

Social skills instruction

“... the very profession of teaching calls on us to try to produce not merely good learners but good people.”

– Alfie Kohn,
“Caring Kids: The Role of the School”

Social skills are essential to the effective functioning of any group or community. All students, including those with behaviour disabilities, benefit from social skills instruction and ongoing reinforcement of their performance of social skills.

Current research indicates that:

- there is a strong correlation between social adjustment and acceptance or rejection by peers
- social skills are a predictor of future academic and social adjustment
- without intervention, social skill deficits increase with age.

In a safe and caring classroom, students can interact comfortably with peers, and learn and practise social skills. Students come to school with varying backgrounds and experiences. Many are uncertain about what the social expectations really are, and they need direct assistance to identify and learn social skills. Students who have behaviour disabilities (or who are at risk of developing such difficulties) have a particular need for targeted social skills instruction and ongoing coaching to help them connect with peers and feel that they belong to the school and classroom community.

Social skills are also an integral part of learner outcomes across the subject areas. For example, a general outcome of Alberta’s English language arts program of studies is that students will respect, support and collaborate with each other. The new social studies program provides many opportunities for students to develop knowledge, skills and attitudes that will help them become engaged and responsible citizens. The program emphasizes the importance of diversity and respect for differences, and creates opportunities for students to engage in problem solving and conflict resolution.

McGinnis and Goldstein (1997) outline specific skills for each of five major skill groups.

Skills for classroom learning

- listening
- asking for help
- saying thank you
- bringing materials to class
- following instructions
- completing assignments
- contributing to discussions
- offering to help an adult
- asking a question
- ignoring distractions
- making corrections
- deciding what to do
- setting a goal

Skills for making friends

- introducing yourself
- beginning a conversation
- ending a conversation
- joining in
- playing a game
- asking a favour
- offering to help a classmate
- giving a compliment
- suggesting an activity
- sharing
- apologizing

Skills for dealing with feelings

- knowing your feelings
- expressing your feelings
- recognizing one another's feelings
- showing understanding of another's feelings
- expressing concern for another
- dealing with your anger
- dealing with another's anger
- expressing affection
- dealing with fear
- rewarding yourself

Alternatives to aggression

- using self-control
- asking permission
- responding to teasing
- avoiding trouble
- staying out of fights
- solving problems
- accepting consequences
- dealing with an accusation
- negotiating

Skills for dealing with stress

- dealing with boredom
- deciding what caused a problem
- making a complaint
- answering a complaint
- dealing with losing
- showing sportsmanship
- dealing with being left out
- dealing with embarrassment
- reacting to failure
- accepting no
- relaxing
- dealing with group pressure
- dealing with wanting something that belongs to another person
- making a decision
- being honest

Social skills are best taught one at a time in the environment in which they will be used.

Demonstrate skills

Work with students to identify the steps involved in demonstrating a skill. For example, ask students who are learning about taking turns, “How would we know if two students are taking turns at an activity? What kinds of behaviour would we see and hear?” Record a specific, step-by-step description of the skill on chart paper and post it in the classroom for students to refer to.

Discuss the skill before demonstrating it. Be sure each step is identified and that the steps are presented in the correct sequence, and are clear and unambiguous. Help students to observe the cognitive process involved in carrying out the skill. For example, “I really want to go first but I’ll let John take his turn this time, and I’ll go first in the next game.” Demonstrate at least two different scenarios using the same skill, always ensuring that the scenarios have positive outcomes.

Practise with role-play

In role-play, students practise a skill by acting out situations, without costumes or scripts. Set the context for role-play and allow students to choose their roles. Give them a minimal amount of planning time to discuss the situation, choose different alternatives or reactions and plan a basic scenario. At the conclusion, ask students to discuss how they felt and what they learned. The most important part of role-play is the reflection and discussion that follows.

As students participate in role-play, they are able to:

- practise communication and social skills in a safe, nonthreatening environment
- consider different perspectives and develop empathy by seeing how their decisions might affect others
- solve social problems and explore new ideas.

Sample strategies for using role-play in social skills instruction

- Always have students role-play the positive side of a skill or situation.
- While it may be helpful to discuss negative situations, it is best not to role-play them. The negative role could be inadvertently reinforced if peers find that acting out negative behaviour is funny or entertaining.
- Provide a specific situation.
- Limit the time students have to develop and practise (5 to 10 minutes is usually sufficient).
- Limit the use of costumes and props.
- Provide tips for participating in role-play (see box).
- Provide tips for observing role-play (see box).
- During the role-play, observe how students handle the situations represented and consider the following types of questions.
 - Are concepts expressed accurately, in language and action?
 - Are any students confused or uncertain about the purpose of the role-play, the situation or their roles?
- Provide feedback as soon as possible after completion.
- To extend learning from role-play, consider the following types of questions.
 - What issues were clarified?
 - What misconceptions might have been presented?
 - What questions did the role-play raise?
 - What new information is needed?

- How does this role-play link with future tasks that extend or broaden the topic?

- Face the audience, and speak loudly and clearly.
- Use body language to communicate your message instead of relying on props or costumes.
- Focus on your role-play partners and the message you want to communicate.
- Assess your participation by asking yourself these questions.
 - How am I demonstrating that I understand this role?
 - Are we showing all important aspects of the situation?
 - Are we showing all of the ideas from our planning session?
 - Am I using new skills or concepts correctly?

- Demonstrate good listening by being quiet and attentive.
- Laugh at appropriate moments.
- Do not laugh at the role-play participants.
- Show support by clapping and using positive words of encouragement when the role-play is finished.
- Reflect on the social skill that is being role-played.
- Consider how you might use this skill in your own life.

Teach self-monitoring

To help students transfer the social skills they are learning to their daily lives, have them regularly practise using those skills and then monitor how well they do. For example, select a social skill that a student is doing well with, ask him or her to practise the skill in a specific situation at home or in school and then have the student complete a self-reflection rating scale.

Alternatively, let the student know when he or she will be placed in a situation that requires a specific social skill. Set up the situation and afterwards sit down with the student to discuss and evaluate how well the student did.

As students become more proficient at using a variety of social skills, prompt them to self-monitor throughout the day. Students can self-monitor their use of a target skill at natural breaks in the day, such as recess and lunch. Students who don't give themselves positive ratings should also state the reasons why.

Students can also self-monitor their use of the social skills they are learning in other contexts; for example, on the bus, at soccer practice or at home. Consider setting up a display area where students can post a sheet that records a situation that called on them to use a social skill in, the steps they followed and how successful they were. Provide space for students to record why things went well, or what they might do to be even more effective the next time.

Teach problem-solving approaches

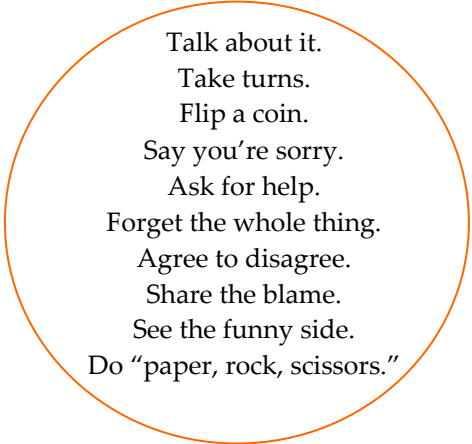
Problems that arise in the classroom can provide opportunities for students to take responsibility for their own behaviour. When students try to solve their problems themselves, they develop confidence and acquire valuable skills that they can use throughout their lives.

Solution Wheel

The Solution Wheel is a strategy that encourages students to take responsibility for their behaviour and find solutions.

Have the class generate a list of solutions that can be used in any number of different conflicts; for example, apologizing, talking it through, taking time to calm down, using an "I" message or choosing something else to do. Once the list is generated, star all suggestions that are respectful and helpful, and work together to select suggestions that everyone can agree on. Students can draw a symbol or picture to represent each solution. Record each of the solutions on the circle and add the symbols. Post the wheel in a visible spot in the classroom.

When a problem arises, ask students to try at least two solutions from the wheel before asking an adult to help solve the problem. Tell school staff, including other teachers, support staff and lunchroom supervisors, about the Solution Wheel so they can remind students to use it when a problem arises.



- Talk about it.
- Take turns.
- Flip a coin.
- Say you're sorry.
- Ask for help.
- Forget the whole thing.
- Agree to disagree.
- Share the blame.
- See the funny side.
- Do "paper, rock, scissors."

Real-life situations

Prompt personal problem solving through questioning, modelling, providing helpful language and reinforcing students' efforts. Use real-life social situations in the classroom to teach social skills through a series of guided questions. For example:

- What do we need to do first?
- What do we need to get before we can start?
- What would happen if you _____?
- Who could we ask?
- Where should we go to _____?
- What would be better, _____ or _____?
- Where did we find _____ last week?
- Where do you need to look for _____?
- Who would be best to help with _____?
- Why would _____ be better than _____?

Problem-solving cards

Use problem-solving cards to help students find new solutions to specific social situations that are causing difficulties in the classroom. Start with easy-to-solve situations. Ask students to answer questions such as:

- What is the difficulty?
- Why could this be a problem?
- What are some possible choices or solutions?
- What are the pros and cons of the choices?
- What might be best and why?
- How could you _____?