

**Teaching Social Skills
to People with Autism**
**Best Practices in
Individualizing Interventions**

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Introduction

Impairments in social skills (including play skills) remain one of the hallmark features associated with individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). This book is designed to provide readers with advice from experts in the field of ASD, all of whom have extensive backgrounds and histories in developing and evaluating treatment approaches aimed at improved social skills with this population. We asked each author to address the same key issues within each chapter, thus giving an overall structure to each chapter. Some of the areas covered include:

- What is a “social skill?” How are these skills distinguished from language/communication skills?
- What are the key issues associated with assessment and measurement of such skills?
- What are the most effective teaching strategies and how can you train staff and parents to implement these strategies?
- How do you collect and analyze data associated with strategies and progress?
- How do you promote generalization of specific skills?

We believe that the chapter authors provide an excellent array of guidelines involving a host of important skills. Each chapter provides descriptions of essential teaching strategies and the evidence-basis for the authors’ suggested strategies. Each chapter also provides several case examples showing how these strategies can be applied to individuals with ASD.

In a very well written and organized chapter, Bridget A. Taylor, from the Alpine Learning Group, opens with a clear discussion about what social skills are and why they are so important in life. She also describes the situations

under which particular behaviors are deemed social, as well as the situations under which the mere absence of them is problematic. Taylor then spells out clear guidelines for assessment and goal selection for people with ASD. She also offers a rich array of strategies to effectively teach social skills, including those associated with motivational variables. Taylor provides an excellent review of the evidence basis for a host of strategies. Her chapter ends with a review of several critical issues, including generalization, data collection and analysis, and social validity.

Shahla Ala'i-Rosales, Samantha Cermak, and Kristín Guðmundsdóttir provide an excellent description of a parent-training program, *Sunny Starts*, which was developed at the Department of Behavior Analysis at the University of North Texas. They begin with an emphasis on a contextual understanding of social skills. A contextual analysis of the social development of children notes the importance of interacting with parents--hence, the accent upon parent training. The acronym DANCE is used to suggest the metaphor of the "social dance" that occurs between parents and their children. Social attending and play are the first key skills addressed by parents in the program. The chapter continues with a description of many other key skills and the sequences in which they are taught.

The next chapter, by Marjorie H. Charlop and Melaura Andree Erickson of the Claremont Autism Center, begins with a review of the social skill impairment faced by many with ASD and a discussion of how these issues change as a function of the child's age and setting. The authors describe the important components of their Center's focus and strategies and their efforts to assure the evidence-basis for each teaching tactic. They address how to select target skills and measure progress on those skills and also describe a number of naturalistic teaching strategies, including video modeling and self-management. They provide several case studies to illustrate how a combination of approaches can be successfully used.

Rebecca MacDonald, from the New England Center for Children (NECC), provides a detailed account of teaching pretend play to children with ASD. After an overview of social referencing and joint attention, she explains why play is a crucial skill to teach and how we can address pretend play as well. MacDonald then provides an excellent review of a series of behaviorally based approaches to teaching, including video modeling. Next, she provides details regarding a specific play curriculum developed at NECC. She also provides explicit examples of promoting generalization of play skills.

Saara Mahjouri and Connie Kasari from the Center for Autism Research and Treatment at UCLA offer strong guidelines aimed at facilitating the social inclusion of children with ASD. They provide information regarding the assessment of early intervention targets as well as the ongoing development of

social skills, including the Structured Play Assessment. They then review evidence-based strategies to promote peer engagement. Finally, they describe strategies appropriate to school settings and address social skills that are important throughout the course of life.

The next chapter is by Daniel Openden from the Southwest Autism Research and Resource Center at the Arizona State University. He opens with a frank discussion of social competence and the broad approaches of Pivotal Response Treatment and Natural Language Paradigm. He includes a detailed account of the major pivotal areas related to this approach. He also explains how to address special skill targets and collateral changes associated with untargeted social skills.

Jed Baker, from the Social Skills Training Project, writes about key components related to social skill training. He begins with a review of definitions and measurement issues. Next, Baker distinguishes between applied behavior analysis, cognitive-behavioral approaches, and relationship-based approaches, and discusses the evidence associated with each approach. Finally, he provides a set of guidelines regarding how to use key components from the broad array reviewed to design an effective package for individuals with ASD.

Mary Jane Weiss, coeditor of this book, closes with a chapter reviewing both the current best practices and the many challenges that remain for those concerned with teaching social skills to individuals with ASD. She provides a review of many popular social skill teaching strategies but reminds readers that many of these strategies do not have the level of empirical support assumed by many practitioners. Weiss provides clear examples of what evidence-based truly means and explains which strategies have the best empirical support. The chapter ends with a series of questions that all readers should remember as they read reports and studies dealing with the ever-emerging field of social skill training.

While discussions and recommendations about social skills have abounded since the initial identification of autism spectrum disorders, research on evidence-based practices has lagged significantly behind. Furthermore, our clinical impact on social skills has been modest (compared to other curricular areas). Some strategies have become popular because they “feel right” or have “common-sense” appeal. Fortunately, the contributors to this book are well aware of the scientific responsibility they have regarding suggestions and advice that are offered. Each chapter therefore reviews research in detail, often including limitations associated with particular strategies. In addition to familiarizing yourself with the specific information this book provides regarding assessment and intervention, we urge you to learn the best questions to ask so that as new strategies are developed, you will be able to discern the difference between hype and evidence.

We wish each of you a good and successful journey along the path of improving the social skills of those with an autism spectrum disorder.

Andy Bondy and Mary Jane Weiss