

# 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

So much of our language is related to emotions. We accuse some people of being “ruled by their emotions” or being “too emotional.” We ask students to “get a handle on their emotions” or find ourselves in emotionally-charged situations. For many students with special needs, though, the nuances of emotions in language and communication are a mystery. The goal of *Spotlight on Social Skills, Elementary: Emotions* is to help you expand the language and communication palettes of your students and to help guide them in expressing themselves more clearly and responding to situations more appropriately.

Many students see the world of emotions as simply feeling “good” or “bad.” This book aims to take your students beyond that black-and-white representation of feelings to a world of richer experiences and expression. The first step on that journey is to simply understand the vocabulary of emotions, and the activities in this book provide a wide variety of practice with a core group of basic emotions. Here are the other objectives of this book:

- recognize and express behaviors and emotions
- explore the association of emotions and actions
- understand emotions and practice expression through simple games
- learn the importance of controlling emotions
- use strategies to deal with bullying
- recognize others’ emotional states
- learn how actions affect others’ emotions
- discover how emotional states can change through narrative stories

Here are some tips to conduct emotions training with your students:

- Model exaggerated, inappropriate emotional states with your students to show the importance of appropriately expressing emotions in everyday communication. For example, slouch your body, frown, speak slowly, and look down at the ground while communicating a message of excitement. You might gloomily say, "I'm so excited about my birthday party this weekend. (Sigh.) There will probably be cake and presents, and it will be a lot of fun. I can't wait." Ask your students to explain the inconsistencies between your tone of voice and your actions and your intended message.
- Do a daily "Emotion Check" before each session. Hold up one of the game cards on page 19. Ask students to relate an experience they've had since your last meeting that matches the emotion. For example, "Did your mom cook something that surprised you? Did anyone visit you? Did you watch something on TV that was surprising?"
- Section a bulletin board into basic emotions (happy, sad, scared, angry, surprised, bored) or create six sections on poster board. Have students cut out pictures from magazines or print pictures from the Internet that express the emotions and attach them to the bulletin board or poster. When you have collected emotions in various situations, examine the pictures for the reasons each emotion is being experienced. Ask questions such as *What is happening in this picture that might be making her happy?*
- Reducing impulsivity and exhibiting self-control is difficult for many students. Because they are often attuned to only their own self-interests in the outcome of situations, they react inappropriately or with anger in situations that do not merit such outbursts. A missing pencil or lost book can trigger a major tantrum. Give your students strategies to delay immediate outbursts (counting, taking deep breaths, visualizing something peaceful, mentally singing a special song, or reciting a phrase). Practice these strategies often and in a variety of situations. Say, "Let's imagine it's lunchtime. You've just sat down and are ready to eat your lunch, but you don't have a fork. That makes you angry. What should you do?" (A student names a strategy for self-control.) "Good. Let's do it together." (Use the strategy.) "Now what should you do? Right, get up and get yourself a fork." It's important to provide students with calming strategies and to stress that most problems can be easily solved when you are not emotionally distressed.

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

Carolyn and Paul