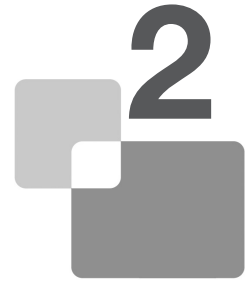


Five Basic Tenets



of Social Skills Programming

The following tenets reflect both research findings and my clinical experience in teaching social skills to children and adolescents on the autism spectrum. They provide the foundation for the social skills program that is covered in this book. These five tenets will be addressed repeatedly by the strategies discussed in this book. These tenets also illuminate what is missing from many traditional social skill programs. More than anything, these tenets reflect my philosophy and conceptualization of successful social skills programming.

As you read this chapter, I encourage you to think about how these ideas can be incorporated into your current or future programming. They should guide the development and implementation of social skills programming for children and adolescents on the spectrum.

Tenet #1: Youth with Autism Want to Establish Meaningful Social Relationships

We need to discard the long-held notion that individuals on the spectrum lack an interest in establishing social relationships. Many such individuals do desire social relationships. However, they typically lack the necessary social skills to effectively establish social relationships, or they want to establish relationships on their own terms instead of being forced into relationships with people with whom they do not want to interact. Most youth on the spectrum want desperately to have friends but fail miserably in their attempts to make friends. One young man I worked with illustrates this point quite well.

ZACH'S ATTEMPTS TO MAKE FRIENDS

Prior to my visit, the school staff informed me of Zach's inappropriate behaviors and his apparent lack of interest in interacting with other children. After spending the morning in a self-contained

classroom, he was given the opportunity to eat lunch with the general school population (a time and place that produced many of his problem behaviors).

As Zach was eating his lunch, a group of children to his right began to discuss frogs. As soon as the conversation began, he immediately took notice. So did I. As Zach was listening to the other children, he began to remove his shoes, followed by his socks. I remember thinking, “Oh boy, here we go!” As soon as the second sock fell to the ground, Zach flopped his feet on the table, looked up at the group of children, and proclaimed “Look, webbed feet!”

Others around him (including myself) stared in amazement.

In this case, he was demonstrating a desire to enter and be a part of a social situation, but he was obviously lacking the skills to do so in an appropriate and effective manner. Instead of participating in the conversation about frogs, Zach showed the children his own webbed feet! Sadly, the other children laughed at him.

Despite a desire for meaningful social relationships, many individuals on the autism spectrum have come to dread and fear social situations as a result of years of social failure and peer rejection. Countless parents have shared stories of their children breaking down in tears because of their difficulties making friends. One mother told me that her son’s dream was to be invited to a sleep-over at a peer’s house—any peer!

I have also received calls from many adults on the spectrum who are searching for the answers to their chronic social difficulties, and the anxiety and depression that they believe is related to these social difficulties. Some of them have successful careers and families but are still struggling to establish meaningful social relationships.

Tenet #2: If We Want Youth with Autism to Be Successful Socially, We Must Teach Them the Skills to Be Successful

There is a marked difference between teaching skills and expecting the performance of social skills. Too many behavioral and educational plans simply expect the child to perform socially without providing a framework for actually teaching skills. Such plans typically describe how social skills will be reinforced and encouraged, or how social opportunities will be provided, but rarely lay out a plan for teaching social skills. For instance, a behavioral plan might outline how successful social interactions will be reinforced, but not how they will be taught. Another plan might provide the child with an opportunity to interact with peers via a weekly playgroup but not teach the skills necessary to be successful in that playgroup.

Think about this in a different arena. Imagine you were suddenly told that you would be performing in a dance recital a week from Tuesday. Exciting opportunity, isn’t it? Yet what if you didn’t know how to dance? Would a behavioral contract be helpful? What about reinforcement and encouragement? Would they help you avoid failure and embarrassment? No! What you would need is for

someone to *teach* you to dance! Social skills are no different. Again, if we want our children to be successful socially, then we must *teach them the skills* to be successful socially.

Tenet #3: Successful Social Behaviors Are Not Always “Appropriate” Social Behaviors

Social interaction skills are not always “appropriate” social behaviors. Sometimes the behaviors that are the most irritating and unacceptable to adults are quite functional and useful with child peers. For instance, passing gas, if you will, is a skill that is both prized and valued by boys all over this country. Although many adults find it disgusting, and it is generally agreed that, at least in our culture, it should be avoided in certain contexts and settings, it is a behavior that can put a young man on the fast track to social success!

Perhaps my greatest mistake starting out in my practice was that I was trying to teach proper manners. I was set on trying to train “little gentlemen” instead of teaching functional social skills. In fact, I’m surprised my teachings didn’t sometimes get my students beat up! Imagine how the following social initiation would play out on an elementary school playground near you: “Hello, my name is Scotty. How are you today?” I could think of a dozen or so likely responses, and none of them are pretty. If we want children to be successful socially, we need to throw out “appropriate” and focus on “functional.” Social skills are supposed to assist in eliciting positive responses from peers. Let the responses of other children be your gauge. If the other children are noticeably irritated by a behavior, or are laughing *at* rather than *with* your child, we are probably dealing with a behavior that needs to be addressed through programming. However, if other children are enjoying the behavior, and consequently your child’s company, even if it is disgusting and irritating to the more civilized among us, then consider letting it go!

Tenet #4: Social Success Is Dependent On Our Ability to Adapt to Our Environment

The social behaviors that we engage in are dependent on the setting that we must function in. The environment is a coercive entity that dictates the behavior of those who are in it, at least for most us. Every setting has an established “standing pattern of behavior” that varies from one setting to another. For instance, the pattern of behavior expected in the library is quite different from that of a sporting event. We are required to modify the volume of our voice, the content of our discussions, and the movements of our bodies based on this established pattern of behavior. For many of us, the standing pattern of

behavior is easy to pick up on, even if we have never been in a given setting before. Whether it is a new restaurant, the first day of a workshop, or attending your friend's place of worship, we are able to adapt to the new standing pattern of behavior simply by observing the setting and emulating its participants.

Similarly, the expectations of our interactions vary depending on the person with whom we are interacting. For instance, more than likely, you act completely differently in interactions with your boss, a police officer, or with your spiritual adviser than you would with your best friend, spouse, or a family member.

Both of these areas are particularly problematic for children and adolescents on the autism spectrum. As a result, they may act no differently at the library than they do at a sporting event, or they may talk with peers in the same way they do with their teacher or a police officer. The ability to adapt to the environment is critical for successful social interactions, and it is dependent on our ability to successfully read and understand nonverbal and contextual cues and to modify our behavior based on these cues.

Tenet #5: Social Interaction Skills Are Not the Equivalent of Academic Skills

Interacting with peers is more similar to a quarterback dropping back to pass, reading a defense, and making a throw than it is to reading a book or doing a math problem. It involves planning, movement, analysis, and behavioral execution. Therefore, we cannot expect to be able to teach social interaction skills in the same way we do academic skills. Most children on the autism spectrum do not learn how to successfully initiate and maintain an interaction simply by listening to a lecture, watching a demonstration, completing a worksheet, or playing a computer or board game.

Social interaction skills are movement-based skills learned and mastered through practice and performance. I discovered this while working as a school psychologist intern. Desperate to find strategies to teach appropriate behaviors to the students on my caseload with behavioral difficulties, I tried a board game designed to teach appropriate classroom behavior. The game essentially required kids to answer the questions "What do you do if ...?" For instance, what do you do if another kid pushes you? Or, what should you do if you know the answer to a question the teacher asks? I discovered that students who struggled so mightily with their behavior in the classroom were quite adept at this game and were able to answer the questions with very little trouble. In other words, they could *tell* you what appropriate classroom behavior was, but they didn't *do* a very good job of demonstrating it in the classroom.

As discussed in the next chapter, worksheets, board games, and computer games can address one aspect of successful social interactions: declarative knowledge. But it is not sufficient. Performing socially (or “doing”) is what ultimately counts. Think of social interaction skills as a combination of the tango and chess—a combination of strategic planning, analytical thought, movement, adaptability, and perseverance is required to be successful.

If we want our children to be successful socially, we need to address these multifaceted areas in our social programming. Most important, we also must give them the opportunity to practice and develop their newly learned skills just as we would a dancer, gymnast, athlete, or chess champion.

Chapter Summary

The social skills program covered in this book is based on five fundamental tenets of social skills programming. The tenets incorporate both research on social skill programming and clinical experience.

- **Tenet #1:** Individuals on the autism spectrum want to establish meaningful social relationships.
- **Tenet #2:** If we want youth on the autism spectrum to be successful socially, we must teach them the skills to be successful.
- **Tenet #3:** Successful social behaviors are not always appropriate social behaviors.
- **Tenet #4:** Social success is dependent on our ability to adapt to our environment.
- **Tenet #5:** Social interaction skills are not the equivalent of academic skills.