



## Social Skills Programming for Individuals with ASD

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The complexities of autism spectrum disorders (ASD) have challenged parents, practitioners, and researchers for over a half-century, and no area of functioning is more complex than social functioning. Difficulty establishing and maintaining social relationships is an enduring and pervasive feature of ASD. As such, parents and practitioners have struggled to effectively address the social-communication and emotional needs of children on the autism spectrum. This difficulty is highlighted by the results of meta-analytical research on social skills training that indicates that many social skill interventions are only minimally effective.

My research team at Indiana University, Bloomington, conducted the first meta-analysis of SST for youth with ASD in 2007. The meta-analysis included 55 published research studies investigating school based social skill interventions for youth with ASD. Nearly half of the reviewed studies produced low treatment effects. Even more importantly, a strong majority of the studies produced low generalization effects across persons, settings, and play stimuli. I am a strong believer in the fact that if you do not have generalization from your social skills program, then you do not have an effective social skills program! Since the publication of our original meta-analysis, additional researchers have conducted meta-analyses on social skill interventions for youth with ASD, with varying results.

Recently, I conducted a synthesis of the Bellini et al. meta-analysis with other meta-analytical reviews to identify some ingredients to effective social skills programming. This work has led me to provide seven recommendations for effective social skills programming (a) Increase the dosage of social skill interventions, (b) Provide

instruction within the child's natural setting, (c) Match the intervention strategy with the type of skill deficit, (d) Conduct a reliable and valid social skill assessment, (e) Develop clear and measureable treatment objectives, (f) Facilitate the generalization of skills across settings and persons, and (g) Ensure intervention fidelity.

A description of each of the seven ingredients is beyond the scope of this short article. However, the ingredients highlight the need for clinicians, educators, and parents to implement social skills programming *systematically*. Too often, practitioners have no organized plan for teaching social skills. Though social goals are commonly developed for students with ASD, they are rarely based on a reliable and valid assessment of social functioning. Furthermore, seldom does social skills instruction proceed in a methodical or systematic fashion. Commonly, SST is relegated to inferior status and only implemented when teachers and other school practitioners have the extra time to address it.

Perhaps most salient to practitioners and parents, teaching social skills systematically also allows us to stop chasing behaviors! It also requires us to develop a large intervention tool chest, and not be a "one trick pony"...so to speak. Consider the following all too familiar scenario: A member of the school team goes to a workshop on the topic of Social Stories. She becomes enthusiastic about writing stories, and then proceeds to write social stories for EVERY problem behavior and issue that occurs. Student runs into the girl's bathroom... write a social story. Child makes inappropriate statements...write a social story. Child violates personal space...write a social story!

Sound familiar? The problem with this method is not the use of a social story. The problem is the lack of systematic programming. We must consider what underlying deficits are contributing to these problem behaviors. In the examples above, it is quite possible that a lack of perspective taking is contributing to all three problem behaviors. Instead of implementing three different interventions, we should instead address the underlying deficit...i.e., teach perspective taking. We must also consider how the use of a social story might compliment other available strategies. No one strategy will work for every behavior or with every student. In our program at the Social Skills Research Clinic, we use no less than a half dozen strategies every session.

Though the collective outcomes of school based SST research for youth with ASD are somewhat disappointing, the results of these studies do help to identify factors that lead to more beneficial social outcomes for youth with ASD. More than anything, the results tell us that children with ASD don't just need **more** social skill interventions...they need **better** social skill interventions.

### **TIPS FROM THE CORNER:**

There is no doubt that behavior and academics go hand-in-hand. As such, we must focus on both behavior and academics in order to promote progress in our classrooms. We all have students in our classrooms who exhibit behaviors, which are undesirable and/ or socially unacceptable and this can cause many problems in the classroom. When we have students who are exhibiting these behaviors, we have to take a step back and ask ourselves, "Why is this student exhibiting this behavior?" We must take time to figure out the true function of the behavior before we try to assign an intervention for correction. Without knowing the function, our best-laid plans will create little change in the undesired behaviors. Many times, undesirable and socially unacceptable behaviors are due to a lack of social skills. So, in order to help these students and our classrooms to run more smoothly, we must teach social skills and how to exhibit more desirable behaviors.

1. How do I find the time to teach these skills?

a. In many cases it can be difficult to set aside the time needed in order to teach social skills and behavior. If no time is specifically allotted to teach these skills, try building this instruction into other lessons that are being taught.

b. While lining up, walking in the hallway, and performing other routine tasks, teach your students what is expected. Be consistent and model the behavior that you want your students to exhibit.

**April TRAININGS**

April 2, 3:30-4:15  
**Webinar Series: Four Part Series on Data Collection: Part 4: Continuing to Gather Data**  
Link to register: <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/TASN-ATBS-web14>

April 22-23, 8:00-3:30  
**Region 7 TEACCH Transition Assessment Profile Training**  
Registration form found under Training Materials at [www.kansasasd.com](http://www.kansasasd.com)

April 24 (1:00-4:00)-25 (8:30-4:00)  
**Autism Specialist Summit 2014**  
\*Registration Closed\*

Direct link to our website:  
[www.KansasASD.com](http://www.KansasASD.com)  
[www.TASNBehaviorSupports.com](http://www.TASNBehaviorSupports.com)

2. What should I teach my students in regards to social skills and behavior?

a. Start out by making a list of skills that your students will need.

b. Pinpoint one or two to start with. Taking on too much will make it difficult for you and your students to focus on what needs to be taught and learned.

c. There are a number of social skills programs out there. Some good resources for you might be your school Social Worker or Counselor. Don't be afraid to ask for help!

3. How long should I teach the skills?

-Teaching social and behavioral skills in an on-going process. Just like when we teach any academic subject, teaching, assessment and remediation of deficits must occur with behavior and social skills. On-going teaching and practice must occur, in order to maintain the desired behaviors.

