

Introduction

Age-appropriate social skills are essential for students to get along well with their peers and to foster strong self-esteem. Social skills are rarely taught directly as a school subject, and most students gradually master social skills without formal instruction. Those who fail to infer expectations and “rules” from personal interactions with others are at risk for being criticized by their peers or, worse, ignored. Students on the autism spectrum are particularly at risk for poor social skills due to the nature of the disorder; many students with language and/or learning disabilities are also at risk.

The activities in *Spotlight on Social Skills, Elementary* highlight specific aspects of social skills and include strategies of direct instruction, modeling, observation, discussion, role-playing, and other guided practice in contexts of everyday interaction. These activities can be presented to individual students or small groups of students. Small groups are preferred because they expose students to their peers’ perspectives and offer a safe setting for practicing social skills.

For an overview of a student’s social skills functioning, administer the *Social Language Development Test, Elementary* (Bowers, Huisingsh, & LoGiudice, 2008). Use the Pretest/Posttest (page 6) to check the student’s awareness and functioning in the appropriate area addressed by one of the six books in *Spotlight on Social Skills, Elementary*:

- Nonverbal Language
- Emotions
- Making Friends
- Making Social Inferences
- Conversations
- Predicting Consequences

These are the student objectives for the activities in this book:

- learn relevant vocabulary
- understand the reciprocal nature of a conversation
- demonstrate appropriate behaviors for listening and speaking during a conversation (body language, eye contact)
- begin conversations
- respond to or expand on a partner’s conversation turn
- avoid interrupting during conversations
- choose topics about which the student has something interesting to say
- avoid hogging conversations
- ask appropriate questions to gain information, show interest, or check a partner’s understanding
- close conversations
- role-play conversations
- evaluate conversation performance

The art of conversation is too broad for this book to cover entirely. You will need to supplement some of the activities with pertinent instruction about additional conversation skills your students need to know about and manage. For example, look for “teachable moments” to point out the effect of speaking too rapidly/slowly or pausing too long before taking a conversation turn. Teach your students that turn-taking, speaking well, etc., are just as important during phone conversations as they are during face-to-face conversations.

Here are some other tips to help you improve students’ conversation skills:

- Some students may think there is no need to have a conversation unless you need to tell someone something. Show them that every conversation is a chance to enjoy someone’s company – to be a friend. Even the shortest conversation can make us feel connected to each other.
- Teach your students that a conversation has much more to do with the way the partners relate to each other than what is said. Does each partner feel listened to? Do they both show their interest in each other as well as in the topic? Do they respect each other by taking appropriate turns speaking and listening? Throughout the lessons in this book, help your students broaden their thinking about conversation types and their impact on getting along with others.
- Before presenting a worksheet to your students, prepare them for the lesson by reviewing critical vocabulary and encourage students to suggest their own definitions or examples. If these definitions or examples suggest a limited grasp of a word, help your students deepen their understanding by giving your own examples. Demonstrate and paraphrase conversation concepts and help students relate them to their own experiences to enrich your lessons and increase the likelihood your students will master them.
- Demonstrate the value of repairing conversation mistakes. Show your students how to rephrase and explain to make sure your listeners understand you.
- If your students talk too much about a certain topic, teach them the “Rule of Three” – “You may only say three things about (topic). Then you need to talk about a different topic.” If necessary, hold up one finger for each comment on the topic and “cut it off” after the third comment. Remind the student to give the partner a chance to talk about something else.*
- As your students gain conversation confidence, introduce the concept of switching topics smoothly by linking the next remark with the previous topic. (This skill is included in *Spotlight on Social Skills, Adolescent: Conversations*.)

We hope you and your students enjoy *Spotlight on Social Skills, Elementary: Conversations!*

Carolyn and Paul

**We are indebted to Lonnie Legler, CCC/SLP, an autism specialist in the school district of Santa Clarita, CA, for her suggestion of teaching students the “Rule of Three” in order to avoid monopolizing a conversation or boring a listener.*