Social skills instruction

> "We shouldn't surprise students. Setting clear boundaries for acceptable and unacceptable behaviour gives students a feeling of control and predictability. Students need to know what is expected."
>
> – Barb James

Negative behaviour is often the result of a skill deficit and is not a motivational issue. Positive reinforcement and negative consequences motivate students only when they know the desired behaviour and are capable of displaying it.

Some students can readily verbalize what they are supposed to do but their actions do not correspond with their statements. Just as people who are learning to drive a vehicle with a standard shift can often verbalize what they are supposed to do but cannot physically perform the action of shifting gears, many students require instruction and practice before they can adopt appropriate replacement behaviours.

Teaching students to manage their emotions and act appropriately and responsibly is much like teaching academic skills. Students with behaviour disabilities generally require direct and intentional teaching of targeted social skills. They have missed out on learning social skills that come naturally and incidentally for most students, and they have not learned how to self-regulate their emotions.

BEHAVE strategy

The BEHAVE strategy provides a framework for planning instruction of social skills.[9]

B = Identify the target replacement **Behaviour** or social concern

- Collect data to assess social competency challenges
- Select specific skill to be taught
- State the skill objective in positive terms
- Clarify what the student needs to know, do and say in observable, measurable terms

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9. Adapted with permission from Karen Bain and Brenda Sautner, *BOATS: Behaviour, Observation, Assessment and Teaching Strategies*, 2nd ed. (Edmonton, AB: Special Education Council, The Alberta Teachers' Association, 2007), p. 69.

E = Explain the **Expectations**

- List the step-by-step skill sequence required

- Consider communication, social and functional skill level of student

- Communicate these behavioural expectations to staff and the student

- Select the setting and context in which this skill is best taught—individually, small group, large group, school or community

H = Have clear models

- Model the specific social skill and use clear language to describe each step

- Use respectful and competent peers as models

A = Act it out consistently and frequently

- Use guided practice to learn and rehearse new skills

- Use verbal and visual prompting to support the demonstration of the new skills

- Create multiple opportunities to practise and master skills

- Reinforce appropriate imitation of models

V = View and **Value** the social skill often

- Ensure the new social skill is more reinforcing than the inappropriate behaviour it is replacing

- Specify how students will be reinforced and supported throughout the learning

- Teach students to monitor their own behaviour and, if possible, self-reinforce themselves when they demonstrate the positive behaviour successfully

- Provide consistent reinforcement initially, then fade

E = Expand and **Extend** the skill

- Communicate learning to others and expect the learning will be demonstrated elsewhere

- Work collaboratively with parents and others across as many settings as possible

Teach emotional regulation

Some students are very quick to anger and act out verbally or physically. Other students become very anxious and engage in negative behaviours to avoid or reduce anxiety. Individuals who are depressed can react to specific situations in different ways, including self-abuse, withdrawal or acting out.

Students who find it difficult to control their emotions benefit from having an alternative strategy to use when they are beginning to get upset. Conventional verbal cues such as "stay calm" and "relax" may be insufficient. Students with these difficulties need help to recognize the trigger event and then deal with it by means of a physical activity such as visualization or intentional breathing.

Turtle visualization strategy

Use the turtle visualization strategy to help students replace behaviours such as withdrawal or acting out.

Turtle Strategy

1. Talk about a turtle. For example:
   - has strengths (it may be slow but it can still win the race with the rabbit)
   - is hard on the outside but soft on the inside
   - can go into its shell for a short time when upset and emerge feeling better

2. Demonstrate the "Do turtle" technique.
   a. Fold hands together, fingers intertwined with thumbs sticking out.
   b. Cool down by slowly blowing on each of the four legs and the head.

3. Practise the "Do turtle" technique.
   - Role-play when the student is feeling calm.
   - Next try role-playing after a planned trigger event.
   - Cue and practise when the student is upset after a trigger event.
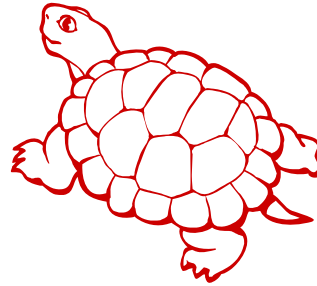
Body breathing

While standing, students visualize breathing in through the soles of their feet, drawing the breath all the way up through the body and exhaling through their hands. Repeat this deep breathing exercise several times.

This strategy allows students to deep breathe without hyperventilating. In order to breathe out through their hands, students must open their clenched fists, which helps them relax.

Teach students to be flexible and tolerate frustration

Teach strategies that students can use to handle difficult times.

Students can initiate the STAR strategy after a trigger event to help them stop their usual pattern of behaviour and choose new and more positive responses.

STAR strategy

Teach students the STAR acronym and encourage them to use it in potentially frustrating situations or when a trigger event has occurred.
- ★ **S** – **Stop** doing what you are doing
- ★ **T** – **Think** about something positive you should be doing
- ★ **A** – **Act** in a way that is appropriate for the situation or **Ask** for assistance
- ★ **R** – **Reflect** on what you have done; use self-talk to tell yourself, "Good job"

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or

SNAP strategy

Encourage students to use the SNAP acronym to remind themselves to use their problem-solving skills.
- **S** – **S**top
- **N** – **N**ow
- **A** – **A**nd
- **P** – **P**lan

Use social stories and scripts

Social stories and scripts help students prepare for what might happen in the future.

Social stories

Social stories are effective for students who require a high degree of structure to understand social expectations and interact successfully with others.[10] They are simple stories that describe a social situation and how the student is expected to behave in that situation. They are especially effective with younger students and older students with developmental delays. Social stories combine language, routines and social expectations on a personal level. They guide and direct responding and can lead to increased self-awareness and self-management. They provide a relevant, accurate orientation to a particular social context.

When developing social stories:

- identify a target behaviour or problem situation which has or may occur

- consider student's developmental level and use vocabulary, print size and concepts appropriate for that student

- develop a specific step-by-step description of what the student needs to do in this situation

- consider what the student is currently doing in similar situations

- write a story using different types of sentences, including:
  - **descriptive sentences** that describe the social situation and provide information
  - **directive sentences** that suggest what the student is to do. To give flexibility they often are statements such as "I will try to …" rather than absolutes
  - **affirmative sentences** that are somewhat abstract, but contain stress reducers such as "this is okay" which can reassure the student. They might also include phrases such as "This is important" to cue students that this particular rule must be followed
  - **perspective sentences** that contain information about the internal states of other people. "My sister likes …", "Some children like …", "My mom is happy when …"
  - **cooperative statements** that provide information about how the student can be assisted or supported. "My mom will help with …"

- write from the student's point of view in present or future tense; e.g., "I will …"

- focus on one skill at a time

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10. This section adapted with permission from Karen Bain (July 2007).

- use positive language

- answer "wh" questions, who, where, when, why, and how

- make the story concrete and literal

- use photos and pictures and, if possible, have students illustrate and/or co-write their own stories

- read and review the story with the student frequently and in different contexts

- teach the skill directly.

Social scripts

Like a movie script, a social script details a step-by-step process of what to do or say and what another person does or says. This technique can be used with students of all ages.

Use scripts to plan for positive behaviour, or to reflect on behaviour or a situation and choose a positive option. Try to ensure that the stories describe positive behaviour. For example:
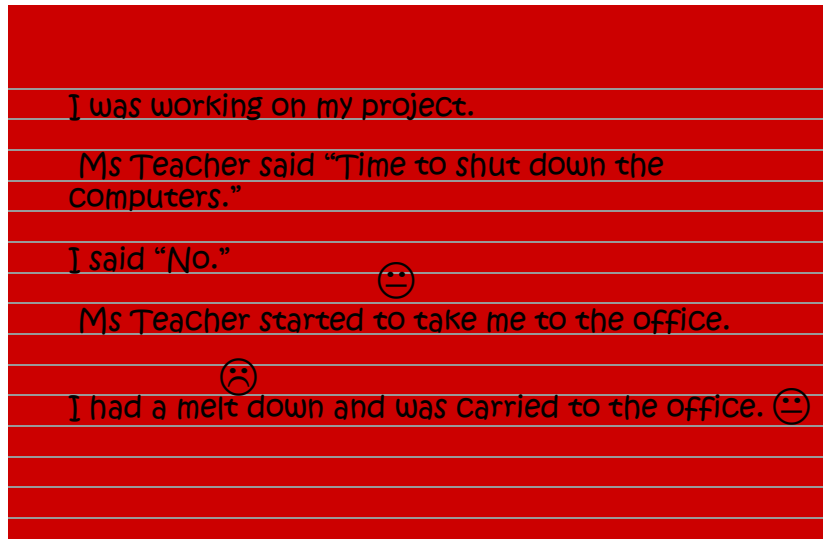
> "When I am working on math and my teacher says 'Listen,' I stop what I am doing, put down my pencil and look at her to show that I am listening."

Social scripts can also provide information about how others might view or react to the situation. For example, "When I look at the teacher to show I am listening, she smiles back at me. She likes it when students follow her directions."
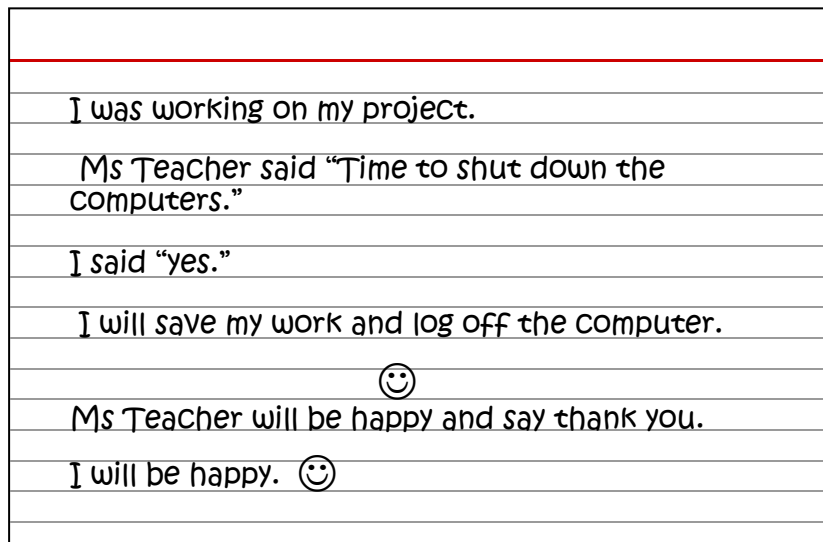
Plan for new or exceptional circumstances such as school assemblies, class parties and other potentially stressful events by developing a step-by-step social script of what will happen, what the student will do and how others will react.

Another way of using social scripts is to write down four to ten actions a student has taken on file cards, along with how others reacted to these actions. Use a red card to record the student's description of actions that have already occurred, and a white card to record the student's ideas about what a more positive sequence of behaviours and reactions might be. This is an effective method of reviewing what the undesirable social behaviour was and the reaction it produced. This method also helps the student plan for more appropriate behaviour and its positive consequences.

Sample red card:

I was working on my project.

Ms Teacher said "Time to shut down the computers."

I said "No." ☺

Ms Teacher started to take me to the office.

☹

I had a melt down and was carried to the office. ☺

Sample white card:

I was working on my project.

Ms Teacher said "Time to shut down the computers."

I said "yes."

I will save my work and log off the computer.

☺
Ms Teacher will be happy and say thank you.

I will be happy. ☺

Tips for using social scripts

- When introducing the concept, look for three to five examples of positive behaviour the student demonstrates and record these on a white card. Reinforce that students already have some of their own positive scripts.

- Relate this strategy to the way actors use scripts to create television shows and movies.

- Colour code the behavioural choices, using red cards for a step-by-step description of negative behaviour and white cards for a more positive script.

- After the student has written the second script on the white card, rehearse it with all the students involved. Physical practice and role-play is critical.

Teach compliance[11]

Compliance refers to the ability and/or willingness to respond to the requests of others. Compliance and noncompliance are learned behaviours that serve a function for that individual. It is important that students be able and willing to comply with basic social expectations and basic requests, especially for safety and group inclusion purposes. For example, a young student who runs off school grounds at recess or runs off from the group during field trips creates a serious safety risk. Students need to understand and respond appropriately to basic requests such as "Stop" and "Please come here."

General tips for teaching compliance

1. Make sure you have the student's attention. Make eye contact (if that is appropriate for the student) and remove distractions.

2. Communicate clearly what the student needs to do. Limit the talking and use a minimum number of words to make the point. Use concrete language. "Pick up the math books and put them on the table" versus the more abstract direction to "Clean up."

3. Use visual cues with the verbal requests and as a follow-up reminder.

4. You can use your body to block or communicate, look expectant or gesture what you want. If necessary, partial physical prompting may be useful. However, avoid physical management as much as possible.

5. If requests are not being followed, remain as neutral as possible. Do not reinforce with attention, tangible items or discussion.

6. Try a gentle reminder of how compliance to one request will lead to being able to do a preferred activity: "First you ____ then you can ___."

7. Sometimes you may have time to "wait," sometimes you can't. Try to avoid rushing if you know it will be a problem. Allow adequate time for completing the task.

8. Consider going ahead and doing something else rather than engaging in a power struggle. "It is time for ___, we will have to clean up later" and return to the original request right before the next preferred activity.

9. Make sure positive reinforcements and negative consequences are clearly stated, fair and consistently implemented. As much as possible, prevent the obtaining of preferred items or activities directly after a noncompliant act.

10. Whenever possible, use other students as positive role models.

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11. Adapted with permission from Karen Bain (July 2007).

Variables that affect compliance

Statements work better than questions. State the expectation in the positive. "Please start your math assignment" rather than "Isn't it time to start your work?"

"Do" requests are more desirable than "Don't" requests. The majority of teacher requests should start behaviours rather than stop behaviours. If too many requests are to stop behaviour, then the classroom rules need to be better communicated.

Descriptions clarify understanding. Describe the behaviour needed. Giving specific and well-described requests will lessen confusion.

Distance matters. The optimal distance for making a request is about one metre away. If speaking with a smaller student, physically get down to his or her level.

Quiet is more effective. A soft but firm voice is more likely to inspire cooperation than a loud voice.

Making eye contact can help focus students. When culturally appropriate for the student, request eye contact when making a request. For example, "Jilla, please look at me. Now, I need you to …"

Using wait time gives students time to respond. Wait at least 10 seconds after making the request before repeating the request or giving another prompt.

Keeping requests to a minimum increases the chances of success. Issue a single request only twice, then follow through with a preplanned consequence. The more you request, the less likely you are to gain compliance. When beginning, make only one request at a time.

Redirecting can help avoid power struggles. For example, asking a student to carry something to the gym, rather than lining up for gym may be the first step in complying to requests to move from one activity to the next.

Positive choices can encourage cooperation. For students who are initially resistant to directions, choices rather than direct statements may be effective. For example, "Do you want to do your math on the floor or at the table?" might be more effective than a direct request to "Get your math book out and get started now."

Reinforcing natural instances of compliance can build competence. Watch for times students are about to do something they like, then ask them to do it, and reinforce them for following through. "Thanks for ___ when I said to." Younger students can play games such as "Simon Says" and "Follow the Leader" to build positive attitudes towards compliance.

Positive reinforcement will increase instances of compliance. It is easy to neglect verbally or socially rewarding students for complying with a request. To get more compliance, genuinely reinforce it.

Help students understand their own behaviour

Students may reject behaviour support—no matter how positive—particularly if the students have oppositional characteristics. One of the most successful approaches to this problem is to collaboratively develop strategies with the student. Students can participate in:

- identifying the problem behaviour and becoming more aware of why it is problematic
- identifying new or replacement behaviours and why they are preferable
- identifying and agreeing to the techniques for teaching and practising the new behaviours
- identifying ways to reinforce and reward the new behaviours
- identifying negative consequences if the negative behaviour continues.

Verbal descriptions

Try describing to students what they are doing that is inappropriate or unacceptable, and what the reactions and consequences to this negative behaviour will be. Work with the student to verbally identify and discuss the trigger events. To make this technique work, discuss what the replacement behaviours are and the reaction to expect from others (including the reinforcement). To be most effective, keep the verbal descriptions as brief as possible.

Physical demonstrations

Many students respond verbally to explanations but do not follow through. Address the verbal and physical aspects of students' responses, explaining that demonstration is important. For some, drawing pictures of the trigger event followed by a positive behaviour choice may be sufficient. Others need to physically demonstrate this new behaviour; for example, by role-playing.

Modelling

Students often learn from watching and copying others' behaviour. Most teachers avoid showing that they are agitated or angry. However, if they model emotional regulation strategies such as Do Turtle or STAR, students see how these responses can be useful and effective.

Video

Some students respond well to making a video that emphasizes the positive aspects of their social skills and shows them displaying new or replacement behaviours. The video provides a visual memory of positive behaviour.