Teaching Social Skills to Students with Autism

Alecia Krapp

University of Mary

“Social skills are the specific behaviors that an individual uses to competently perform social tasks. Furthermore, social skills are behaviors that must be taught, learned, and performed” (DeMatteo, Arter, Sworen-Parise, Fasciana, Paulhamus, 2012). Without proficient social skills, people would struggle not only in school, but also in the real world when it comes to getting a job, doing everyday tasks such as grocery shopping, and even relationships could be affected. Social skills are essential for people to live healthy and happy. The earlier social skills start getting taught, the better off the child will be because even at a young age it is vital for children to be able to communicate with their peers, parents, teachers, etc. Because social skills are so crucial, it is important for students with disabilities to develop and be able to apply the skills as well. Autism is a type of disability that causes students with it to struggle with the social aspect of their life. Since social situations are a struggle for people with Autism, it is crucial for parents and educators to start teaching social skills at an early age. It needs to be stressed more with a student with Autism than it does with a student who does not have Autism.

When teaching social skills, it is important to keep in mind what is considered a social skill and what different ones are necessary to teach. Some social skills that need to be taught are conversational skills, play skills, understanding emotions, dealing with conflict, and friendship skills. Not everyone with the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is the same which is important to keep in mind because this means social skills will have to be taught in different ways and with different techniques. Dr. Lorna Wing categorized the types of difficulties students with ASD may have into four sub-groups. The first is the ‘aloof’ child which is when the child appears to be withdrawn and indifferent to other people. Second is the ‘passive’ child which is when the child will not make spontaneous approaches to other people, but will accept contact if started by others. Next is the ‘active but odd’ child who will approach other children enthusiastically, but this will mostly be in an odd manner. Lastly, the ‘over formal, stilted group’ is when the person uses overly formal language and behavior and are excessively polite. This usually occurs in teenagers and young adults (The National Autistic Society).

Once the individualized education program team of a student with ASD knows and understands the personality and how he or she learns best, it is time to set up a social skills program. According to LaMarce, there are five basic steps to follow when planning a social skills program. The first step is to define one or more social behaviors the student needs to learn in measureable terms. The second step is to use distinct trial teaching techniques while discussing with and teaching the student a new social behavior. This is when social stories would be great to use. The next step is practice using the social skills with peers by role-modeling and video modeling. Step four is transitioning from practicing in structured situations to practicing in real social situations. Lastly, the final step is checking the progress of the student (LaMarca, 2008).

There are so many research articles out there available for teachers and parents to read to help inform them about efficient strategies and techniques for teaching social skills for students with the Autism Spectrum Disorder. Before looking at social skill training ideas, it is crucial to understand what social thinking is. According to Michelle Garcia Winner, a Congressional-award winning speech-language pathologist who specializes in treating students who experience social and communication difficulties, social thinking is “An intuitive process that allows us to consider the points of view, emotions, and intentions of others,” (Winner). Social thinking is also a neurological process people are blessed with at birth and learn throughout infancy. People with ASD, lack this process therefore disabling them to think socially. Thankfully, social thinking can be taught as well as the different social skills. Social skills help students with ASD know how to act and react in social situations, but being taught social thinking clarifies to them why social skills need to be developed. It teaches why people use certain social behaviors and helps people with ASD understand the whole meaning of the social world.

“Individuals who successfully develop social skills demonstrate greater independence, social acceptance, adaptive behavior, and employment success,” (Yakubova, Taber-Doughty, Purdue University, 2013). Like mentioned before, there is a ton of research about effective strategies and techniques to use to help teach social skills to students with ASD. One strategy that showed to be very effective after a study was video modeling with verbal prompting included. Students with ASD in the study said they liked watching the video because it was easy to understand (Yakubova, 2013). The verbal prompts were applied only if the student was struggling when practicing the social skill. To make it clear, video modeling involves demonstrating desired behaviors and role-playing through video images (Oglivie, 2011). It is beneficial to choose skilled student peers to act in the video models. The students with ASD will have a better understanding and interest if they see their peers in the video models. Also, peers need to be taught to model specific social behaviors and reinforce new social skills with natural, social rewards (Frea, 2014). To implement the intervention of using video modeling, the first step is to introduce the skill to the student and who the peer mentor he or she will be practicing with later on. Step two is to review the steps of the skill. Next is to show the video model to the student. After showing the video, allow the student to practice the skill with his or her peer mentor. The final step is to review all the steps of the skill (Ogilvie, 2011).

Another common, but efficient strategy to use when teaching social skills is Social Stories. Social Stories try to identify the situation in which a behavior occurred, describe the perspective of people involved, and provide procedures for what the student should do. Christopher Denning (2007) said, “The advantage of Social Stories seems to address social understanding and to provide behavioral solutions to the student in a concrete and portable form,” (p. 17). However, Social Stories should be used with other interventions as well. There are six different types of sentences suggested to use when making Social Stories. The types are descriptive, perspective, cooperative, directive, affirmative, and control. There is also a formula to follow if one chooses to use it when creating Social Stories. The formula implies there should be twice as many descriptive sentences as directive or control sentences combined.

A research study was done about the use of drama to teach social skills in a special school setting for students with ASD. According to the article, drama can provide a context in which skills can be practiced and learned and also lead to students feeling confident (Kempe, Tissot, 2012). Drama allows a safe place for students to practice their social skills and also provides a great opportunity for inclusion. It is important for teachers to be creative when teaching social skills therefore drama is a very creative and effective strategy.

Another creative strategy for assisting students with ASD in developing social skills is therapeutic horseback riding. A study using this technique was done for 21 elementary students with ASD. The students were taught the basic riding skills for controlling the horses. The first lessons consisted of touching the shavings from a stall, holding the lead rope, and putting snacks for the horses in the feed buckets (Ward, Whalon, Rusnak, Wendell, Paschall, 2013). The next lessons involved mounting the horses and doing a continuous non-stop movement for ten to fifteen minutes with no interaction with the team or instructor unless it was necessary for safety. After the ten weeks of therapy horseback riding, the study showed improvement of social communication, attention, tolerance, and reactions to sensory input in the classroom (Ward, 2013).

When teaching social skills, it is beneficial and effective to make it fun too. There are various activities and games for children and teenagers to play that help develop social skills. A couple social skill building games for children are the name game and follow the leader. Other activities for students are charades, team sports, and make the statue laugh (Dewar, 2013). Team sports allow students with ASD to practice numerous social skills such as being a good loser, showing respect to others, showing encouragement to other players who may be less skilled, and how to fix problems without running to the teacher (Dewar, 2013).

Recess is also a great time for the development of social skills for students with the Autism Spectrum Disorder. In a study, researchers decided to take the advantage of using recess to figure out what would allow more social skill building time during recess. They came up with idea of introducing a new game to all of the students each week. The rules were directly taught, modeled, practiced, and played which encouraged all students to play (Schoen, Bullard, 2002). After weeks of teaching games, there were many games to choose from. Students could take turns picking the game to play during recess.

Other activities for older students to work on social skills are creating political posters in groups and mock job interviews (Dewer, 2013). Mock interviews are very effective because it allows students with ASD to learn how to ask and answer questions appropriately. It is definitely needed to know for after high-school when it is time to obtain an adult job.

Parents play a very essential role in their child’s life. Social skills not only need to be taught in a school setting, but also in the home. There are many activities parents can do with their child. Some activities to help with eye contact are staring contests, playing eyes on the forehead using a sticker, and even swinging outside (12 Activities to Help Your Child with Social Skills, 2011).

Idioms can be very challenging for children with ASD to understand. Most people with ASD tend to take everything very literal, so it is crucial for them to learn and understand idioms. In order to help teach idioms, parents can read books about them to their child, play online games, or playing a memory game (12 Activities to Help Your Child with Social Skills, 2011).

As mentioned above, it is crucial for parents to be part of the process for developing social skills for their child with ASD. A study was done to see if sessions available for the parents and teenagers with ASD to attend for working on social skills would be effective. Some of the different sessions included in the study were instruction about rules of electronic communication, identifying what peer group their child wants to be in and what peer group would he or she best fit in, and how to resolve an argument with a peer (Laugeson, Frankel, Mogil, Dillion, 2008). The study showed improved knowledge of social skills for the teenagers with ASD.

Overall, it is important to know and understand the student with ASD, different strategies to use to teach social skills, as well as making it fun and creative, and getting the parents involved. Both teachers and parents should remember if the student or child with ASD seems to lack a desire for learning social skills, that it is not necessarily the reason for it. It could be an attention, timing, or a sensory issue (What can Help Improve Social Interaction and Development?, 2008). If the social skills training is fun and engaging, the students will more likely cooperate and most importantly learn the needed social skills. The overall goal is to ensure the students with ASD develop the social skills because this is what will set them up for the most success in the future.

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