

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).

Students with developmental disabilities often find some aspects of social situations challenging. For example, a student with autism may interact well in one-to-one situations with other students, but feel overwhelmed in bigger groups. Social rules or norms can be hard for some young people to understand and learn. They are not written down and not always explicitly taught.



Evidence-based strategies

Model social skills

- Consider demonstrating social skills that are important at school, or have another student demonstrate. Another option is to watch videos that model a social skill then give opportunities to practise.

Teach self-monitoring

- Some students can learn to practise and self-monitor a social skill. Help them set goals and decide on how they will reward themselves for reaching their goal. For some social skills, a reminder like a small watch beep can help a student check if they are using that skill.

Best practice tips

Teach social skills

- To teach teenagers a social skill explain exactly what they should do. There are a range of different social skills programs for teenagers that show how to teach these skills. Consider running a social skills group program at your school.

Always have full participation

- Come up with activities that get everyone involved. For example, avoid games where students get eliminated. Similarly, consider picking teams or partners so no-one is left out.

Set clear social rules

- Teenagers who struggle with social skills may be left out by other students. Setting 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.

Access stories about social skills

- Consider reading stories that show or talk about how to act in different social situations. Access AllPlay Learn's stories What is bullying and what to do about it and What is cyberbullying under relevant resources below.



Other considerations

Behaviour

- Some students may not understand social norms about personal space without clear instruction. Consider teaching all students about boundaries. Be specific. For example, talk about how close to stand to others and what is and isn't appropriate to ask/say.
- It may be helpful if sexuality education includes content about social rules and norms. Some students may need to be taught whether (and where) it is ok to touch someone and in what situations.
- Refer to the [ABC approach](#) for more information on how to reduce challenging behaviour by supporting the young person and promoting more helpful behaviour, and our [emotions page](#) for more information about supporting a young person with managing their emotions.

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 student.

Relevant resources

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

- Strengths and abilities communication checklist
- AllPlay Learn Story - What is bullying and what to do about it
- AllPlay Learn Story - What is cyberbullying