

Social skills instruction

“Building a safe, caring and inclusive school culture means teaching it minute by minute, day by day, integrating it into discipline practices and curriculum, using instructional models that provide practice in social and relationship skills and, most importantly, modelling it.”

– Vicki Mather, former Executive Director, The Society for Safe and Caring Schools and Communities

Getting along with others is one of the most important life skills. Students with strong social skills can interpret social situations and respond appropriately. They are also better able to manage potential conflict and reach decisions that respect everyone involved.

While many students already have social skills when they come to school, most can still benefit from direct teaching of skills such as:

- listening
- conversation skills
- establishing and maintaining friendships
- dealing with feelings
- accepting consequences
- dealing with peer pressure
- resolving arguments
- dealing with bullying.

Benefits of social skill instruction

Through consistent modelling, teaching and reinforcement of positive social skills, students are more likely to develop:

- enhanced self-confidence
- greater self-control
- greater respect for the rights of others
- a greater sense of responsibility for their own actions, so that meeting behavioural expectations seems natural and easy.

Role modelling by teachers

Social skills can be taught through the interactions teachers have with their students each day. When teachers consistently speak and listen respectfully and demonstrate kindness, they are modelling respectful relationships and positive social skills.

Direct instruction of social skills

Another way to teach positive social behaviour is through direct instruction. Effective teaching of prosocial skills:

- happens early
- is linked to the current environment
- is a hands-on experience (e.g., role-playing)
- is a minds-on experience (e.g., reflecting, discussing and sharing)
- involves, respects and teaches about making good choices
- is paired with managing emotions, making thoughtful decisions and setting realistic and meaningful goals.

Many resources are available for directly teaching positive social skills to students in Kindergarten through Grade 12. Most approaches involve a step-by-step approach. For example:

1. Identify the social skill that you need to teach.
2. Introduce the skill to students through stories, film, poetry or discussion.
3. Identify the components or steps involved in the skill.
4. Model the components or steps of the skill.
5. Give students opportunities to practise and master the skill through other activities. Provide corrective feedback, as necessary.
6. Acknowledge and celebrate independent use of the skill.

Sprague and Golly recommend teaching social behaviour in the same way as academic skills are taught.⁶ For example:

- teach through multiple examples (define, show, tell, describe)
- teach where/when the problems occur

6. Adapted with permission from Sopris West Educational Services. *Best Behavior: Building Positive Behavior Support in Schools* by Jeff Sprague © 2005, Figure 10, page 55.

- give frequent practice opportunities (each skill or expectation requires at least 10 to 20 reviews per year)
- provide useful corrections
- provide positive feedback
- monitor for success.

Integrating social skills across the school day

Intervene with students using the language of social skill instruction. For example, if a student is running in the hall, say, “What is the rule about hallways? ... Please go back and walk to show respect for the safety of yourself and others.”

Use the language of behavioural expectations in content lessons (e.g., social studies or science), or when reading and discussing stories with students. To teach behavioural expectations in content lessons, connect the topics; point out attitudes, outcomes and personality concerns; and discuss information using a positive behaviour framework.

For example, when studying a novel, students can write or talk about how a character’s behaviour and attitudes influence other people. Many students need to have these concepts explained clearly in order to understand them well and apply them to personal situations.

Character education is another opportunity to integrate social skills across the school day. Specific social skills can be targeted in related character education activities across the school setting.