

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

Rick Lavoie, the well-known speaker and author, has been preaching the same message for many years: what students with special needs desire above all else is simply a friend. Unfortunately, the children who desire friendship the most are usually the least equipped to reach that goal of companionship. *Spotlight on Social Skills, Elementary: Making Friends* presents strategies and practice in essential interpersonal communication skills that will help your students develop and maintain friendships. Here are the goals of this book:

- understand the characteristics of friendship
- recognize friendly faces
- identify friendly actions
- understand others’ feelings
- make polite requests
- use friendship reference maps to discover interests
- learn the etiquette for meeting someone new
- understand the appropriate way to join groups
- learn how to deal with arguments and make apologies
- understand the composition of an effective compliment
- learn how secrets, tattling, and being a good sport relate to friendship

Here are some tips and activities to improve your students' abilities to get along with their peers:

- Enlist friendship mentors for your students. An effective mentor might be a socially successful student a grade or two ahead of your student who is willing to have lunch with your student several times a week. Arrange to have the mentor tutor your student in academics several times a week, if necessary, and give the mentor information about the specific social skills you are addressing in your instruction. The mentor might discuss those skills with your student during their tutoring or lunch sessions to reinforce your instruction and provide more practical application suggestions.
- Students with social skills deficits are natural targets for bullying, teasing, and being completely ignored. Provide support to a student who is struggling by encouraging building staff to make a special point of speaking to your student, especially in view of other students. This strategy accomplishes two goals: engaging the student in a positive interaction and sending a message to other students that this student is okay to hang around with and is supported by the adults in the building.
- Use the information on page 7 to create a "What Friends Are/What Friends Aren't" bulletin board or poster. As students relate everyday encounters, compare them against the criteria on the board or poster to see if they are dealing with a true friendship, an acquaintance, or an antagonistic relationship.
- Playing a board or card game is a competitive activity and also a social situation. The basics of pragmatics are present: turn-taking, being a good communication partner, listening, paying attention, responding to the context, etc. Practice playing one-on-one games with your student and focusing on basic strategies for turn-taking, self-control, and reducing impulsive behaviors. When your student shows that she can behave appropriately in a two-person game, add more players (enlist the student's parents and family in this venture and provide strategies to repair any breakdowns).

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

Carolyn and Paul