BUILDING SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

**A Systematic Approach
to Teaching Social Interaction
Skills to Children and Adolescents
on the Autism Spectrum**

2

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This book is dedicated to my wife, Kelly,

and my sons, Zachary, Addison, and Easton—

the four loves of my life.

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To my wife, Kelly, who gives so much, yet asks for so little: Everything that I have done, and everything that I will do, is because of you. To my children, Zachary, Addison, and Easton, who have served as peer mentors in my social skills program since they were preschoolers, thank you for giving so much of your time to work in the family "business." Most importantly thank you for always being such good friends to your buddies on the autism spectrum. To my parents, David and Carol, you have provided me with the three greatest gifts: life, love, and education. For that I am eternally grateful.

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Finally, I would like to extend a special note of gratitude to the many individuals on the autism spectrum, family members, and professionals who have participated in my clinical practice, workshops, and various research projects over the years. This book is the culmination of what I have learned from each of you. I am proud and honored to share it with you and the wider community.

Dum Spiro, Spero—"While I breathe, I hope"

Introduction

The Second Edition of *Building Social Relationships* (BSR-II)

It has been nearly a decade since the publication of the original *Building Social Relationships* (BSR) book—a book that changed my life. When I wrote it, I hoped that at least a few people beyond my family and friends would read it. My expectations were indeed low. I was in no way prepared for the wonderful response the book would receive. I am certain that much of the success of the original BSR book had to do with its impeccable timing; it was written at a pivotal time in the field of autism. No doubt there was a clear need to teach social skills to youth on the autism spectrum, but many of us were struggling with how to do it *effectively*, and there was a dearth of available resources to guide us down the path of success. My original motivation for creating the BSR program was, in fact, motivated by my complete and utter embarrassment at the results of my own social skill interventions. I had been getting great results with my behavioral interventions, but my social skill interventions were simply ineffective, and if there is one thing I *cannot* stand, it is being ineffectual!

In the original BSR book, I wanted to promote the idea of teaching social skills *systematically*. "Practicing With Purpose" was my mantra for the book. I had no interest in changing anyone's theoretical orientation or diminishing the importance of anyone else's work. I had one primary goal: to improve and enhance the social outcomes of youth on the autism spectrum. To accomplish this, we needed to change the way we think about and, most importantly, how we teach social skills to youth on the spectrum. I hope that in some small way the BSR book accomplished this goal.

Since publication of the original BSR book, I have had the great fortune to present the BSR program to tens of thousands of parents and professionals all across the United States and beyond. These professional development workshops always leave me feeling excited and energized about the BSR program and the people who are implementing it. Today, there are numerous BSR programs in existence in schools and clinical settings across the United States. These programs take many shapes and forms and are being implemented by therapists, teachers, and parents who have read the book and/or attended

BSR workshops. I am heartened by the fact that these folks were able to use the information acquired in the book and workshop to improve the outcomes of their social skills program. However, learning is truly a two-way street. The feedback I have received from parents and professionals has helped me improve my own BSR program. As a result, the program has changed and developed since publication of the original book.

In 2008, I closed my private practice and opened the Social Skills Research Clinic (SSRC), a university-based clinic specializing in social skills programming for youth on the autism spectrum. The SSRC allows me to systematically study social skill strategies and train graduate student clinicians to implement the BSR program. It allows me to figure out what works and what doesn't work in my own BSR program and in social skills programming in general. Most importantly, it allows me to continually expand my own knowledge and skills in the area. In this second edition (BSR-II), when I refer to "our BSR program" I am explicitly referring to the social skills program being implemented at the SSRC. I use the term "our" to denote the substantial involvement of my wonderful and talented graduate students. It is every bit as much *their* BSR program as it is *my* program. As you read this book, I encourage you to continually think about how to design and/or improve *your* BSR program.

What's New in *Building Social Relationships,* Second Edition?

This is not a new book, per se. It is a second edition. As such, some areas of the book have not changed at all. Aside from some minor "tune-ups," the basic structure and conceptual framework of the BSR program has not changed (e.g., it is still a systematic Five-Step Model). With that said, many changes, updates, and additions have been made. Overall, BSR-II is infused with lessons I have learned in this past decade as a researcher and practitioner.

In terms of conceptualization, one very important change is apparent in the second edition: BSR-II emphasizes the importance of targeting *both* social skills *and* social-cognitive processing. This is reflected in the revisions to the "Thinking" component of the "Thinking, Feeling, Doing" conceptualization introduced in the original BSR. BSR-II highlights the roles of social problem solving, observational learning, and attention in addition to the roles of knowledge, perspective taking, and self-awareness covered in the original book. To reflect this in practice, BSR-II divides the intervention strategy chapters into strategies to teach *social skills* and strategies to teach and activate *social-cognitive processing*.

This enhancement in conceptualization also necessitated an expansion in strategies, particularly in social-cognitive strategies. BSR-II provides 10 new

strategies to add to your intervention tool chest, many of which were created, developed, studied, and refined in our BSR program at the SSRC. Furthermore, many of the original intervention strategies have been updated or modified to reflect the knowledge gleaned in research and practice. Numerous changes to the implementation procedures of the BSR model (step four of the Five-Step Model) are also covered in BSR-II, including the use of a structured play activity (SPA) and updated session structure plans. In all, BSR-II contains more than 40 social skill intervention strategies.

The two assessment chapters (Chapter 5 and 12) have also been updated to reflect current best practices in the field of social skills programming and current assessment practices in our BSR program. A renewed emphasis is placed on linking intervention objectives to targeted component skills and using outcome measures to monitor progress. Along these lines, BSR-II also contains an updated version of my widely distributed social competence measure, the Autism Social Skills Profile.

In Closing

The people I have met "on the road" this past decade have been extraordinary. I am certain that many of them are reading these words now. It has been your stories, ideas, encouragement, tears, and laughter that have inspired me to write this second edition of BSR. Let me say this now: this book is for you!

Effective Social Skills Programming

for Youth on the Autism Spectrum: From Hope to Reality

> *"I am not asking for my child to be the life of the party, or a social butter-fly. I just want her to be happy and have some friends of her own. She is a wonderful kid, and I hope someday others can see that."*
>
> —MOTHER OF A CHILD ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

When I first shared this quote in the original BSR book, I wanted to communicate the frustration many parents felt regarding their child's social functioning and social skills programming. Parents could see the potential and desire in their children to make friends but were frustrated by the lack of programs and resources available to foster this potential. This particular parent was lamenting the fact that her child had many wonderful qualities to offer, but these qualities were going unnoticed by others. Her wish was simple: she wanted to help her daughter make just *one* friend. Fortunately, she found an effective social skills program for her daughter, and she got her wish and so much more. By sharing this quote, I wanted to communicate what I believe to be the *essence* of social skills programming: to promote positive and enduring social relationships in youth on the autism spectrum—that is, to *build social relationships*.

I was also trying to counter—no, to *challenge*—the long-held notion in the field of autism that social skills programming was futile for most children on the autism spectrum because they were destined for a life of isolation and solitary

play. The prevailing sentiment at the time was that we might be able to get the child to *tolerate* social interactions, but we would probably never teach them to *thrive* and enjoy social interactions. Fortunately, much has changed in the past decade! Our knowledge of social skills programming has expanded, and the number of available resources has exploded. Consequently, our hopes and expectations for youth on the spectrum have also been elevated. I have seen the changes firsthand in the children participating in my BSR program and in the stories I hear from parents and practitioners all across the United States. Youth on the autism spectrum are making and keeping friends more than ever, and yes, some are even blossoming into "social butterflies" in their own right.

The social "ceiling" for youth on the autism spectrum has never been higher. However, there is still so much work to be done. I still hear from many parents who are tremendously concerned about their child's social functioning and their future quality of life. They still see them struggling to build and maintain social relationships; still see them experiencing peer failure, rejection, and relentless bullying; still see them dealing with social anxiety and depression; and still see them experiencing social isolation. Not coincidentally, I also am still hearing from practitioners who are frustrated by the tepid results of their social skills program. I guess the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Now, more than ever, our field and, more importantly, our children are in desperate need of effective social skill programs. Not just EASY social skills programs, but EFFECTIVE social skills programs. I have revised this book with the lasting beliefs that we have long undervalued social skill instruction in our schools and clinics and that we have significantly underestimated the social potential of individuals on the spectrum. The time for change is long overdue.

What Are Social Interaction Skills?

Prior to discussing *effective* social skills programming, we should start by clarifying what social skills are. There still seems to be much confusion regarding the term *social skills*. To some, social skills refer to skills that assist a child in developing social relationships. To others, social skills refer to any behaviors that keep a child out of trouble! To avoid confusion, it is important to present a working definition. I am essentially an academic geek. As such, my favorite definition of *social skills* happens to be quite dry and boring: "Socially accepted learned behaviors that enable a person to interact with others in ways that elicit positive responses and assist the person in avoiding negative responses" (Elliott, Racine, & Busse, 1995, p. 1009).

For those of you who fell asleep somewhere between "socially acceptable" and "elicit positive responses," let me tease out the important points of the

definition. For me, the most important aspect of the definition is the phrase "learned behaviors." Social skills are indeed learned. Whether you are asking a peer to play on the swings or asking your boss for a raise, you are using social skills that you have learned in the course of your life.

Yet here is the rub. Most "neurotypical" children acquire basic social skills (e.g., turn taking, initiating conversations) quickly and easily through experience, modeling, and trial and error. The brains of most children are seemingly prewired to learn and perform social behaviors. For children on the autism spectrum, however, the process is much more difficult. Whereas many children learn these basic skills simply through exposure to social situations, children on the spectrum often need to be taught skills explicitly, or, in the case of social-cognitive processes, they need to have them *activated*.

The second important aspect of the definition is the phrase "elicit positive responses and assist in avoiding negative responses"—that is, when we teach social skills, we need to continually ask ourselves: "Will this skill be positively received by peers, and will it help the child avoid negative responses from peers?" Remember, the purpose of social skills instruction is to facilitate *positive* interactions with *peers*. Sometimes we make the mistake of focusing too much on teaching skills that only adults will appreciate, such as manners and etiquette.

Social skills, or social behaviors, are tremendously important to consider and target when designing a social skills program, but they represent merely half of the equation. We must also target social-cognitive processing. Social cognition involves our understanding of the thoughts, intentions, motives, and behaviors of ourselves and others (Flavell, Miller, & Miller, 1993). To be successful socially, we must engage in effective social-cognitive processing, such as perspective taking, self-awareness, social problem solving, and attention.

I have a personal confession to make: I am captivated by social behavior! I can't stop myself from watching and eavesdropping on the social interactions of others. To me, no television show can match the intrigue and drama of real-life social interactions. It is also a wonderful way to learn about social interaction skills. Much of the conceptualization that I present in this book comes directly from observing people (both children and adults) interact with others. The next time you find yourself at a school board meeting, fast-food joint, faculty gathering, cocktail party, or other social functioning, watch how people interact. Notice what they are doing, acting, feeling. Notice how they move their bodies, modulate the tone of their voices, or express their feelings and interests through nonverbal means. Although I can't predict exactly what you will observe, you are bound to notice a great variety in the styles and skill levels of these adult participants.

Let's move on to school-aged children and the seemingly chaotic social environment that is the school playground. What are the kids doing? Are they standing around chatting about current affairs and other worldly matters? NO! They are doing what kids were meant to do. They are playing, running, spinning, jumping, arguing their points, braiding hair, and chasing each other. Now ask yourself the following questions: What are the characteristics and qualities of the children who are socially successful? What social interaction skills are required for children to be successful in this environment, and how do we teach these skills? It is the answers to these and similar questions that this book will attempt to answer.

Finally, when I discuss social skills in this book, I am not just referring to generic "pro-social" skills such as raising your hand to speak, standing quietly in line, or other behaviors that make adults happy or our jobs easier. I am referring to *social interaction* skills because the term accentuates the human *interactional* component of social skills. The term also incorporates both social skills (or behaviors) and social-cognitive processing because both are essential to successful social interactions. *Social interaction skills are the building blocks of successful social relationships*.

Why Teach Social Interaction Skills?

Social interaction skills are critical to successful social, emotional, and cognitive development. Although social skill deficits are a central feature of autism spectrum disorder (ASD), few children receive adequate social skills programming (Hume, Bellini, & Pratt, 2005). This is a troubling reality, especially considering that the presence of social impairment may portend the development of more detrimental outcomes. Poor social skills have been linked to numerous negative social and emotional outcomes such as social failure and peer rejection, bullying (for both the bully and victim), anxiety, depression, substance abuse, suicidal ideation, delinquency, and other forms of psychopathology (Bellini, 2006; Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010; Tantam, 2000). Furthermore, positive social skills and social-emotional instruction have been associated with positive academic outcomes such as improved grades and test scores (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

Most important to quality of life outcomes, social skill deficits impede our ability to establish meaningful social relationships, which often leads to withdrawal and a life of social isolation. Our lives are filled with thousands of social interactions and relationships that make up our social network or support system. Many of these relationships are rich and meaningful; others are not so fulfilling. Regardless, our social network provides the foundation for later social relationships and career opportunities. In fact, according to prominent researcher Sheldon Cohen (2004), the presence of a social support system may prevent

or even eliminate the stress associated with peer failure by promoting the ability to cope with stress. Cohen has also found that participation in positive social relationships promotes positive psychological states, such as self-worth, self-efficacy, and positive affect (i.e., general happiness). Finally, Cohen's research has shown that social participation (which he refers to as *social integration*) even promotes physical health and reduces susceptibility to certain medical illnesses.

As we develop and establish relationships with more people, our social network expands—friends beget friends. However, this expansion of the social network, and the benefits that come with it, will only occur if we have the necessary social interaction skills to be successful. Teaching these social interaction skills is the primary purpose of the BSR program.

The Need for EFFECTIVE Social Skills Programming

In our zeal to advocate for social skills programming for children on the autism spectrum, we sometimes find ourselves settling for ANY social skills program. Yet research on social skills interventions suggests that being in a social skills program does not necessarily guarantee that your child will learn and demonstrate successful social skills. I am sure that this does not come as a surprise to most of you; I receive countless numbers of calls and email messages from parents of children on the autism spectrum who are dissatisfied with their child's social skills program. We don't just need more social skills programming, we need *better* social skills programming.

A number of meta-analytical studies have been performed on social skill intervention studies involving children and adolescents with and without ASD. *Meta-analysis* refers to a systematic review of the collective outcomes of a particular area of inquiry. A primary purpose of a meta-analysis is to determine whether a particular strategy is effective. In general, these studies have yielded variable results on the effectiveness of social skill interventions for youth, with most indicating that social skill interventions often produce disappointing treatment outcomes (Bellini, Peters, Benner, & Hopf, 2007; Forness & Kavale, 1996; Gresham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001; Mathur, Kavale, Quinn, Forness, and Rutherford, 1998; Quinn, Kavale, Mathur, Rutherford, & Forness, 1999; Reichow & Volkmar, 2010; Wang, Parrila, & Cui, 2012; Wang & Spillane, 2009).

In 2007, I unwittingly set off a firestorm in the field of autism with the publication of a meta-analysis on school-based social skills interventions for children and adolescents on the autism spectrum (Bellini, Peters, Benner, & Hopf, 2007). Results of the meta-analysis suggested that school-based social skills interventions were only minimally effective for these children. Nearly half of the reviewed studies produced ineffectual intervention effects and most produced

poor generalization effects (i.e., the results did not transfer to other settings or with other persons not involved in the intervention). This last finding was very important because if you don't have generalization, then you do not have an effective social skills program.

I received many calls and emails from parents, clinicians, and researchers after the study was published, and many were quite positive. However, not all were so congratulatory. Some of the folks who contacted me were actually quite angry! One parent even called me "anti-social skills training." I could understand where she was coming from, but still, that was harsh! Calling me anti-social skills training is a little like calling a registered dietician "anti-diet" for saying that most diet plans fail. Well, guess what: most diets do fail. You know what else? Most social skills programs fail too! But they don't have to fail. They just have to be implemented better.

The Ingredients of Effective Programming

Though hard to swallow for some, the results of these previous meta-analytical studies provided us with a great deal of useful information. Most importantly, they provided us with the "ingredients" of successful social skills programming, such as using a sufficient dosage (i.e., number of hours of intervention), implementing interventions in natural environments, discerning between types of skill deficits, conducting a thorough assessment of social skills, identifying the precise component skills that needed to be targeted, and perhaps most importantly, implementing social skills programming systematically. My research and clinical experience makes it abundantly clear to me that social skills training can be quite effective when these ingredients are applied to the social skills program (Bellini, Benner, & Peters-Myszak, 2009). This section briefly discusses the ingredients of successful social skills programming as elucidated by meta-analytical research and my own clinical experiences.

Gresham et al. (2001) recommended that social skill interventions be implemented more intensely and frequently than the level presently delivered to children with social skill deficits. Although the researchers did not recommend a specific dosage, they stated that 30 hours of instruction spread over 10–12 weeks was insufficient. If you are an educator, you are probably thinking "How in the world can we teach social skills for 30 hours over the course of 10–12 weeks?" The answer is that you can't! Social skills training should take place throughout the day and in every environment that the child enters, including the home, the school, and the community.

Gresham and colleagues also noted that the weak outcomes of social skill interventions can be attributed to the fact that these interventions often take place in "contrived, restricted, and decontextualized" (p. 340) settings, such

as resource rooms or other "pull-out" settings. The results of my meta-analysis supported this assertion. Intervention and generalization effects were significantly lower for interventions that were implemented in pull-out settings only (Bellini et al., 2007). Think about the absurdity here. We pull kids out of rich social environments (classroom or playground) to teach social skills in a contrived setting (resource room). That's like a football coach pulling his team off the field and taking them to Starbucks to run through some plays!

Does this mean that we should stop teaching social skills in pull-out settings? No, but it does make it clear that we can't *only* teach social skills in pull-out settings. In other words, social skills training should not stop the moment the child leaves the resource room or therapist's office. Remember this mantra: *Every environment the child enters presents an opportunity to teach social skills.*

Matching the type of skill deficit with the type of intervention strategy is also an essential aspect of quality social skills programming (Gresham et al., 2001) and is a key feature of the BSR model (step two of the Five-Step Model, discussed later in this chapter). Discerning between types of skill deficits (skill acquisition deficits and performance deficits) is essential because it guides our selection of intervention strategies. It determines whether we need to teach a new skill or enhance the performance of an existing skill. In my meta-analysis, only 1 of the 55 studies purposefully matched the type of intervention strategy to the type of skill deficit. I should add that this one study also demonstrated positive outcomes.

Another ingredient of effective social skills programming is comprehensive assessment (Step 1 of the BSR model). It is imperative that we assess the child's social functioning before, during, and after social skills programming. Without an assessment component, interventions are poorly conceptualized and lacking in direction and objectivity. Too often professionals and parents begin social skill interventions without conducting a thorough social skills assessment. When asked what they are teaching the child, they may respond "friendship skills" or "social skills." What exactly does that mean? It would be analogous to a mathematics teacher responding to a similar question with "math skills" or a dance instructor with "dance skills." Assessment allows us to identify and target the precise social skills the child needs to be successful in social interactions with peers. Quinn et al. (1999) found that social skills programs that targeted specific social skills (e.g., turn taking, social initiations) were more effective than programs that focused on more global social functioning, such as friendship skills, cooperation, and so on. We need specificity in our intervention planning. We do not teach friendship skills, we teach the specific skills that compose "friendship skills," such as joining in an activity with peers, asking a peer to join you in an activity, responding to the greeting of others, initiating a greeting, reading and understanding the facial expressions of others, inferring

the interests of others, maintaining reciprocal conversations, and so on. In addition, without assessment it is impossible to know for sure whether the social skills program is effective.

Another reason why social skills strategies—especially those designed for the general population of children, such as board games, classroom activities, and software packages about friendships and appropriate classroom behavior— may not be effective for children on the autism spectrum is because they tend to be too subtle or indirect. For instance, a school counselor was frustrated with the progress she was making with a student on the autism spectrum. She stated that the program was showing positive results with "other kids in the group," but the student on the spectrum didn't seem to "get it." Indeed, he was not "getting it!" The reason was quite apparent. The school counselor was attempting to teach the students about the concept of friendship using board games and by showing videos depicting other children signing songs about being a "good friend." This may be acceptable for some children, but for children on the spectrum it is too subtle a form of instruction. Instead of spending countless hours teaching the child about the concept of friendship, the instruction should have focused on skills that the child could use to make and keep friends. Plus, the concept of friendship is much easier to understand once you have had a friend or two! For example, I worked with one child who told me that he had two friends at school. When I asked his teachers about this they informed me that those two "friends" were actually two girls who followed him around calling him names and making fun of him. To him, they were friends simply because they were the only two kids on the playground who paid attention to him!

These ingredients to effective programming will permeate the content of this book, because they were considered very carefully when I developed and later modified the BSR program. The BSR program addresses the need for *effective* social programming for youth on the autism spectrum by providing a systematic social skills program that incorporates these ingredients at each step of the model.

The Building Social Relationships Program: A Systematic Five-Step Model for Social Skills Programming

Systematic is defined as "methodical in plan and procedure, and marked by thoroughness and regularity; presented or formulated as a coherent body of ideas or principles" (merriamwebster.com). Applying this definition, we can say that much of the academic and behavioral programming in schools is often delivered systematically. When dealing with problem behaviors, schools often follow a process that utilizes a functional behavior assessment. First, they

determine the function of a behavior by identifying antecedents and consequences. Next, educators develop a hypothesis as to why the behavior is occurring and then develop an individual behavior plan that addresses the data collected in the assessment.

In addition to behavioral programming, schools routinely address academic functioning systematically. For academic skills, many schools are implementing a response to intervention approach to programming that emphasizes the collection of systematic data. In this approach, teachers collect pre-assessment data to ascertain the child's current level of functioning. They then provide instruction that is suited to the child's individual level of performance. Performance is then assessed on a continual basis throughout the school year. The use of functional behavior assessment (FBA) and response to intervention (RtI) approaches in the schools is driven by federal special education laws that mandate their use.

When it comes to social skills programming in schools, systematic programming is not always taking place. Usually schools have no organized plan for teaching social skills. Although social goals are commonly developed for students on the autism spectrum, they are rarely based on a reliable and valid assessment of social functioning. Furthermore, seldom do social skill interventions proceed in a methodical or systematic fashion. Commonly, social skills programming is relegated to inferior status and only implemented when teachers and other school practitioners have the extra time to address it. Another common occurrence is for educators to deliver a single intervention strategy under the guise of social skills programming. For instance, a member of the school team might go to a workshop on the topic of social narratives, become enthusiastic about writing stories, and then proceed to implement this strategy for numerous students on her caseload and for every behavior that occurs! For the child who makes inappropriate comments, she writes a story. For the child who violates the personal space of others, she writes a story. For the boy who runs into the girls' bathroom—you guessed it, she writes another story. This is an example of *chasing a behavior*. This is not systematic programming.

The problem with this method is that implementing a single strategy without conducting an assessment or determining how the strategy fits into the child's overall social skills program is not *systematic programming*. In addition, instead of chasing multiple behaviors, we need to determine (via assessment) which common underlying deficits may be contributing to their occurrence. For instance the student may be making inappropriate comments, violating personal space, and running into the girls' bathroom as a result of an inability to read nonverbal cues of others, take another person's perspective, and a lack of self-awareness. Instead of a single social narratives, the student would probably benefit from a social narratives intervention as well as instruction on reading nonverbal cues, perspective taking, self-awareness, and behavior rehearsal to practice the skills covered in the social narratives. Instead of

implementing an intervention for each problem behavior, this more complete intervention would likely address all three behaviors because it addresses the underlying deficits contributing to the behaviors. In this example, the educator's mistake was not the use of a social narratives; it was the use of the social narratives in isolation and without first collecting data on the nature of the child's social skill deficits. Her intervention, although well intended, was short sighted, disjointed, and too narrowly focused. Systematic programming follows a methodical and orderly process that is thorough and comprehensive.

A primary purpose of the BSR program is to guide parents and professionals through the process of designing and implementing effective social skills programming for children on the autism spectrum. Although practical strategies and tools are presented, this book is more than just a collection of activities. I have spoken to parents and professionals who have purchased books and resources that were filled with wonderful activities, worksheets, and other strategies to teach social skills to children on the spectrum. Unfortunately, many never got around to using them or used them briefly before giving up. The most common complaints that I hear from parents and professionals is that they don't know where to begin the program or how to use the various strategies available to them. Another frustration I hear from parents is that the particular strategy proposed in the book was not effective for their child. Indeed, not all strategies are effective for every child. As such, it is imperative that we not put all our eggs in one basket, as it were, when it comes to selecting and utilizing intervention strategies.

The BSR program is purposefully flexible enough to allow room for a comprehensive array of strategy options. It provides both a conceptual framework for understanding social functioning and practical tools for assessing and teaching social skills to children on the autism spectrum. The BSR program addresses the ingredients of effective and systematic social programming. The model incorporates the following Five-Step Model:

1. Assess Social Functioning

2. Distinguish Between Skill Acquisition and Performance Deficits

3. Select Intervention Strategies

4. Implement Intervention

5. Evaluate and Monitor Progress

The first step of the model consists of conducting a thorough assessment of the individual's current level of social skills functioning. This book provides information on how to evaluate social performance and how to identify the specific skills that will be the target of the intervention. After the assessment is complete, step two is to discern between skill acquisition deficits and performance deficits. Information is provided on how to distinguish between these

two types of skill deficits. Step three uses this information for the selection of intervention strategies. You will learn how to select strategies that provide the greatest opportunity for program success. A wide selection of strategies will be covered. Guidelines for implementing the strategies, step four, also will be covered. Finally, step five involves evaluating progress and modifying interventions as needed, and you will be given the tools to take this step and shown how to use them effectively.

Although I use the term *steps*, it is important to note that the BSR model is not perfectly linear. In real life, applications, social skills instruction does not follow a lock-step sequence from step one to step five. For instance, it is not uncommon to identify additional social skill deficits (step one) in the middle of the implementation process (step four). In addition, it is important to continually assess and modify the intervention as additional information and data are accumulated.

The Goal and Structure of the BSR-II Book

Parents and professionals often ask *how to* teach social skills and *how to* design social skills programs for children on the autism spectrum. Often they are seeking answers to basic questions such as "Where do we start?" and "What strategies do we use?" BSR-II will answer those questions and more. The book will show you where to start and how to implement a social skills program for children on the autism spectrum. It will also show you how to organize and make sense of the myriad social skill strategies and resources currently available to parents and professionals. BSR-II is not meant to replace those other books that you may already have purchased or strategies that you have learned. Instead, it will use them and help you synthesize them into one comprehensive program. Think of this as a "guidebook" more than a cookbook. You will be given a recipe to help guide your social skills programming, but you are strongly encouraged to refine the ingredients to suit the unique needs of your child, your student, your client, and your BSR program.

The success of a social skills program is dependent on the cooperation and contribution of both parents (and other family members and caregivers) and professionals (teachers, counselors, speech and language pathologists, social workers, occupational and physical therapists, psychologists, physicians, case managers, and many others). Social skills are best taught across a variety of settings, including home, community, classroom, resource room, playground, and therapeutic clinic. With this in mind, I provide ideas and strategies that are useful and understandable to both groups and in many settings. I also write this book with the understanding that those who read this text have varying levels of experience and knowledge related to social skills programming. Therefore, I have attempted to avoid technical jargon as much as possible

without watering down the message. In sections where jargon is either useful or unavoidable, I have provided sufficient context and explanation so that it can be understood by the most inexperienced of readers.

In most instances, I will be presenting information that is applicable to *both* parents and professionals. In some cases, the message might be more applicable to *either* parents *or* professionals. Sometimes, I write directly to a specific discipline (i.e., teachers or therapists). However, since collaboration between parents and professionals is imperative to the success of social skills programming, I have tried to make every word relevant to all who read it. My hope is that this book will be passed back and forth between parents and professionals to promote both understanding and collaboration. I want it to be tattered, torn, and coffee stained. That is, I want it to be used—and used a lot!

The content of this book reflects my dual role as researcher and practitioner. No doubt, I care about things such as data, empirical evidence, and conceptual foundations, and BSR-II embodies that, especially in the first few chapters. (I'm sure you are getting goose bumps just thinking about that!) However, I am fully aware of the fact that 99% of the readers of this book are looking for practical strategies that work. BSR-II embodies that as well. I also recognize that too often researchers examine interventions in tightly controlled settings and laboratories that share no resemblance to the chaos of the REAL WORLD. This unfortunately can lead to results that have no practical relevance to parents and practitioners, and interventions that are virtually impossible to implement outside the research setting.

This book is different. It is for parents and professionals who operate under real-world circumstances and who want to teach children on the spectrum how to be successful in real-world situations. I do not want to waste your time and money on an overhyped, ineffectual program that fails to deliver on its promises. My goal is to provide you with a model that allows you to practice with purpose and to systematically evaluate and modify your programming on a continual basis. The result is a collection of practical strategies that are provided within the context of a coherent conceptual framework.