

Teaching Social Competence

social skills and academic success



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Introduction



School is primarily a social environment, and much of what students learn to do to be successful takes place in the form of social interactions. These social interactions occur not just on the playground and in school hallways and the cafeteria; they are the foundation of classroom instruction and are manifest in methods and activities teachers use to instruct essential academic skills.

Teaching social competence is critically important to educational programming, because it fosters student achievement, increases involvement, builds status and peer group acceptance, encourages self-esteem, and enhances other qualities vital to school success.

Despite their importance, social skills are rarely taught systematically, so students must acquire them by trial and error or through incidental learning. But many students find it difficult to learn social skills through such indirect means. We wrote **Teaching Social Competence** to give you a straightforward and practical approach for teaching this crucial skill. Use the methods and strategies described in this book to address a wide array of individual and group problems in social behavior: for students who need to become more outgoing and assertive, students who show chronic and longstanding aggressive or defiant behavior, and even those who merely act silly and immature.

We begin **Teaching Social Competence** by presenting the concept of social skills as an unwritten and implicit curriculum of social demands, comparable to conventional curricula which presents academic demands in reading, math and other subject areas. In Chapter One we show how to use observational techniques to identify social demands in your classroom and in other settings where students interact. In subsequent chapters, we show how to use these demands for social behavior to implement the other elements of instructional planning: setting priorities for instruction (Chapter Two); assessing behavior and setting teaching objectives (Chapter Three); preparing teaching methods and activities (Chapter Four); planning lessons and interventions (Chapter Five); monitoring student progress (Chapter

Six); follow-up on instruction (Chapter Seven); and choosing long-term goals and short-term objectives (Chapter Eight). With each chapter, we present worksheets and case examples for your convenience in guiding instructional activities.



Paul Rodes, M.A. and Dennis Knapczyk, Ph.D.

Teaching Social Competence

Social skills are central to everything students do in school, from playing tag during recess to learning algebra in math class.



Chapter One

Thinking about social skills and observing social behavior

The nature of social skills

Every teacher realizes social skills are important in school. When the topic of social skills comes up, teachers think of students like Alfred, who tattles on his friends, Maria, who acts shy and doesn't talk with classmates, or Granville, who teases and bullies other students. Teachers see the problem behavior of students like these preventing them from forming close bonds with their peers and often affecting their entire school performance.

But while teachers are readily aware of social problems among their students, less often do they consider the real value of social skills—the proficient, capable behaviors most students use to be successful in their school interactions. Every day, students hold conversations, plan activities, ask questions, listen to instruction, collaborate on assignments, and engage in a host of other social behaviors that allow them to connect to classmates and teachers and make the most of learning opportunities. But because most of these skills are acquired more or less incidentally, rather than through deliberate curricular instruction, we often fail to recognize how remarkable and complex they are. This chapter gives an overview of some important features of social skills, and offers a format for observing and thinking about the social behavior that takes place in school settings.

Social skills are an integral part of all school settings

Social skills go beyond the things students do on the playground, in the school cafeteria and hallways and before and after class. They are central to everything students do in school, from playing tag during recess to learning algebra in math class. Consider, for example, the ways students learn to read.

Most social demands are implicit, regulated more by conventional practices than by stated rules.

Social skills are usually learned informally through everyday experiences.

In reality, social skills can be enormously complex.

They recite words to their teacher, take turns reading passages in small groups or practice going over sentences with their neighbor. They ask their teacher how to pronounce a certain word or what it means. They whisper to their neighbor to find out where the place is, or exchange smiles about something that happened in the story. All of these acts involve social interactions of one kind or another, and all are important for learning how to read proficiently. While learning math, students practice exercises or assignments in small groups, discuss word problems or do boardwork as a large group. All of these lessons require them to interact with one another and their teacher in order to learn the material being presented. Thus students use social skills not just to socialize with friends and play games, but to participate in instructional lessons, do assignments, and perform all the activities required for learning academic subjects.

Social demands are usually implicit

Although social skills are a crucial element of school performance, it's important to recognize that they are rarely defined or explained to students like other skill-based demands. When students complete an assignment or project for class, they are given explicit instructions about the amount of work to be done, the format for submitting it, the time limits involved and the standard for judging the final product. But the same is seldom true for social demands. Teachers may post explicit classroom rules that cover a few key elements of social behavior, but most social demands are implicit, regulated more by conventional practices than by stated rules. Consider, for example, the ways students greet one another when they enter the classroom, the topics they talk about before class begins, the body language and tone of voice they use when they ask for help, the ways they look to neighbors to confirm their progress or how they plan what to do when class is finished. These actions mark a student as skilled or unskilled in social behavior, but the rules that define how to accomplish them are unstated and are simply understood by most students. Students who have difficulty recognizing these unwritten rules are likely to struggle with social skills.

Social skills are learned incidentally

Because of their subtle and implicit nature, social skills are usually learned informally through everyday experiences. Students don't have opportunities to acquire these skills in the same methodical way they learn reading or math. Instead, they imitate what they see friends or older students doing, or repeat behaviors that have elicited

Thinking about social skills and observing social behavior

a favorable response in the past. To regulate this learning process, students must rely on subtle cues such as facial expressions or tone of voice to judge the appropriateness of their behavior. They must be able to follow the link between responses of others (such as anger, laughter or withdrawal) and the behavior patterns that caused them. Students who are not proficient at this demanding learning process find themselves falling behind their peers.

Social skills are complex

Teachers think of social demands in simple or clear-cut terms: showing respect for others, using positive language, getting along with peers. But in reality social skills are enormously complex. Consider, for example, the demands that must be met by Maria in order to join in an ordinary conversation with classmates. She must be aware of the group she is joining, and the relative status of its members. She must be able to greet her friends with the appropriate phrasing and attitude. She must be able to identify suitable and popular topics for discussion and formulate relevant comments. She must know how to spot an opening before speaking and the proper body language and words to use to make sure her comments are well received. Finally, she must be able to read the reactions of peers and modify her behavior based on even very subtle responses. Thus, what seems to be a simple social behavior—talking with friends—is a complex pattern of learned skills. Students who have little history of success in social behavior, or who have difficulty learning independently and informally, are often at risk of falling behind peers in the social arena and find themselves isolated and out of step.

Social demands are set by peers as well as adults

Teachers think of social behavior in terms of their own demands: students should sit quietly, pay attention in class, raise their hand before asking questions, etc. But, in reality, competent behavior is more involved than this, because it responds to an important range of peer-set demands. When students exchange glances or whispers with neighbors, talk about current subjects before class, or jostle and tease while lining up, they are meeting crucial demands that help to strengthen their relationships with peers and give them greater involvement and ownership in school. By the same token, students who speak too loudly or too often in class, who isolate themselves while others are conversing, or who push and shove aggressively while lining up are likely to be shunned or teased by classmates, and they carry these problems over into the academic realm.

Students use social skills to socialize with friends and play games, to participate in instructional lessons, do assignments, and perform all the activities required for learning academic subjects.



Spend about fifteen minutes observing students in a general education setting.

Focus on behaviors that seem common or average, rather than looking for misbehaviors.

Observing social behavior in school settings

Because social skills are more involved than the rules and guidelines teachers set for social behavior, a good place to begin is by observing the behavior of average students. Teachers are trained to watch student behavior with an evaluative eye, and they naturally focus on whether students are meeting school expectations. But, by acting as a neutral observer, and watching objectively the ways students interact in school settings, you will learn a lot about their behavior that you didn't notice before.

An exercise we recommend is to spend about fifteen minutes observing students in a general education setting. These could be students you teach or others at a similar grade level. Pick a routine activity, and record what you see them doing. Focus on behaviors that seem common or average, rather than looking for misbehaviors. Notice the ways students interact with adults in the settings, as well as the ways they interact with peers. Is there a lot of non-verbal interaction going on? Who do the students look at during the activity? Can you see any behaviors that help the students bond to one another or their instructors? Can you see any behaviors that help them feel like part of the group and engaged in its activities?

This chapter includes a worksheet to tear out or photocopy and record such an observation. Your notes can be informal and don't need to be exhaustive or complete. The idea is to gain a perspective about the range of social behavior and social demands that characterize any school setting. Teachers who use this form typically report that they didn't realize how much social behavior was occurring in their classrooms until they took an objective look in this way. At the end of the chapter we provide an example of what a completed worksheet looks like, and suggestions for using it in your settings.

The social skills curriculum

Close observation of student behavior reveals a whole realm of social skills and demands that students respond to every day in school. In fact, we find it useful to think of social skills as comprising a broad, unwritten curriculum that students learn in school, comparable to the written curriculum you use in reading, math and other subject areas. Like a formal curriculum, the social skills curriculum describes abilities and skills that students must have to be successful in their interactions with teachers and peers—and by extension, to be successful in school.

Although unwritten, the social skills curriculum can be surprisingly

exacting. Seventh-grade students must speak, play, and act in ways that are markedly different from fifth-graders. Students who are unable or unwilling to meet these requirements find themselves falling behind in class and getting in trouble with teachers. And they often have difficulty making friends, conversing with peer groups and building status among classmates. By observing student social behavior more closely you become familiar with the components of this curriculum, and put yourself in a position to recognize and respond when a student is struggling. And you will learn to develop lessons to help whole groups of students increase their proficiency in key curricular areas.

Curriculum and average behavior

One of the key functions of any curriculum is to define a level of learning or performance that marks the difference between passing and failing. In math or social studies, the curriculum helps you identify average or “C-level” work as a standard for measuring whether students are performing competently or not. But in the area of social skills, we rarely have the advantage of this perspective. Teachers think not in terms of average performance, but of the rules or expectations *they would like students to meet*—being respectful of others, giving positive encouragement, waiting until called upon before speaking, etc. In reality, such expectations denote C-level not A-level behavior. Most students accomplish these things some of the time, but their average level of performance is usually far below what their teachers might wish. Furthermore, students can meet normal classroom rules and still lack competence in key areas of peer interaction.

This is why it’s helpful to think of the social skills curriculum not in terms of what teachers might like, but rather in terms of *the average behavior of students in general education settings*. Such behavior does not represent an ideal, but a level of minimal competence, indicating passing or C-level behavior. This is why we recommend looking at the behavior of average students in your school settings: such behavior provides a realistic basis for understanding the real social skills curriculum as it applies to your students. Developing a familiarity with C-level behavior gives you a yardstick for spotting deficits before they become problems, and suggests areas in which to focus your instruction, the same yardstick any other curriculum provides.

Teaching the social skills curriculum

We do not recommend any formalized process for exploring or

We find it useful to think of social skills as comprising a broad, unwritten curriculum that students learn in school.

Although unwritten, the social skills curriculum can be surprisingly exacting.

Think of the social skills curriculum not in terms of what teachers might like, but rather in terms of the average behavior of students.

One elementary teacher told us, “Now at the beginning of the school year it only takes me a day or two to notice even subtle problems, and I can start planning interventions right away.”

defining the social skills curriculum. Instead, we advocate an informal approach to understanding the *average social behavior* displayed by students *in general education settings*. The observation worksheet at the end of this chapter gives you a head start in such an effort. Knowledge of what we call the “social skills curriculum” is useful in two ways:

First, it gives you a perspective for spotting problems in social behavior before they become deep-set. Once you have trained yourself to recognize C-level behavior, it’s easier to spot behavior that falls below average. This is not because such behavior fails to meet your expectations, but because it makes students stand out from their peers. After practicing the kinds of observations we recommend a few times, teachers look at their classrooms in a whole new way. One elementary teacher said, “Now, at the beginning of the school year it only takes me a day or two to notice even subtle problems, and I can start planning interventions right away before problem behavior becomes established.”

Second, a general knowledge of the social skills curriculum forms a basis for planning group lessons, much as you use a math or reading curriculum. As you identify the social demands that apply in your settings, work to make them more explicit for students and teach them how to respond more effectively. Examples of approaches teachers use for the social skills curriculum include:

- Giving students practice in how to ask questions when they need help
- Having a class discussion about age-appropriate topics of conversation
- Posting a set of guidelines for working with a neighbor or participating in a class discussion
- Having the class produce skits showing good and bad ways to interact in the cafeteria
- Teaching a four-step technique for resolving disagreements

Special education and the social skills curriculum

Special education teachers should note that in this chapter we recommend observing student behavior *in general education settings*. Although an increasing number of special education professionals are already working in inclusive settings, many are still limited to contact with students in self-contained classrooms or resource rooms. But even in such cases, it’s important to become familiar with the average

Thinking about social skills and observing social behavior

behavior that prevails in general education settings for the grade levels you work with, rather than the behavior you see in the special education setting. In this way, the behavior you observe stands as a referent or measuring point for minimum, age-appropriate social skills in your school. You can then use this to set adjusted goals for students in your own classes, the way you would use the general math or science curriculum to guide goals you set for students in these areas.

The advantage of this approach is that it counteracts the artificial isolating effect created in special education. In such settings it's often hard for the teacher, much less the students, to keep a clear idea of what constitutes average social behavior in the general population of students. Under these circumstances students behave very differently than they do among their peers at large, and without clear referents, special education teachers often fail to recognize this key shift in social demands. By observing social behavior of students in general education settings, you counteract this effect by planning instruction and setting goals that move special education students toward behavior more in line with that displayed by their peers.

We recommend observing student behavior in general education settings.



If you do not seem like you're paying attention to students, they will ignore you and you can begin observing them discreetly.

Videotaping is helpful because you can pause the tape to take notes and view it repeatedly to pick up new subtle behaviors each time.



Suggestions for using Worksheet 1

This worksheet is designed to guide you through a short observation of average social behavior in general education settings. Feel free to adapt or augment the worksheet anyway you wish. Some suggestions for conducting a useful observation include:

Keep the observation short. Try observing no more than 10- or 15-minute activities. Longer observations diminish your ability to attend to the circumstances around you.

Remain unobtrusive while observing. This is important when observing in a setting where you're not normally present. Arrive early and take a seat in back or out of the students' line of vision. Try pretending to be busy reading or correcting papers when students come in. If you do not seem like you're paying attention to them, they will ignore you and you can begin observing them discreetly.

Be aware of your own limitations. When observing in your own classroom, it's difficult to teach and observe at the same time. If you do observe while teaching, try to schedule an activity where you're not actively providing instruction. Pretend to be grading papers or engaged in other work while students are occupied with a task or activity.

Consider using outside observers or videotaping to gain an objective view of your own setting. Videotaping can be helpful because you can pause the tape to take notes and view it repeatedly and pick up new subtle behaviors each time.

Look for actual student behavior; don't just make a restatement of classroom rules. It's easy to fall into the trap of filtering what you see through the prism of what you want students to do. Remember, this should be a neutral listing of actual behavior, not a restatement of your posted regulations or routines.

Look for social behavior. Rather than focusing on procedures or routines of the activity, look for how students interact with one another and with adults. For example, note such factors as:

- The ways students greet one another
- The ways they maintain social relationships during class activities
- The ways they support each others' work
- The ways they share information about classroom tasks

Thinking about social skills and observing social behavior

- The ways they get help when they need it
- The ways they negotiate differences of opinion and express their views

Look for behavior that seems average or typical. You should avoid focusing on extreme behavior, whether it's good or bad. Remember, you're trying to get a picture of the average level of social skills in this student group.

Watch for student behavior rather than teacher behavior. When observing other teachers, it's easy to fix your attention on what they are saying or doing. Remember, your objective is to focus on student interactions.

Don't try to do too much. Develop a general notion of the range of social behavior that takes place during the activity. You need not be exhaustive in your list, nor develop a full understanding of the social skills students use in this setting. Instead, think of it as a new way to look at student behavior.



Linda is charting student social behavior while another teacher instructs.

Worksheet 1 Example

Ms. Garcia teaches in a special education resource room at Tecumseh Middle School. She rarely sees her students outside this setting, and though she is used to the ways they behave during small-group and one-on-one work, she doesn't have a feel for how their social behavior fits in with that of their peers at large. She has talked with Mrs. Jameson, who has two of her students in 7th grade social studies, and has looked over the posted classroom rules and performance charts. But she realizes she would know a lot more if she simply spent time watching student behaviors while class was going on.

Mrs. Jameson agreed that this might be an interesting idea, so Ms. Garcia arrived just before class on a Tuesday and sat in a back corner. She worked on a stack of papers as students filed in so they wouldn't pay too much attention. She had decided in advance to do her observation during the homework review portion of the class, since it seemed similar to some of the activities she does in her resource room groups.

During the observation, Ms. Garcia took quick notes on a blank piece of scrap paper. She paid particular attention to behavior that seemed common or average to get a sense of typical classroom behavior. When she was finished she rewrote observations on Worksheet 1. This allowed her to refer back to them later and share them with others. She took the worksheet to Mrs. Jameson and they went over it together. Mrs. Jameson said the behaviors sounded familiar, but she hadn't realized how much of this behavior was going on during a structured activity like homework review. "If you would have asked me before what the kids did during this activity," she said, "I would have said they listened to me and raised their hands to answer questions." The two teachers agreed that Ms. Garcia's list gave them a lot to reflect on when thinking about students' social skills.



Thinking about social skills and observing social behavior

Worksheet 1 Observing social behavior

Name Mrs. Garcia Date November 5

Grade level/student group observed Mrs. Jameson's 7th grade social studies class

Task or activity observed _____

Specific student behaviors observed (focus on social behavior)

Most of the students respond quickly when the teacher asks them to get out their homework.

Several students compare homework papers with neighbors.

A lot of whispering and chatter is going on until the teacher asks for quiet.

A few students keep talking, but most quiet down quickly.

Most eyes are on the teacher as she talks about the assignment.

One student raises her hand to ask a question.

As the teacher reads each question, several students raise their hands to volunteer answers.

A few students wave their hands or say "I know!" but most wait quietly to be called on.

Most students make faces or gestures when answers are given (indicating agreement, disagreement, surprise, etc.).

Many students ask follow-up questions without raising their hands first (e.g., "why isn't the first one?") The teacher seems not to mind, and usually answers them.

Most students glance to compare results with neighbors after each answer. Some whisper short comments to neighbors.

Students focus on the teacher when called on.

One girl who doesn't know the answer looks plaintively to her neighbors.

Other students mouth the answer silently or look on encouragingly if a student is struggling.

When the teacher asks for the homework to be handed in, the students begin talking animatedly as they pass it up.

Most discuss their expected grade, and express happiness or disappointment. Many make excuses for questions they got wrong.

As the teacher begins writing out the next assignment on the board, the students quiet down and take notes.

Most of the students frown and complain mildly about the length of the assignment.

A few students try to bargain good-naturedly for more time.

Students talk with neighbors about the next assignment as they put books away.

Keep a focus on average or typical behavior. This is what indicates competent or sufficient responses to social demands.

Look for non-verbal interactions as well as verbal ones. These can be important in developing peer-to-peer relationships.

Look for ways students respond to one another in academic situations, in addition to the ways they respond to the teacher.

Keep your eye out for transitional moments during which students break into short interactions. Teachers often fail to consider the important opportunities such transition points provide for students to build social rapport.

Worksheet 1 Observing social behavior

Name Ms. Garcia Date November 5

Grade level/student group observed Mrs. Jameson's 7th grade social studies class

Task or activity observed _____

Specific student behaviors observed (focus on social behavior)

Most of the students respond quickly when the teacher asks them to get out their homework.

Several students compare homework papers with neighbors.

A lot of whispering and chatter is going on until the teacher asks for quiet.

A few students keep talking, but most quiet down quickly.

Most eyes are on the teacher as she talks about the assignment.

One student raises her hand to ask a question.

As the teacher reads each question, several students raise their hands to volunteer answers.

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Many make excuses for questions they got wrong.

As the teacher begins writing out the next assignment on the board, the students quiet down and take notes.

Worksheet 1 *Observing social behavior*

Name _____ Date _____

Grade level/student group observed _____

Task or activity observed _____

Specific student behaviors observed (focus on social behavior)