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## SOCIAL SKILLS ACQUISITION AND PERFORMANCE

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### **Abstract**

Social skills are the skills that are used by human beings to interact and communicate with others to assist status in the social structure and other motivations. Social rules and social relations are created, communicated, and changed in verbal and non-verbal ways creating social complexity useful in identifying outsiders and intelligent breeding partners. The process of learning these skills is called socialization. The development of social skills constitutes a major area of child development. Deficits, delays or disturbance in social behaviours may either be the cause or consequence of developmental disabilities in toddlers and young children. Their linguistic, pre-academic and/or academic failures distance them from their age peers in many social-play situations. It may be that their social-play skills are deficient, thereby leading to non-acceptance by their peers, or it may be that other children are not accommodating to their vagaries in social situations. The present paper is an attempt to underline the important highlights of the concept and importance of Social skills along with factors affecting social skills acquisition.

**Keywords:** Child development, Communication, Social Skills, Socialization.

### **Introduction**

Social skills refer to how we get along with others- family and friends. Navigating social interactions is one of the most complex tasks that human beings do, involving many psychological systems, such as visual and auditory perception, language and problem solving. These systems develop throughout childhood and adulthood based on both nature and nurture. Social skills are the ability to respond to a given environment in a manner that produces, maintains, and enhances positive interpersonal effects.

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The development of social skills constitutes a major area of child development. Deficits, delays or disturbance in social behaviours may either be the cause or consequence of developmental disabilities in toddlers and young children. Their linguistic, pre-academic and/or academic failures distance them from their age peers in many social-play situations. It may be that their social-play skills are deficient, thereby leading to non-acceptance by their peers, or it may be that other children are not accommodating to their vagaries in social situations. In any case, there is need for supervised social activities and superintended preparatory play for these children during their interaction with their peers. More often, such difficulties are multiplied by attitude malformations in caregivers rather than due to inherent impairments of these children.

### **Concept of Social Skills**

Social skills are defined as interpersonal behaviors that help the individual in society. Social skills are specific behaviors, exhibited by children in free play or academic situations, which initiate or maintain social interactions with others. Social skills are discrete, teachable behaviors that are associated with direct measures of social competence, and as such serve as 'building blocks' for the establishment of interpersonal relations, effective social participation, and cooperation or affiliation with peers and others.

Important social behaviors include greeting others, sharing, asking for assistance when needed, initiating conversations, giving complements, following games and classroom rules, being able to talk about such things as current movies and television show, having sense of humor, helping classmates, and knowing current slang words. Unacceptable social behaviors include not responding to peer social initiations, misinterpreting the approach behaviors of peers, and entering games of group activities uninvited.

Since many children with special needs do not have the social skills necessary to interact positively with their peers, it seems imperative that teachers assess their levels of social skills and begin remediation of deficits.

In addition to any deficits in cognitive, motor, language and other development areas, young children with disabilities typically exhibit problems in social skills. When placed in mainstreamed settings, many pre-schoolers with disabilities interact infrequently and incompletely with other children. Strain and his colleagues (Strain, 1981; Strain and Odom, 1986) have investigated the use of peer social initiations as a means of increasing the social competence of pre-schoolers with disabilities. The procedure involves teaching non-disabled peers to direct social overtures to their classmates with disabilities.

Social skills are discrete, observable, and teachable behaviors that initiate and sustain social interaction and that are decently associated to measures of social competence (Odom, 1992), for all children social skills include social initiations (behaviors that direct attention to another individual and that set the occasion for social interaction), social responses (behaviors that follow social initiations and that establish an interaction with the initiator), and maintenance responses (behaviors that extend a social interaction beyond the initiation/response sequence).

Social skills also include social problem solving skills (identification and resolution of interpersonal conflict), pro-social skills (sharing, giving assistance, expressing affection), and other components of social discourse. Social skills including responses that are verbal, meteoric, or gestural; each is identified as 'social' to the extent that it establishes or maintains interaction with one or more partners.

Social skills have been conceptualized frequently as a set of desirable skills (Caldarella and Merrell, 1997; Gresham and MacMillan 1997) for effective interpersonal functioning and are defined as a person's ability to get along with others and to engage in pro-social behaviour that determines popularity among peers and with teachers, parents and significant adults (Matson and Ollendick, 1989). Social skills have been seen as the nexus between the individual and the environment (Phillips, 1978), the tools used to initiate and sustain the peer relationships that are a vital part of our psychological well-being. The development of social skills is one of the most important outcomes of the schooling process.

One of the most frequently referred definitions has been by Combs and Slaby (1977), which describes social skills as 'The ability to interact with others in a given situation in specific ways that are socially acceptable or valued and at the same time personally beneficial, mutually beneficial or beneficial primarily to others'.

Ariel (1992) lists as many as thirty different social skills. A somewhat condensed list includes the following specific behaviours necessary for social competence.

### **Basic Social Skills**

Basic social skills to be developed are:

- Eye contact: being able to maintain eye contact with another person to whom you are listening or speaking for at least brief periods of time.
- Facial expression: smiling, showing interests.
- Social distance: knowing where to stand relative to others; knowing when physical contact is inappropriate.
- Quality of voice: volume, pitch, rate of speech, and clarity of content.
- Greeting others: initiating contact or responding to a greeting, inviting another child to join you in some activity.
- Making conversation: age-appropriate conversational skills; expressing your feeling; asking questions; listening; showing interest; responding to questions asked.
- Playing with others and working with others: complying with rules, sharing, compromising, helping, talking, complementing others, saying thank you, saying you're sorry.
- Gaining attention and/or asking for help: using appropriate ways.
- Coping with conflict: controlling aggression, dealing with anger in self and others, accepting criticism.
- Grooming and hygiene.

The above list represents a fairly complex amalgam of non-verbal and verbal skills which all appear crucial for successful social interaction. Having the appropriate social skills an individual also needs not to have other behavioural characteristics which prevent easy acceptance by others, e.g.; high levels of irritating behaviour (interrupting, poking, shouting etc.) impulsive and unpredictable reactions; temper tantrums; abusive language; cheating at games. In some cases these undesirable behaviours may need to be eliminated by behaviour modification or cognitive behaviour modification procedures.

Bellack and Hersen (1979) have referred to four repertoires of social skills in their taxonomy of social skills as follows:

### **Self -Expressive Skills**

- Expression of feeling (sadness and happiness)
- Expression of opinion
- Accepting compliments
- Stating positive about oneself

### **Other-Enhancing Skills**

- Stating positive about a best-friend
- Praising others

### **Assertive Skills**

- Making simple requests
- Disagreeing with another's opinion
- Denying unreasonable requests

### **Communication Skills**

- Conversing
- Interpersonal problem-solving

### **Factors Affecting Social Skills Acquisition and Performance**

Elksins and Elksins (1998) assumed that the social skill deficits were the result of the student's lack of knowledge. Given this assumption, our responsibility as teachers is to teach the student the skill using the instructional sequence provided. However, there are other reasons children fail to acquire and perform social skills:

- **Interfering behaviours**

Students in class may exhibit behaviors that interfere with learning and using social skills. At one end of the behavior continuum, students may suffer from such high levels of anxiety that they avoid social situations, denying themselves opportunities to become more socially skilful. At the other extreme, certain students who are impulsive and inattentive may be unable to acquire and perform social skills. For these students, you need to address the interfering behaviors before teaching, or while teaching, social skills.

- **Lack of opportunity**

Some students fail to acquire or perform social skills because they have few occasions to use the skill. In this case, we must provide students with opportunities to use skills, including unstructured classroom activities such as cooperative learning, peer tutoring, and

other group activities; as well as ensuring that our students have opportunities to informally interact throughout the day.

- **Lack of feedback**

We rely on feedback to maintain or change our behavior. In order for students with learning and behavior problems to become more socially proficient, we must provide them with specific, informative feedback after a skill is performed. In addition, we need to encourage parents, teachers, peers, employers, and co-workers to provide students with feedback when we are not present.

- **Lack of sensitivity to environmental cues**

Some of our students know how to perform social skills, but they are unable to identify appropriate times and places to use them. We can teach students to become more environmentally sensitive by eliminating behaviors that may interfere with attention, prompting the student to use the skill at an appropriate time, or teaching the student to generate situations, places, and times in which to use the skill.

- **Lack of reinforcement**

Students must be reinforced to continue to perform social skills. We can provide students with positive reinforcement following skill use by teaching.

- **To facilitate social interaction for children with special needs in regular classes three conditions are necessary:**

- The general attitude of teacher and the peer group needs to be made as positive and accepting as possible;
- The environment should be arranged so that the child with a disability has the maximum opportunity to spend time socially involved in a group or pair activity, during recess and during academic work in the classroom;
- The child needs to be taught the specific skills that may enhance social contact with peers.

### **Importance of Social Skills**

Several factors have caused educators to reconsider the importance of social skills instruction. Studies examining outcomes of children socially skilled and unskilled have yielded some startling results. Perhaps the most alarming result of outcome studies is the relationship between social skills problems during early childhood and adult mental health

difficulties. Strain and Odom (1986) reported that social skill deficiency in early childhood was the single best predictor of significant problems in adulthood.

- Children with poorly developed social skills are at greater risk for dropping out of school, and juvenile delinquency rates are higher for these children.
- Poor social skills are responsible for much of our unemployment and underemployment, whereas adequate social skills and high levels of emotional intelligence can lead to occupational advancement (Elksnin and Elksnin, 1998).
- Finally, violence in our schools and communities has heightened educators' interest in social skills instruction.
- Students with special needs may fail to conform to the expectations of school and society. They may not look or act the same as other students. For teachers and peers unfamiliar with special students, these differences can create apprehension, distrust, and even hostility. The abilities, talents, and needs of the students with special needs are frequently overlooked.
- Some students with special needs can be easily identified; their appearance or their actions are visibly different. One example is the student who travels by wheelchair. Others have no observable signs but stand out when their performance falls below expectations. For instance, students with learning disabilities are indistinguishable from their peers until they are asked to read or write or do calculations.

### **Conclusion**

Social skills are extremely important if one is to get along at school, home, in the work place, social functions and other places outside the family unit. Social skills are arguably most important set of abilities, a person can have. Human beings are social animals and lack of good social skills can lead to a lonely life, contributing to anxiety and depression. It has been found that children who are identified as deficient in social skills are unpopular with their peers and are more likely to be unhappy and maladjusted. A life without social skills is filled with frustration, rejection, and low self-worth.

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