



Workbook Sample from

**Nurturing Social Skills in the
Inclusive Classroom**

1-866-811-8665

The Need For Social Skills

The social skill deficits of young children with autism are well established (Strain, 1990). In fact, one of the defining characteristics of the diagnosis is the atypical ways these children interact with peers, family members, and others with whom they come into contact. Studies show that there is a relationship between peer status in childhood and later dysfunction in adolescence and adulthood and that unpopular children are “at risk” for later adjustment problems (Cowen, Pederson, Babigian, Izzo, & Trost, 1973; Roff, Sells, & Golden, 1972; Ullmann, 1957; Parker & Asher, 1985; Kupersmidt, 1983).

Promoting the social development of youngsters with autism is one of the primary goals of preschool integration, as is facilitating the ability of young children with social delays to develop appropriate friendships. While a significant amount of preschool integration research has concluded that young children with social delays engage in social interactions more frequently in integrated programs than in non-integrated programs, mere placement does not automatically result in increased social acceptance or the modeling of desired peer behavior (Guralnick, 1990; Guralnick & Groom, 1988; Peck & Cooke, 1983; Schultz & Turnbull, 1983; Striefel, Killoran, & Quintero, 1991; Gresham, 1982).

With early and intensive intervention, the seemingly pervasive social skill deficits of many children with autism can be remediated (Lovaas, 1987; McGee, 1993; Strain, 1987). If there is such a thing as a “recipe for success” it must include regular access to typical peers, thoughtful planning of social situations, the use of “social” toys, multiple-setting opportunities to practice emerging social skills, and intensive data collection to make midcourse corrections to existing intervention plans (Strain & Danko, 1994).

To help demonstrate the usefulness of this social skills curriculum, LEAP (The Learning Experiences: An Alternative Program for Preschoolers and Parents) conducted numerous studies. In these areas of inquiry LEAP has shown that:

- ❖ Typically developing peers as young as 36 months can be taught to easily utilize facilitative social and communicative initiations with their peers with autism (Goldstein & Wickstrom, 1986; Strain & Danko, 1995).



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- ❖ Peers' use of facilitative strategies result in higher rates of communicative interaction for preschoolers with autism (Goldstein et al, 1988; Strain, 1987; Kohler & Strain, in press).
- ❖ The peer facilitative strategies often produce “day one” effects, suggesting that the delayed social and communicative abilities of many young children with autism may be attributable, in part, to the socially non-responsive settings in which they are most often educated (Strain & Odom, 1986; Kohler & Strain, 1993).
- ❖ For many children who receive the peer-mediated intervention, their eventual level of social participation falls within the typical range for their age cohorts (Strain, 1987).

Social Acceptance

School plays a critical role in each child's social development and self-concept. Consider the fact that students spend a significant part of their daily lives at school within the classroom. According to Lavoie, children tend to fall into specific social “categories” in the school setting:

- 1) **popular** — students who have established positive relationships within a variety of groups;
- 2) **controversial** — students who have established a circle of friends based upon common interests or proximity but seldom move beyond that circle;
- 3) **isolated** — students who, although not openly rejected, are ignored by classmates and are uninvolved in the social aspects of school; and
- 4) **rejected** — students who are consistently subjected to ridicule, bullying, and harassment by classmates.

This classification system applies to all students, even though at the preschool level, students' classification may not yet be apparent.

Lavoie believes there is much that a teacher can do to foster and promote the social development of each student in her classroom and increase a child's acceptance regardless of his age.



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Working With Preschoolers

Educators are in a good position to foster the acceptance of a socially incompetent student by demonstrating support and caring despite the child's behavioral or language weaknesses. Educators can focus on promoting age-appropriate language and communication skills for the child in a positive, supportive, and accepting manner.

Working With Elementary School Students

Educators at this level can try *pairing a troubled child with a high-status child* who will be accepting and supportive. The teacher must also *search for opportunities to promote and encourage appropriate social interactions*, like having the socially-troubled child communicate messages to another student for you. Avoid the humiliating feelings of the "last one picked" scenario by *preselecting teams or drawing names from a hat* instead of letting students hand-pick classmates from the large group. *Playing classroom games* can foster social development (e.g., voice modulation, taking turns, sportsmanship, competition, etc.) and promote academic skills.

With children of any age, teachers should determine the specific interests, hobbies, or strengths of the rejected child. Once discovered, these should be celebrated in a very public manner. Rejected children who play the "expert" role can greatly increase their status. Also, try assigning the isolated child to a position of leadership in which his classmates become dependent on him. Finally, recognize the parents' and siblings' role in the child's social development by involving the family. Ensure that social goals are on the IEP and are being addressed, as well as prioritized.

Assessing The Environment

The classroom environment plays a critical role in the number of opportunities for regular social interactions among children. There are basically five steps staff should follow to ensure social interactions are occurring in the classroom.

- 1) Teachers must *plan for how they will encourage social interactions during curriculum planning meetings*.
- 2) Teachers need to *make time to teach social skills* (either during structured group times or in small groups).



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- 3) Staff needs to *arrange the environment to promote social interactions*.
- 4) Adults need to *regularly prompt interactions between children*.
- 5) Finally, staff should *have a plan in place for reinforcing child-to-child interactions* to ensure their continued occurrence.

The following checklist can assist you in assessing the children's environment. The more questions for which you can answer "yes," the more opportunities there are for social interactions in your classroom.

Social Interaction Procedural Checklist

- ? Are there typically-developing children available for daily interaction?
- ? Are all class activities structured to promote social interactions?
- ? Are typically-developing children offered specific instruction to foster interaction with peers?
- ? Are interactions mostly child-directed, not teacher-directed, during free play?
- ? Are social skills goals included in children's IEPs?
- ? Do teachers provide children with positive feedback when they are playing nicely together?
- ? Does the teacher help by supporting and suggesting play ideas?



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Strategies For Promoting Social Interactions

The following are ideas and strategies for teachers to utilize to increase social interactions in the classroom.

Set-up or arrange materials

Set up or arrange materials for an activity in advance that are novel or unique to the area. Unusual materials are a good way to facilitate a reaction. Other materials that are not typical for the activity or arranged in advance may be spontaneously brought into the area once the interest and nature of the child's play becomes more evident. Materials that are planned in advance of the activity may not always fit the child's interest during the activity. The following are examples:

- 1) *The teacher places a box of large cardboard blocks in the gross motor area for the children to stack at the bottom of the slide. Children enjoy sliding down the slide and knocking over the blocks.*
- 2) *The teacher places letter cards on the side of a climber in the gross motor area. Alex (the focal child) directs the teacher to crawl a toy dinosaur up the cards by naming the letter on the next card he wants the dinosaur to crawl on.*
- 3) *The teacher encourages Alex and two other children to bring cars over to the slide for races. The teacher directs the children to hold the cars up at the top and wait for Alex to say, "Ready, set, go."*

Join the activity

Join the activity to enrich the quality of the child's play and/or participation. Assume an activity-related role in play with the child. This involves more than actively commenting on what the child is doing during the activity. The following are examples:

- 1) *After reading a book about cowboys, the teacher assumes the role of a bad guy, steals some food from the table where Alex is playing (socio-dramatic area), then encourages Alex to be the sheriff and capture her.*



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- 2) *The teacher takes on the role of a small creature he is manipulating. The creature he is holding keeps trying to get the lid off a container that holds more creatures that Alex wants. The teacher seeks directions from Alex during the play and encourages him to chant, "Pull, pull," as the creature attempts to lift the lid.*
- 3) *The teacher actively participates in a game of basketball with Alex and his peers. The teacher occasionally steals the ball and runs with it, holds the ball beyond the children's reach, and redirects the ball back to Alex's hands as needed.*

Require expansion

Require expansion in response to the child's initiation by asking follow-up questions or by intentionally delaying a response to the child in an effort to make the child repeat or elaborate on her verbalization. The following are examples:

- 1) *Once Alex has made a basic request for a toy, the teacher withholds the toy and asks a series of questions to gain more information and extend the interaction. "You want the car. What color is it?" "Is it a big or little car?" "Where are you going to take it?"*
- 2) *The teacher acts like she does not hear Alex's request to stack the blocks. The teacher holds the block, turning it over and over while looking across the room. Alex repeats the request with more specific details about where and how to stack it. The teacher responds to these repeated overtures by complying with the child's requests.*

Encourage activity-related talk

Encourage activity-related talk by modeling or inviting participation in songs or nursery rhymes, chanting, reading, counting, or appropriate reciting. The following are examples:

- 1) *The teacher slowly sings, "Three Little Monkeys," and plays the part of the alligator, while the children work to keep the monkeys away from her.*
- 2) *The teacher models then encourages Alex to say, "Ready, set, go," as other children get ready to slide into the blocks at the bottom of the climber.*



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- 3) *The teacher invites Alex to say, "1, 2, 3, go," as the other children prepare to race their cars down the slide.*
- 4) *The teacher models lines from a Winnie-the-Pooh book that Alex knows well to encourage him to interact with peers.*
- 5) *The teacher directs Alex to count blocks as they are being stacked at the bottom of the slide.*

Invite the child to direct the teacher

While playing with the child, situations occur in which the child can direct the play scenario. The teacher can then ask the child questions related to her role in their play together. Caution should be taken to have such questions flow naturally during play. The child should not be inundated with questions related to the teacher's role in the activity. The questions are most natural when both teacher and child are working together to solve a problem during play. The following are examples:

- 1) *The teacher intentionally gets some creatures "stuck" in a place out of Alex's reach. The teacher asks, "Alex, they are stuck! What should I do?" He responds by telling the teacher to pull hard or lift him up so he can try. He took on a very active role in directing the teacher's behaviors so he could get his creatures.*
- 2) *The teacher could intentionally stack the blocks incorrectly, violating Alex's expectations. He would immediately react and the teacher could ask him to explain how to correctly stack them.*

Encourage focal child and peer interactions

Encourage focal child and peer interactions by inviting children to attend to each other and play together. The teacher wants the children to join in an activity together, without prompting for verbal or non-verbal interaction. The following are examples:

- 1) *The teacher sets up an activity where Alex pretends to be Tigger. The teacher then asks two peers if they would like to be Winnie-the-Pooh and Piglet.*



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- 2) *The teacher notices a peer building a road in the block area and tells the child to look at Alex and ask if he would like to help.*

Invite children to exchange materials

The following are examples:

- 1) *The teacher asks Mike to hand a peer a block to help build a tower.*
- 2) *A group of children race cars down the slide. After the race, the teacher tells Alex to give his friends their cars so they can race again.*
- 3) *Several children are having a tea party. The teacher tells Alex to hand cups and cookies to each peer.*

Invite children to talk or engage in nonverbal interactions

Invite children to talk or engage in nonverbal interactions by prompting either the focal child or peers. The following are examples:

- 1) *After winning the basketball game, the teacher suggests that the team members give each other a high-five.*
- 2) *The teacher encourages the children to include Alex in their plans and be sure to ask him for his ideas.*
- 3) *The teacher asks Alex to pick which peer would be next to knock over the stack of blocks and then prompts Alex to say, "Ready, set, go," at the right time.*



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Peer Mediated Strategies: The Social Skills Curriculum

The social skills curriculum has been developed over the past 20 years and has been extensively researched. It continues to be utilized as a tool for parents and teachers in increasing levels of interaction between children. This is especially important for students within integrated classrooms because some children with disabilities can exhibit decreased levels of social interaction (Strain, Kohler, Storey, & Danko, 1994). The current curriculum consists of five social skills that were chosen based on evidence suggesting that they tend to result in more lengthy interactions between children and create the potential for friendships (Kohler, F.W., Strain, P.S., & Shearer, D.D., 1992).

The following scripts are for teacher and parent use in teaching the social skills curriculum. The purpose of these scripts is to establish the proper steps in the instruction process as well as to give adults potential things to say to their audience about each skill. A great opportunity for teaching the skills is utilizing two or three minutes during a structured group time (e.g., circle time). Teach one skill a day until the steps involved in that skill are well understood by the children. Always review all skills previously learned before moving on to new skills. The posters accompanying each skill provide a visual reminder of the steps required to complete each skill. These posters can be hung in toy or play areas of the classroom or at home where there are opportunities to interact.



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Skill 1

Getting Your Friend's Attention

General Introduction To The Peers

“Today we are going to learn about getting our friends to play with us. It is very important that children learn to play with each other. One way to get your friend to play with you is by getting her attention.”

Step 1: Describe

“One way you can get your friend to play with you is by getting her attention. When you get your friend's attention:

1. Look at your friend.
2. Say your friend's name.
3. Gently touch your friend on the shoulder or arm if she isn't looking at you.
4. Keep trying.”

“Here is a poster that shows a bug getting his friend's attention. He is looking at her and touching her shoulder in the top one. In the bottom one, he is looking at her and saying her name.”

Step 2: Demonstrate

“Let's practice getting a friend to look at you.”

“Now watch me. I'm going to get _____'s attention. Tell me if I do it right.” (Demonstrate)

“Did I get _____'s attention?”

“That's right. I looked at my friend, said her name, and touched her gently on the arm.”

Repeat several times. Make sure each child has several opportunities to respond.

Step 3: Child Practice with Adult

“Now I want you to practice getting your friend's attention. Let's pretend I'm your friend and you're going to get my attention.”



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“Remember to:

1. Look at me,
2. Say my name,
3. Gently touch me on the arm or shoulder if I’m not looking at you,
4. Keep trying.”

Use the reminder, “Remember to get your friend’s attention,” each time you have children take a turn. This will help them remember what to do when they hear you say this during a play session.

“If you forget to get your friend’s attention, I’ll remind you by pointing to the poster.”

Step 4: Practice with the Target Child

“Now we’re going to have _____ come over and join us and I’m going to ask you to practice getting his attention. I’ll help you by saying ‘Remember to get your friend’s attention.’ Remember your going to:

1. Look at him,
2. Say his name,
3. Gently touch him on the arm or shoulder if he’s not looking at you,
4. Keep trying.”

“I want the two of you (the two peers) to take turns getting _____ ’s attention.”

Step 5: Awards and Prizes to Students

Give specific praise as to why students are getting prizes, such as “You got your friend to look at you,” for peers or, “You looked at your friends!” for target students.