

Getting More From Social Skills

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Every teacher has had the experience of teaching a student who exhibits difficult behaviors; the kind of behaviors that make it hard for the teacher to teach and hard for the student to learn. One popular intervention has been to give the student social skills training. Teaching students the social skills they lack is a natural choice for teachers because it is similar to how they teach academic skills. And yet, despite the natural fit, social skills training has not always been an effective intervention. Researchers have studied social skills training at every level of intervention. They have studied it as a Tier 1 class-wide or school-wide intervention, as a Tier 2 small group intervention, and as a Tier 3 individualized intensive intervention. At every level, the research has produced mixed and often unimpressive results (Gresham, 1998; Gresham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001). These results bring up an important question, “Should teachers and related service providers continue to use social skills training to address the problem behavior of students?” The remainder of this article will address this question. First, social skills will be defined along with the variety of problems that typical social skills programs suffer from. Second, a review of some of the research literature on Tier 2 social skills training will be provided. Finally, recommendations for improving social skills training interventions will be discussed.

Social Skills Training

Social skills are those behaviors that predict an individual's access to reinforcing social contingencies such as popularity, peer acceptance, and affirming feedback from others (Caldarella & Merrell, 1997). So, social skills training is any instruction that promotes the social skills of a target individual or group helping them better access those reinforcers. The typical approach is to buy a social skills curriculum (there are literally thousands of them available on the market and can cost between \$10 and \$2,000), and teach the curriculum starting with lesson one and progressing sequentially through each. This approach is simple and straightforward but it suffers from some serious flaws that compromise its effectiveness. First of all, a prepackaged curriculum may or may not address the specific deficits of the individual or group. If the curriculum does not address the deficits of interest, educators will spend precious time and resources teaching things students don't need to know. Moreover, even if the curriculum does address those deficits, it likely also addresses additional skills that students have already mastered, wasting time and money on unnecessary instruction. A related problem is that social skills curricula typically do not include tools for assessing what skills students are lacking. This is a major draw back because even if educators acknowledge that they may not need to teach every skill in a curriculum, they are still at a loss for deciding which skills to teach.

Gresham et al., (2001) point out an additional major problem with typical social skills curricula. Namely, they do not address the *type* of deficit. Gresham argues that students struggle to demonstrate appropriate social behavior because of an: (a) acquisition deficit, (b) performance deficit, or (c) fluency deficit. An

acquisition deficit exists when students cannot perform a certain skill because they have not yet learned the skill. For example, we do not expect kindergarten students to do algebra because they have not yet learned it. The same is true of social skills. Some students simply have not acquired certain skills important to function in school.

A performance deficit exists when students have learned the desired skill and can perform the skill but choose not to because they can more efficiently or effectively acquire desired reinforcement by engaging in problem behavior. For example, a student can be taught to take turns on the computer, however he may find that if he just pushes other students away from the computer, he gets more computer time in a more efficient manner. So, he is more likely to push a student than take turns. To correct a performance deficit, additional motivation for engaging in the appropriate behavior and reduced motivation to engage in competing behaviors is necessary.

Finally, a fluency deficit exists when a student has learned a target skill and can demonstrate the skill, but does not use the skill on a regular, or frequent enough basis. For example, a student may be taught how to start a conversation with other students. That student may be able perform the skill in a role-play, but must think about each step, resulting in less production, and reduced use in real world environments where the skill is needed. To correct this deficit, adequate support must be provided for students to successfully demonstrate the skill in natural environments, including a slow removal of supports until they can perform the skill fluently in the natural environment.

Understanding why a student struggles to perform a desired skill before teaching the skill is important to the success of any social skills training. Without this understanding, time and energy will likely be expended trying to treat the wrong type of deficit.

One final problem with many social skills curricula is that they fail to program for generalization (McIntosh & MacKay; 2008). Generalization occurs when a student learns a new skill and then performs that skill over time, in new settings that are different from the training setting, and in the presence of new people that were not involved in the training. McIntosh and MacKay indicate that the failure to achieve generalization is often due to insufficient practice opportunities, unrealistic training settings or scenarios, and neglecting to address student motivation to use newly trained skills.

Although the significant drawbacks of typical social skills interventions should give us pause, it does not necessarily mean that social skills training is a lost cause. The following section of this article focuses on a review of some of the best available evidence on Tier 2 social skills training, indicating when it can be effective. Tier 2 social skills training is particularly critical because it is (a) the most commonly used tier of social skills support, (b) it gives teachers an opportunity to efficiently prevent the type of serious problem behavior that interferes with learning, and (c) it prepares students who are not responsive to Tier 1 interventions to perform better in the future without the need for extensive additional supports.

A Review of the Research

The current article provides a systematic review of the research literature on the use of Tier 2 social skills training. Tier 2 refers both to the target population and to the characteristics of the intervention. First, Tier 2 interventions are primarily used with students who do not respond to Tier 1, school-wide (Universal) interventions. If Tier 1 supports are delivered effectively, this group typically makes up between 15% and 20% of the population. Characteristics of Tier 2 intervention include (a) delivery in small groups, (b) high availability, (c) low cost in terms of time and energy, and (d) sustainable with up to 20% of the school population.

A search of four academic search engines (i.e., Academic Search Premier, ERIC, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection and PsycINFO), and a preliminary review of articles based on specific inclusion criteria resulted in identifying seven studies that reported the effects of Tier 2 social skills training. These studies were analyzed for methodological quality and for the strength of the intervention effect in order to identify the best available evidence related to Tier 2 social skills. This analysis led to some helpful conclusions and recommendations that can guide how we implement supports. Of the seven studies that met the criteria for review, four of them had good methodological quality and convincing effects (Lane et al., 2003; Marchant et al., 2007; Miller, Fenty, Scott, & Park, 2011; Wu, Lo, Feng, & Lo, 2010).

One study conducted by Lane et al., (2003) included seven participants in grades 2nd through 4th and looked at the effects of teaching social skills on disruptive behavior, academic engaged time, and negative social interactions. The researchers used the Social Skills Intervention Guide curriculum and included one socially

competent peer for each socially at-risk participant. The instruction was delivered in 30min sessions for 20 total sessions.

A second study conducted by Marchant et al. (2007) included a total of three participants. One participant was in 1st grade and two in 5th grade. Unlike the other three studies, this study examined the effect of social skills instruction on internalizing problem behavior (e.g., isolation, social avoidance, etc.). It used lessons from the Boys Town Skill Streaming curriculum but did not report the frequency or duration of instruction. Each socially at-risk participant was initially matched with a socially competent peer and later with a socially competent adult. The researchers also used a “Good Behavior Card” reward system in which the participants received reinforcement for engaging in the target behavior.

A third study was conducted by Miller et al., (2011) and included three participants in 2nd grade. The researchers in this study used the Boys Town Skill Streaming curriculum and taught 10min lessons in conjunction with regularly scheduled reading groups. These groups included both socially at-risk and socially competent students. The participants also used a self-monitoring card tied to reinforcement for appropriate behavior. The researchers measured the effect of social skills instruction on on-task behavior.

Finally, the fourth study conducted by Wu et al., (2010) included two Taiwanese participants in 3rd grade. The researchers used a curriculum that they developed to deliver social skills instruction and taught a series of 18 forty-minute lessons. They measured the effect of this instruction on conflict resolution,

cooperation, and on-task behavior. The intervention also included a feedback and reinforcement system for encouraging appropriate behavior.

Results

The first thing noted in these studies was that three of the four used different social skills curricula and yet each intervention had a meaningful effect on student outcomes. This may suggest that the specific curriculum is less important than other factors in terms of effectively teaching social skills. In fact, one study used a curriculum that was developed by the researchers and was not commercially available. Furthermore, in each study the researchers modified the curriculum to fit the population they were working with.

The second important result is that each of the four studies utilized an effective teaching cycle when delivering the social skills instruction. This cycle included (a) explaining and demonstrating the skill, (b) having the student practice the skill with support, (c) fading the support while providing feedback, and (d) having the student use the skill in the setting where it will be needed.

A third finding is that three of the four interventions used behavior management strategies in addition to the social skills training. More specifically, these studies included a way to reinforce students for properly demonstrating the newly trained skills. Three of the studies (Marchant et al., 2007; Miller et al., 2011; Wu et al., 2010) also included strategies for decreasing competing problem behaviors and one study (Miller et al., 2011) included a way to help students monitor their own behavior.

Finally, all of the studies used a data collection system to guide decisions about the social skills training. The researchers collected data on what the target behavior looked like (e.g., recorded how often it happened during a 30min observation) before they began the social skills training. Then they tracked the behavior to determine what effect the intervention had on the behavior.

Implications for Practice

In light of the results of these studies and the shortcomings of social skills training discussed previously, the following recommendations can be suggested. First, educators should conduct some type of assessment to determine what specific skills the student or group needs. There are several social skills assessment tools available, both commercially and at no cost (e.g., Social Behavior Assessment Inventory, Social Skills Rating System, Walker-McConnell Scale of Social Competence and School Adjustment, Social Skills Questionnaire, etc.). Conducting an assessment ensures that time and resources are not wasted on lessons and materials that are not necessary. Additionally, it is helpful to determine the type of deficit (i.e., skill, performance, or fluency) that the student or group is experiencing so that the intervention matches the specific needs of the students. This can be done by conducting an informal assessment of the students' ability, willingness, and fluency to perform target skills in various settings (e.g., with the teacher, with other students, on the playground etc.). If the students are experiencing an acquisition deficit, then direct instruction is appropriate. If it is a performance deficit then motivational strategies including reinforcement and extinction strategies are

warranted. Finally, if it is a fluency deficit, supported successful practice should be the focus.

Second, if a commercially available curriculum is used, some adjustments are usually necessary to have the maximal positive impact. Educators may need to reorder the sequence of the lessons, leave some lessons out, or create lessons to address specific needs. Additionally, changes may need to be made so that the lessons conform to effective instructional practices (e.g., adding scaffolded practice opportunities to allow students to develop fluency with the skill). Other changes may be warranted based on the educator's professional judgment.

Third, when selecting a social skills curriculum, check to see if it follows an effective teaching cycle. If it does not, you may be able to make the necessary modifications. This can be done by simply taking the skill from a particular lesson and ensuring that the instruction on that skill is delivered following an "I do", "We do", "You do" pattern. More specifically, you can select a skill from a curriculum and provide clear examples and non-examples of the skill, have the students practice the skill with layered support until they are fluent with the skill, and finally allow the students to practice on their own in the natural environment until they have mastered the skill. Furthermore, school staff may be able to develop their own lessons based on assessment following this effective teaching cycle. Doing so would allow a much closer match between instruction and student need, but may also increase staff member time investment.

Fourth, when educators are planning to implement a social skills training intervention, it is essential to build in ways of encouraging students to use the

appropriate behavior and avoid the problem behavior. Reinforcement systems can be very helpful along with providing corrective feedback for behavioral errors. A reinforcement system could include tokens for appropriately demonstrating the skill, group rewards for meeting a performance criterion, or social acknowledgement for improved behavior. Corrections should be instructive, that is they should involve a review of the skill and opportunities to practice along with any reductive consequences.

Finally, before implementing social skills intervention, it is important to identify the specific behaviors that will be addressed, and regularly measure the behavior in some meaningful way to determine if the intervention is having the desired effect. This is especially important given the mixed results that social skills training has demonstrated in the past. Keeping data allows you to know if you are being effective and to make adjustments when needed.

Conclusion

Social skills training programs have suffered from some troublesome drawbacks that have compromised their effectiveness. However, results of the current review indicate that educators can do several things to improve outcomes: (a) assess the specific deficiencies that students have prior to delivering instruction and tailor instruction to those deficiencies, (b) teach skills using an effective teaching cycle including teaching in the location and with the people that are relevant to the skill, (c) teach skills that are most relevant to the student despite the curriculum order, (d) include additional behavior management strategies to improve motivation and accountability, and (e) keep and regularly use data to guide

decision making about how to proceed with the social skills training. These recommendations represent some of the best available evidence to provide the best educational experience for students who struggle with social behavior challenges.

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