

Module 11: Social Skills

1.1 This module will be exploring social skills for students who have Language Disorder and related difficulties.

1.2 Social skills are a set of abilities and behaviours that support appropriate and reciprocal interaction and communication with others. Making new friends, having a conversation, understanding another's perspective and managing conflict are all examples of specific social skills which are essential for an individual to adapt and cope in their environment.

A number of factors can influence the development of a child's social skills, including the reinforcement and teaching they receive from others, their environment and the people around them, and the cultural context in which they live. Other factors which can also impact on social skills development include personality variables, language abilities and cognition.

1.3 Social skills are culturally specific, learned over time and occur as part of a developmental learning process. So what do social skills look like at different ages?

1.3.1 In the pre-school years from the ages of 3 to 5, children start to initiate interactions and move from parallel play to cooperative play. Children at this age start to work together on a common activity and enjoy simple group games.

1.3.2 In early primary school, children's coordinated pretend play grows in complexity, and rule-based competitive games are introduced. At this age, children should start to develop a knowledge of "fair play" and turn taking. Empathy and negotiation skills also begin to emerge.

1.3.3 In upper primary school, children start to make social comparisons and begin to consider social values. "Best friendships" emerge and conversational skills become more important to peer relationships. Children at this age start to recognise that another's perspective may be different from their own, and are able to solve problems and resolve conflicts with less adult intervention. This is also the age where social exclusion and bullying can start to emerge.

1.3.4 As children move into adolescence, they seek more independence and responsibility. Adolescents are more likely to seek out new experiences and engage in more risk-taking behaviour. They start developing a stronger sense of identity and an individual set of values and morals. Increased conflict between family and peers is more likely. Although adolescents become better at reading and processing other people's emotions as they get older, they can sometimes misread facial expressions or show self-consciousness in their body language. They may also find it hard to understand the effects of their behaviour and comments on other people. Over time, older adolescents develop increased abstract thinking and social reasoning skills.

1.3.5 ACTIVITY

So much of our social interactions revolve around understanding and using language. To get an idea as to how social language or "pragmatics" contributes to language development, we can review the following model.

Consider the sentence, “Richard made lasagne for dinner”. Can you match the following pre-requisite language skills with their corresponding components?

For more information regarding the form, content and use of language, please see the handout at the end of the module Components of Language.

2.1 The previous activity highlighted the importance of pragmatics, or social language, as a key component of communication. With social interactions often relying on effective communication to be positive and successful, it follows that children with language disorder often experience difficulties with social skills (Botting & Conti-Ramsden, 2000; Evans, 1996).

There are a broad range of social skills difficulties which may be demonstrated by children with language disorder. Poor language skills can act as a major barrier to establishing long-term peer relationships, and overall, children with language disorder have fewer friends and are less satisfied with peer relationships compared to their classmates (Fujiki et al., 1996; Durkin & Conti-Ramsden, 2007). They are twice as likely to be ignored by their peers, and may prefer to speak to adults instead of children their own age (Fujiki, Brinton, & Todd, 1996; Rice, Sell, & Hadley, 1991).

2.2 Social skill difficulties are not unique to children with language disorders however, and occur frequently with a range of other developmental disorders. These include, but are not limited to: Autism Spectrum Disorders, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorders, Social (Pragmatic) Communication Disorder and Intellectual Disabilities. The various underlying disorders may predispose students to specific areas of difficulty within the social domain. For example, students with autism spectrum disorders are more likely to demonstrate difficulties with social reciprocity, while a student with ADHD may demonstrate impulsive social behaviours and talk over their peers. Students with social communication disorder will present with difficulties across a wide range of social skills.

Environmental risk factors such as abuse and neglect can also increase the likelihood of social skills difficulties.

2.3 Regardless of the cause, poor social skills can lead to a range of negative effects in the long-term such as loneliness, anxiety, low self-esteem and poor physical health. Children with social skills difficulties are also at an increased risk of bullying and peer pressure. Somewhat of a ‘snowball effect’ can be seen in that students with impaired social skills who have difficulty initiating and participating in social interactions have less opportunity to practice their social skills. With intervention in childhood however, these long-term effects can be reduced. Strategies for social skills intervention will be explored later in the module.

3.1 So far, we’ve talked about what social skills are, how they differ across age ranges, and co-morbidities associated with social skills difficulties. In the classroom though, how might a student with social skills difficulties present?

3.2 It has long been recognised that social skills play a pivotal role in the classroom and can impact upon students’ academic achievements. A lack of social skills can be misinterpreted as deliberate and intentional behaviour, and students risk being labelled as “distracted”, “obstructive” or “disruptive”.

As with many conditions, students with social skills difficulties will have individual presentations. Move your mouse around the screen to explore the potential characteristics of a student with social skills difficulties.

Students with social skills deficits may commonly present in the classroom as:

Inattentive

Unprepared for class/unorganised
Aggressive towards classmates and teachers
Unable to cooperate in group situations
Frequent 'challenging' behaviours
Lack of confidence to engage
Isolated from peers

3.3 If you suspect a student has social skills difficulties, they may require further assessment and intervention. This may be provided by professionals either internal or external to the school setting. Professionals who can assist in assessing and providing social skills training to students include:

Speech- Language Pathologist
Occupational Therapist
Psychologist or Guidance Counsellor

3.4 When referred to services specialising in the assessment and intervention of social skills, both formal assessments and informal methods of assessment may be used. Formal assessments are those assessments which are evidence-based and usually have standardised measures. Informal assessments are those assessments not derived from standardised data but still clinically based, and may include student observations, self-report questionnaires, or interviews with teachers, parents and the student themselves.

A combination of informal and formal assessments can help to identify which areas of social skills the student is having most difficulty with. However, it is important to note that students do not require a formal diagnosis or need to meet a set criteria in order to benefit from social skills intervention. If any student presents with social skills difficulties, there are a number of strategies and approaches that can be implemented by teachers, teacher aides or parents to support the student in their areas of difficulty.

4.1 In this section of the module, we will explore whole classroom strategies which may support students with social skills difficulties. These strategies will not only benefit those students with poor social skills but can help promote the social skills and behaviour of the entire class. Work through the following page to discover strategies which may be implemented on a whole-class level to assist students with social skills difficulties.

4.2 Teacher-student interaction

Supportive teacher-student relationships play an important role in a healthy classroom environment. They help students to form a positive connection to school and improve their desired academic and social-emotional outcomes. When students feel unconnected in their classroom environment, or alienated from peers and teachers, they are at a higher risk of developing anti-social behaviour and experiencing greater gaps in their social skills development.

Ways you can form positive teacher-student interaction may include:

Interact with students in a responsive and respectful manner
Offer students help in the classroom (e.g. answer questions in a timely manner, offer appropriate levels of support)

Promote students to reflect on their thinking and learning skills
Demonstrate interest in individual students (e.g. their interests, background, strengths)

Promote student independence
Avoid showing irritability towards students

Positive teacher-student interaction can lead to healthy outcomes of:

Increased engagement in class
Increased student self-confidence

Increased likelihood of peer acceptance of student
Increased independence and self-directed learning

4.3 Establish clear routines

Students who have difficulties with their social skills will benefit from clear routines in the classroom, to reduce the amount they need to rely on their social skills to follow along and participate in classroom activities. Consider using the following strategies in the classroom: Provide students with a daily agenda or timetable during the school day and encourage them to refer to it regularly. Consider implementing a larger class schedule which all students can refer to, or alternatively provide individual students with a copy that they can place on their desk.

Provide students with organizers - graphic organizers, checklists, subtitles, outlines etc. that assist with written work and assignments.

Model the steps or sequences of a process to show students what the finished product should look like.

Give students as much warning as possible for changes in routine, this may be verbally, visually or both.

Please see the SALDA Handout Visual Schedules and Visual Supports for ideas on how these may be implemented in the classroom to establish routines.

4.3.3 Teach asking for help

Talk to the whole class about the importance of asking and seeking help. Learning to ask for help in the early years prepares students, as they get older, to self-advocate and not rely on others to anticipate their needs. Asking for help is also an important part of building workable and meaningful relationships with peers. Develop routines when asking for help, such as having students raise their hand.

Ask three then me - have students ask 3 of their peers for support before seeking support from the teacher. This is beneficial as sometimes students have an alternative way to explain new concepts from the teacher.

4.3.4 Give specific praise

Give specific verbal praise to students when they demonstrate good social skills in the classroom (e.g. "XX, I like the way you waited patiently with your hand up")

Please see the SALDA Handout Providing Effective Praise for ideas on how to use praise to support students in the classroom.

4.3.5 Classroom Layout

Consider your position in the classroom in relation to students who may need extra support. If possible, place those students needing help near the front of the room or towards your desk so that they can easily access support if they need to.

4.3.6 "Stop, Think, Do"

Consider implementing a framework such as, "Stop, Think, Do". This framework teaches students different social skills at different stages. For example, students develop self-control, perceptual and communication skills primarily at the "STOP" stage. They then progress to cognitive problem-solving skills at the "THINK" stage, and finally develop behavioural skills at the "DO" stage.

Further information about the program can be found at the listed website.

4.3.7 Teach Being Assertive

For students with social skills difficulties, a lack of assertiveness can unfortunately lead to increased risk of peer pressure and victimisation or bullying by other students.

Support students how to be assertive and to be independent decision makers by encouraging them to learn and use the language of assertiveness. Use "I feel messages" such as "I think... I feel... I want..."

It may also be beneficial to teach students statements of personal reference and personal meaning and e.g. "This is the way I see it..." "In my opinion..." "This is how I feel..." "This is what it means to me..."

Support students to learn how to say no to unreasonable requests.

4.3.8 ACTIVITY

Now that we have explored some strategies that can be used in the classroom to support social skills development, let's look at the following example:

Jenny is a new student, and has joined the class halfway through the school year. She sits by herself every lunchtime, and rarely interacts with other students. Her mother has told you that Jenny is very shy, and took a long time to make friends in her previous school.

How could you help support Jenny's social skills as part of the whole class? Select all options which may be effective:

When the class is completing group work, pair Jenny with students who share similar interests to allow for conversation starters [yes]

Take the time to get to know Jenny, including her interests, strengths and background (yes)

Have the class pair up with someone they don't know well and find out three interesting things about them [yes]

Tell Jenny to be more outgoing [no]

Link Jenny up with information about breaktime clubs at school that she may be interested in becoming involved with and create friendships through shared interests (e.g. foreign language clubs, gardening clubs, technology clubs, etc.) [yes]

Tell students that if they break the classroom rules, they must sit with Jenny at lunch time [no]

5.1 We have seen how general classroom adjustments and whole class strategies can be used to support the development of appropriate social behaviours in the school environment. However, for some students, individual or small group intervention can be an effective way to target specific social skills.

Work through the following page to discover strategies which may be implemented with small groups or in a one-on-one setting to assist students with social skills difficulties.

5.2 Direct Teaching

5.2.1 Direct teaching is one of the most commonly used forms of social skills training (Asher, 1985), and is as effective form of intervention for school-aged children (Schneider et al, 2012).

Direct teaching or explicit instruction simply means working with an individual or small groups of students to directly target a specific skill or strategy.

5.2.2 From a social skills perspective, explicit instruction can be a useful strategy to explain and teach a broad range of social, communication and behavioural skills. But let's look at non-verbal communication as an example. Social skills can be divided into verbal and non-verbal components, and for many students with Language Disorder, inappropriate use or interpretation of non-verbal language can impact significantly on their communicative abilities.

5.2.3 ACTIVITY: Let's explore non-verbal language a little further. Can you identify the verbal and non-verbal social skills in this picture?

5.2.4 So how can we use direct teaching to encourage the development of non-verbal social skills? Consider the following scenario:

Johnny is in prep and has trouble understanding and respecting boundaries and personal space. He frequently hugs and touches his classmates during floortime, and greets both adults and children by giving them a kiss. As a result, his classmates have started to refuse to sit next to Johnny, and avoid greeting him when he arrives at school.

Johnny's teacher could use explicit instruction to support the development of Johnny's non-verbal social communication skills. Some examples of how this could be used include: Show Johnny that there are different rules for how close you can sit or stand to people, and support him to fill out a "space control" circle.

Explain that there are different types of touch, and that these may be used with different people and in different situations. Johnny could be asked to consider which levels of touch would be appropriate with different people, including in specific contexts such as during floortime or when greeting his classmates.

The completed visuals could then be referred to and discussed at the start of the school day and prior to floortime activities for the next few weeks, with verbal praise provided in response to appropriate non-verbal behaviour. The eventual goal would be for Johnny to demonstrate the target non-verbal behaviours, gradually fading out the need for visual reminders or further instruction.

5.2.5 Direct teaching could also be used to support the development of students' social-emotional skills. Students with impaired social skills often have difficulty identifying emotions and understanding emotional language, which can lead them to misinterpret social cues and respond inappropriately in conversation.

5.2.6 **ACTIVITY:** For younger students, identifying emotions in pictures is a fun activity that targets social-emotional skills and understanding non-verbal cues such as facial expressions. How are you at identifying emotions? Match up the emotions listed below with their corresponding pictures

5.2.7 For an example of how direct teaching could be used in the high school setting, consider the following scenario:

Jenny is a Year 9 student. She has difficulty identifying emotions and understanding emotional language. This is affecting the quality and complexity of her written work in the classroom, as she is only confident in using broad emotional vocabulary such as 'happy, sad, angry'. She has difficulty accurately using more specific and complex emotional vocabulary terms such as 'ecstatic, livid, disappointed'.

Jenny's teacher has decided to support this area through direct teaching and explicit instruction of emotional vocabulary. She includes Jenny and another student in her classroom who is having similar difficulties. Some examples of how Jenny's teacher could support this area include:

Explicitly teach the definitions of a range of emotional vocabulary. Jenny and the other student could be supported to find related terms in a dictionary, thesaurus, or online, and collate these into a glossary of emotional vocabulary, grouped into broad emotions.

Once the glossary has been completed, assist the two students to rank these in order of 'least strong' to 'most strong' to create a 'feelings gradient'. For example, the feelings gradient of the emotion 'anger' might look like the following: irritated, annoyed, cross, mad, seething, outraged, furious. Regularly refer the students back to the glossary of emotion vocabulary to support their ordering of the terms.

Provide the students with a range of scenarios and ask them to identify the most appropriate emotion to describe how the characters are feeling. For example, 'The girl was sewing and the thread slipped out of the eye of the needle. How does she feel?' Give specific feedback on their

responses, such as 'You're right, she might feel irritated. Irritated is at the bottom of the 'anger' gradient, which means it refers to a very small amount of anger. Thread slipping out of a needle is a small issue that is easily fixed, so irritated is a good choice to describe how the girl might be feeling.'

5.3 Social scripts

Social skills training can also take the form of social scripting. This involves using a written or verbal script for a specific social situation, which is gradually faded back until the student no longer requires prompts or supports in that setting. Click on the script image at the bottom of the page to see an example of a social script.

5.3.1 Social scripts are particularly useful in encouraging students to initiate interactions and establish peer relationships. When implementing a social script, it may be useful to consider: What is your target activity and learning objective? Would you like the student to be able to start a conversation with their peers during lunch time? Or interact with others during constructive play?

What do typically developing children say and do during the target activity? It may be useful to note comments they make, how they initiate conversations, questions they ask, and topics of conversation to assist you in writing a natural-sounding and relevant script.

What format will the script take? The script can be in audiotaped, written, pictured, video, or verbal form, depending on the student's learning style and literacy level.

How will you teach the script? The student will need to be able to repeat the visual script sentences or phrases fluently, and overly complex scripts may be difficult for the student to remember.

How will you implement the script? The student will need multiple opportunities to use the script during the target activity. Scripts may be written or pictured on cards or on paper to help cue the student to use each phrase.

How will you fade the script? If possible, the script should be faded over time. This can be done over several steps, removing the script a piece at a time. Script fading may take place rapidly or over several weeks, depending on the student's skills.

5.4 Social stories

Social stories are another way in which a student's social skills can be directly targeted. A social story is a short story written to meaningfully support students' understanding of a situation, skill or concept. The goal of a social story is to describe, rather than direct a student, by using positive and reassuring language to encourage a positive change in behaviour.

For example, consider the following scenario:

Jimmy is in year 3 and has trouble acting assertively towards his peers. His peers often take items off him when he is playing with them, leading Jimmy to react via 'meltdowns'. His peers find this amusing and Jimmy is removed from the situation to calm down.

Jimmy's therapist developed the following social story to teach him about being assertive and the best way to behave when his peers interrupt his play.

At school, we need to let our friends know when we don't like something they do so that we can keep playing and not get upset.

Sometimes I don't like it when my friends take what I am playing with, without asking first.

I do not cry or yell at my friend when they take something I am playing with.

I let my friend know how I feel by saying, "I do not like it when you take something without asking".

I ask my friend if I can have can have what I was playing with back.
If my friend does not give it back, I can ask my teacher for help by saying what has happened.
For more information on social stories such as how to write one and when to use one, please see the SALDA Handout attached at the end of the module, Social Stories.

5.4 Peer mediated intervention

Peer mediated intervention is a treatment approach in which peers directly support a student's social skill development. Roles played by peers may include modelling appropriate behaviour, implementing prompting procedures, and reinforcing target behaviours.

One way in which peer modelling can be used is in supporting the development of reciprocal friendships. To achieve reciprocal relationships, it is essential to be able to hold a back-and-forth conversation, a skill which can be extremely challenging for a student with Language Disorder. To explore how a peer-mediated approach could be used to support the development of conversation skills, let's take a look at the following scenario: Jenny is a grade 2 student who has a severe language disorder. Although she tries to engage conversations with her classmates, she often gets confused and provides inappropriate or irrelevant responses. Take a look at a conversation between Jenny and her classmate Jimmy during break time (pics).

How could you use Jimmy to support Jenny during a conversation?

Include Jimmy in Jenny's social skills groups: This will allow Jimmy to model appropriate conversation skills and social language for Jenny.

Role play: Using hypothetical social scenarios, ask Jimmy and Jenny to provide appropriate responses to questions and comments.

Increase peer awareness: Ensure Jimmy has an understanding of Jenny's language difficulties, and is aware that Jenny may respond or react differently in a conversation.

Direct peer training: Show Jimmy how to manage communication breakdowns when needed by repeating or rewording questions, or modifying her language so that Jenny is better able to understand.

Think-Pair-Share: Allow Jimmy and Jenny to discuss appropriate responses to a social question or scenario together before sharing them with the group (<https://salda.org.au/publications/think-pair-share/salda-think-pair-share-2/>).

5.5 Generalisation

One of the biggest challenges in social skills intervention in individual or small group settings is encouraging generalisation or skill transfer. Often, students may be able to model appropriate and effective social skills within a controlled, adult-mediated setting, but have difficulty applying these skills across different situations and contexts. Some ideas for encouraging generalisation include:

Set

Allow students to practice social skills in a variety of settings.

At this stage of the training I invite you to take a minute to reflect, or, have a discussion with a colleague if you're viewing this in a group. Consider the content covered so far. How has your understanding of social skills now changed? Could you identify students struggling with social skills at school?

When you're ready to move on click the next button.

We hope that you now have a greater understanding of insert learning objectives here.

Your feedback on this training would be greatly appreciated. Please click the survey link to complete a short anonymous survey.