

INTRODUCTION

A Brief Overview of the Book

The impetus to write this book came from working with students with Asperger Syndrome and related pervasive developmental disorders. Inherent in these disorders is a profound difficulty with social interaction despite normal and sometimes superior intellectual ability. Each time a student with whom I was working experienced a problem with social interaction, I set out to create an explicit lesson to help the student know what to do and say to avoid the social difficulty.

After writing over 70 skill lessons I began to apply these strategies in my new job as director of social skills training for special education students in the Millburn School District in New Jersey. I realized that these skill steps were not just helpful to students with pervasive developmental disorders like Asperger Syndrome, but to any student who was having difficulty knowing what to do and say in social situations. Similarly, I urge other professionals to worry less about diagnostic issues and more about what social skills difficulties their students are encountering and then set out to implement skills training in the deficient areas. My philosophy about skills training is explained below along with a brief description of the organization of the book.

All social interaction and social problems involve at least two people. Social difficulties can be defined as both a skill deficit for the student with a social disability and a problem of acceptance of that student by his or her peers. Thus, intervention must focus on teaching skills to both the student with a disability and typical peers. All too often we strive to “fix” the child with the disability and virtually overlook the “typical” peers who may be ignoring, teasing or rejecting the child. Moreover, including typical peers as a focus for intervention may yield results much sooner, as typical peers may learn to be understanding of the child with a disability more quickly than the child with a disability can learn to interact more appropriately with peers.

Consistent with this view, I believe effective social skills training for individuals with Asperger Syndrome and related pervasive developmental disorders consists of at least the following four components:

For Students with Special Needs

1. Skills training lessons for students who have social skill deficits
2. Activities and incentive programs to promote generalization and practice of skills in the situations where they are needed

For Typical Peers

1. Sensitivity training lessons for typical peers to be more accepting of students with special needs
2. Activities and incentive programs to promote generalization and practice of sensitivity skills in the situations where they are needed

The majority of this book is dedicated to the first component through a series of 70 skill lessons and activities for children and adolescents who have skill deficits. Before we get to these step-by-step lessons and accompanying handouts, general information about social skills training and related issues will be presented.

Chapter 1 describes the background for developing social skills training groups. Keep in mind that training groups are not the only context in which to teach social skills. As discussed in Chapter 5, skills training can occur at home with a parent, on a play-date, or in a typical classroom. Chapter 2, written by Brenda Smith Myles, provides an overview of the symptoms of Asperger Syndrome with an emphasis on social skills. In Chapter 3 we look at what skills to target for social skills training and how to combine students if running a group. The centerpiece of this chapter is a Social Skills Menu listing all the skills covered in the book, for which detailed lessons are presented in Chapter 8. The menu is a place to begin assessing what skills to target with an individual child.

Numerous strategies for teaching skills are discussed in Chapter 4, with an emphasis on a technique called structured learning (McGinnis & Goldstein, 1997). "Structured learning" contains four components: (a) didactic instruction (verbal or pictorial explanation of the skill steps), (b) modeling (live demonstrations of how to perform the skill), (c) role-playing with feedback (having students physically go through the steps and providing them with corrective feedback until they can accurately perform the skill), and (d) practice assignments for outside the group.

Chapter 5 describes places where skills training may be provided – in a general education classroom, in a small group, or on a play-date. In the classroom, a structured skill lesson is conducted early in the week, then time to practice the skill is created by specific conversation and play activities scheduled during the rest of the week. During a small-group session, a formal lesson is conducted along with less structured times for practicing the skills more spontaneously. The schedule for small groups usually involves the following sequence:

- conversation time
- skill time
- playtime
- snack

INTRODUCTION

For play-dates and other home-based activities, skill lessons are usually conducted prior to the get-together, then rehearsed just before the play-date and practiced on the play-date itself.

Chapter 6 describes behavior management strategies that can be used to run groups and to deal with challenging home and classroom behaviors. In Chapter 7, we take up the important topic of how best to promote generalization, beyond the generalization step built into the skills lesson. Chapter 8 contains the handouts of these skills broken down into their component parts. The handouts depict what to teach students and thus serve to guide those teaching the skills. An activity sheet accompanies each skill with tips for parents and teachers on how to practice and thus promote generalization of the skills at home and in the classroom. Finally, Chapter 9 deals with sensitivity training for typical peers and developing incentive programs to promote peer acceptance. Sample sensitivity lessons are included along with reward programs to help those skills generalize.



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