriate language, greeting people, and being polite. The school has a plethora of small group settings that can be capitalized upon. Is your student receiving therapy in a small group setting? If so, ask the therapist to embed social skill activities in the therapeutic sessions. For example, maintaining a conversational topic is one practical activity that can be taught and practiced in speech therapy. Many schools offer a special class period when a teacher supports a small group of students. Sometimes these groups focus on special topics, but often there are small cooperative groups at work or a few groups engaged in board games. Consider the social opportunities in this setting! If you manage to squeeze a few minutes of social skill teaching time, think of the practice that could take place. Similarly, many schools have, math, computers) or social club meetings (e.g., Nascar racing, baseball, chess, or community service) for students. Does your student have a special interest area where he or she shines and has friends with similar interests? Take advantage of these built-in social opportunities during the course of your school day to teach social skills. Social success, especially to one who has encountered some failure, is invaluable.

Is your student in a study hall or study skills class? If so, consider using a portion of this time to teach social skills. Since some schools are going with a block schedule, this certainly could afford some concentrated time to devote to social skills. This doesn't have to be one-on-one instruction. If you can find several students in a study skills class who also need social skills assistance (they don't all have to have Asperger's syndrome or high functioning autism), think about providing a small group session.

Recruit Assistants' Support

Are there any class settings where there is already support for the student? If so, have your helper try teaching some social skills to the student. In class-within-a-class settings, assistants can prompt students to greet others, wait their turns, and use setting-appropriate language. At the very least, your helper should be helping the student practice skills previously learned. Your school lunchroom is probably like most Missouri school lunchrooms—crowded with little time for more than just eating. Yet, somehow, kids manage to get a lot of socializing accomplished during this time. If you can recruit some peer or assistant support, this is a great time to practice social skills. Think of the socialization that takes place while you eat with colleagues or friends. Someone to cue or take on a more direct role would be just the ticket—lunch ticket, that is!

Planning Is Important

As you can see there is time to teach and support social skill development. Capitalizing on any of these opportunities is often only a matter of pulling your team together and determining who will teach or support the social skills. Planning is important—if not planned, social skill training may not happen. Spend some time thinking about what is really important in your student's life. Is it learning content area? Although important, I suspect you'll agree it is more important to help him make friends, be happy, become independent, and employed. These goals have less chance of becoming a reality if we don't address social skills.

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