



Social Skills

About social functioning

Socialising with others requires many skills. These include being able to express thoughts or ideas, listen and understand what others say, show an interest in others, and share or take turns. Non-verbal behaviours are also important for socialising. These include using and understanding gestures, reading facial expressions, knowing how close to stand to others and whether it is okay to touch someone.

Many things impact the way we interact with others. This includes personality traits (e.g. shy and quiet versus outgoing and energetic), mental health (e.g. feeling sad or low, compared with feeling happy and energised), ability to manage emotions (e.g. coping with frustration), and cognitive and communication skills (e.g. talking; using and understanding gestures; reading facial expressions; controlling impulses).

Students with developmental disabilities often find some aspects of social situations challenging. For example, a child with autism may play well with one child, but feel overwhelmed if more children join in. Social rules or norms can be hard for some children to understand and learn. They are not written down and not always explicitly taught.

Evidence-based strategies

Teach social skills

- To teach a child a social skill, explain exactly what they should do. For example, if they are learning to meet someone teach them what to say and do (e.g. 'Hello, my name is James'). Instructions that are not concrete and specific may be difficult for a child to follow (e.g. 'be nice').

Model social skills

- Consider demonstrating social skills that are important at school, or have another child demonstrate. It may be helpful to watch videos that show a social skill, and to point out the skill to the child. Another option is giving a child a picture card showing a social skill just before an opportunity to use that skill.



Encourage and acknowledge effort

- Children may respond well to praise or encouragement when practising or using a good social skill.

Practise social skills

- It can be helpful to create opportunities for children to work together and practise social skills. Be deliberate. For example organise games in which children need to co-operate. Have children act out short dramas about social situations. Ask children to practise a specific social situation or skill during playtime. Encourage a child to copy other children's social behaviour.

Set clear social rules

- Children who struggle with social skills may be left out by other children. Clear rules for the class about how to treat each other may help. Consider establishing a clear system to manage any exclusion, teasing or bullying.

Encourage peer interaction

- Pointing out common interests among children can encourage friendships. For example, suggest students talk about soccer or music at recess time.

Stories

- It may help to read stories that show or talk about how to act in different social situations. Access AllPlay Learn's [stories](#).

Best practice tips

Have full participation

- Come up with activities that get everyone involved. For example, avoid games where children get eliminated. Similarly, consider picking teams or partners so children aren't picked last.

Joining in may take time

- A child might not be able to join in with the class straight away. They may need to join the group in their own time or you might need to find a way to ease them into the group.



Other considerations

Behaviour

- Some children may not understand social norms about personal space without clear instruction. Consider teaching all children about boundaries. Be specific. For example, talk about how close to stand to others and whether (and where) it is ok to touch someone.

Other co-occurring conditions

- Students with social challenges may also experience [autism](#), [attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder \(ADHD\)](#), [oppositional defiant disorder](#), [blind or low vision](#), [d/Deaf and hard of hearing](#), or [anxiety](#).
- Refer to information about these areas to help support the child.

Relevant resources

Visit our [resources page](#) for a range of resources that can help to create inclusive education environments for children with disabilities and developmental challenges. Some particularly relevant resources for children with social issues include our [stories](#), and:

- Strengths and abilities communication checklist
- Emotion cards
- Problem solving guide