



Social Skills

About social skills

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).

Children 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 say and do. For example, ask them to say: 'Hello' when they see a child for the first time. Instructions that are not concrete and specific (e.g. 'be nice') may be difficult for a child to follow.

Model social skills

- Consider demonstrating social skills that are important or have another child demonstrate. Another option is giving a child a picture card showing a social skill just before an opportunity to use that skill.

Encouragement

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



Practise social skills

- Create opportunities for children to work together and practise social skills. Be deliberate. For example, organise games in which children need to co-operate. Use interactive music where children act out social skills. Create play opportunities that practise different social skills or settings (e.g. asking for help at the pretend supermarket). Encourage a child to copy other children's social behaviours.

Stories

- It may help to read stories that show or talk about how to act in different social situations.

Best practice tips

Have full participation

- Come up with activities that get everyone involved. For example, avoid games where children are eliminated. Similarly, considering picking teams or pairs so no-one is left out.

Joining in may take time

- A child might not be able to join in with the group 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.

Set clear social rules

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

Encourage peer interaction

- Pointing out common interests among children can encourage building relationships. For example, suggest children talk about their favourite game at snack time.



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.
- Refer to the [ABC approach](#) for more information on how to reduce challenging behaviour by supporting the child and promoting more helpful behaviour, and our [emotions page](#) for more information about supporting a child with managing their emotions.

Peer mediation

- Read more about how [peer mediation](#) can support peers with learning social and communication skills that facilitate the inclusion of children with disabilities.

Other co-occurring conditions

- Children with social skills challenges may also experience [autism](#), [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 supporting children with social skills issues include:

- Strengths and abilities communication checklist
- Emotion cards (A4)
- Problem solving guide
- Stay play talk poster (simple)
- Stay play talk poster
- AllPlay Learn Story - Making Friends
- AllPlay Learn Story - Sharing