



## Social Skills Training in School

(BBB Autism; printable Article #24)

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In the effort to tackle basic skills and then academic skills, social skills are sometimes left in the lurch. Schools are the primary social venue for children, but many schools are unsure how to fit social skills into their curriculum. Community organizations that convey the social graces to "normal" children, such as Scouting and religious youth groups, may be unprepared to deal with a child whose social skills are far behind his peers. And even children who interact well with their siblings may not be able to carry these skills over easily to socializing with unfamiliar children and adults.

Not surprisingly, many children and adults with PDDs find themselves ostracized due to barbaric manners, inability to tackle the back-and-forth of playground conversation, and difficulty in reading common social cues. It's not their fault--these skills not come naturally to people on the autistic spectrum, and parents are usually so busy teaching other essentials that messy eating habits and such are the least of their worries. But for the person without positive social skills, true inclusion in the workplace and community will be elusive.

### **Note to adults with PDDs:**

Some people might be surprised to learn that many adults with PDDs are avid readers of books about etiquette, protocol, and body language. These books spell out things that everyone else seems to know. Others take courses in psychology or anthropology, or tackle self-help books that promise to teach readers how to be successful in work, life, and love. Depending on the book or course, this can be a good approach for many adults.

Some systems have pitfalls, however: one we know took up neurolinguistic (NLP), which promises to teach practitioners the secrets of influencing others through verbal and nonverbal communication. Communication had always been difficult for him, and he often felt that he was ineffective and misunderstood. Although he progressed through his courses well, his acquaintances found his efforts to be rather transparent and, ultimately, manipulative. As always, caveat emptor!

There are many skill areas to work on, including:

-  Maintaining appropriate eye contact
-  Maintaining appropriate body space
-  Developing a sense of empathy for others
-  Giving and receiving complements
-  Sharing interests and other strategies for making friends
-  Decoding facial expressions and body language
-  Using facial expressions and body language
-  Learning conversational techniques, including openers and closers
-  Determining whether a topic is appropriate for discussion
-  Learning table manners
-  Understanding rules for community activities, such as riding the bus or going to a movie



-  Understanding dating and sexual etiquette
-  Learning grooming techniques and expectations
-  Interacting with authority figures
-  Using observation to determine appropriate behavior, dress, and manners in a new social situation

Developing and using self-calming techniques can be one of the most important social skills your child will ever learn. These techniques help your child develop a self-righting mechanism of sorts, preventing embarrassing meltdowns that lead to ostracism.

Many schools are implementing variations on the theme of friendship clubs or social-skills clubs. These are small, adult-supervised groups of children brought together to help one or more children in the group learn appropriate social behavior. The adult--and eventually the other children--acts as a social-skills coach.

One of the best mechanisms for teaching appropriate social behavior is the use of social stories, a special kind of storytelling originally developed by educator Carol Gray. Social stories provide the child with a narrative about events that are going to happen or that should happen. They are short, easy to remember, and can be told over and over to help the child internalize what's expected. Here's a sample of a social story:

### **James Is a Good Bus Rider**

-  When James gets ready for school in the morning, he has his coat and backpack ready before the school bus arrives.
-  When the bus comes, he gives his mom a hug and gets on the bus right away.
-  James sits in the seat right behind the driver as soon as he gets on the bus. He puts on his seat belt. Then he puts his backpack on his lap.
-  Sometimes James talks to his friends when he is riding the bus. They talk quietly.
-  Sometimes James draws pictures or looks at a book while he is riding the bus. He makes sure that his paper, crayons, and books are in his backpack when the bus gets to school.
-  If someone bothers James on the bus, he can ask the bus driver for help.
-  When the bus gets to school, James is the first to get off the bus. He waits with Mr. Smith until all of the children have gotten off the bus, and then they walk to class in a line.

You'll notice that the story is about all the good things that James does, or should do, on the bus. It isn't a list of "don'ts," no matter how tempting it might be to add a line like "James doesn't hit or bite the other children on the bus."

"Sometimes" lines like the ones in the example above can be very important for autistic spectrum children, who have a tendency to get stuck in very specific routines. These lines introduce and emphasize the idea of flexibility: sometimes we do X, and sometimes we do Y.

Some parents and teachers like to set social stories to music, which can make them even easier to remember. Others have made them into picture books with illustrations or photographs. For example, James might be asked to act out his bus social story while a teacher or parent takes some instant photos. Then the book can be written out one line to a page, with an illustration for each line.

Thick paper and lamination can be used to protect social stories that children want to carry with them.

Social stories can work well for people of all ages, even teenagers and adults.

Social-skills work may actually be harder today than it was 50 years ago, despite everything we've learned about behavior and human development. The rules of society are in flux everywhere, and children may not see the lessons of the home or classroom reinforced in everyday life. For children who tend to take rules very seriously, this can make life quite

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difficult. The playground may be full of inappropriate language and behavior, diners at fast-food restaurants wolf their food down sloppily as though no one is looking, rudeness abounds on the television, and the freeway is full of drivers who break the rules.

Interestingly, school district officials often comment that the most well behaved children they meet when visiting schools are in the special education classes, where standards are explicitly spelled out and enforced for all students.

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