Social Skills Groups

One in a series of mini-reference modules developed to support the needs of students with autism spectrum disorders

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Check out our blog at:
http://www.madisonateam.blogspot.com/
The following mini-reference modules are available to staff and families working to support students with autism in their classrooms, schools, communities, and/or homes:

- Accessing Autism Community Resources
- Early Childhood
- Social Skills Groups
- Social Thinking®
- Transition from School to Adult Services
INTRODUCTION

This mini-resource module provides staff and families with a framework for how to structure social skills groups for students who have autism spectrum disorders. Although we feel that this framework can be utilized with students across the spectrum, given the diverse range of individuals that this represents, modifications and adaptations likely will be necessary to meet the individual needs of students.

There are several important assumptions we make which guide and shape the focus and direction of this framework:

- Students with autism have social skill challenges but have the desire and interest to establish social relationships with their peers.
- Often we do a good job of providing students with opportunities to engage and interact with their peers but frequently fall short in providing the structured, systematic instruction that students with autism require to make these opportunities successful.
- Social skill instruction and/or support needs to be provided in group settings and involve typical peers. At times, instruction may occur in 1:1 or in homogeneous groups, but instruction and support should be provided in natural environments with chronologically, age-appropriate peers, ideally where students have frequent opportunities to practice and demonstrate the skills.
- Social skills training and groups can and should be provided to students at all ages (pre-school to post-high school). This module provides a framework that can be utilized with all students. In order to implement this framework with students of varying ages, modifications to the activities and contexts in which the training and support is provided will be necessary.

In defining a framework to address the social skills instruction needs of students with autism, we feel that an eclectic model works best – no single strategy or approach works with all students. Both clinical and education practice, as well as the social skills research literature, has identified many successful strategies, approaches, and interventions that address the social skill challenges of students with autism spectrum
disorders. In identifying conceptual components to include in our social skills training framework, we chose to focus on the following:

- social skills assessment,
- “hidden curriculum”,
- social thinking®,
- systematic instruction & support
- peer mediated instruction,
- video modeling, and
- progress monitoring & evaluation.

In our mind, a number of noted researchers and clinicians stand out not only as being well respected for their skills and experience with social skills training for students with autism spectrum disorders, but also in having published resources and materials that are readily accessible to school and families: Jed Baker, Scott Bellini, Barry Prizant et al, Brenda Smith Myles, Michelle Garcia Winner, and Pamela Wolfberg. Their resource materials on which we have focused are user friendly and well organized, oftentimes providing readers with useful frameworks that are easily implemented and modifiable (no need to re-invent the wheel). We have borrowed heavily from the above referenced researchers and clinicians. Sometimes summarizing their work, other times referencing certain areas of their work and directing staff and families to where to find more information, and lastly providing direct resources from their work for staff and families to use and/or modify.

This is NOT a cookbook. It’s a framework that hopefully will guide you in your efforts in designing and implementing successful social skills groups. The Autism PSTs are very interested in working with you in refining your skills and practice in this area. School staff are encouraged to submit a professional development request form ([https://specialedweb.madison.k12.wi.us/node/68](https://specialedweb.madison.k12.wi.us/node/68)) in order to have one of us collaborate with and support you and the efforts of your school-based team in meeting the social skills instruction needs of students with whom you work. [Note this request form is available to school staff working on a computer connected to the district’s network]. A bibliography is provided that lists specific resources utilized in developing this framework. These resources are available for check out (for a limited 4-6 week timeframe) from the Autism Program Support Teacher assigned to your high school attendance area.
Finally, social skills instruction does not occur in isolation, focus and attention will need to be provided to address the receptive and expressive communication, emotional and sensory regulation, visual support, and other needs of students with autism spectrum disorders. This mini-reference module does not specifically address these dimensions.

**ASSESSMENT**

**Systematic Social Skills Assessment & Instruction.** Scott Bellini is a well respected professional in the field with years of experience in facilitating the development of social relationships with students who have autism and other social challenges. You are encouraged to familiarize yourself with Bellini’s work and have at least two means by which you can accomplish that goal. First of all, read Bellini’s book, “Building Social Relationships”. This is an excellent resource that provides succinct information and steps for designing and implementing social skills instruction. Secondly, go the Autism Internet Modules (www.autisminternetmodules.org) and complete the online module, “Overview of Social Skills Functioning and Programming”. [NOTE: you will need to register and establish on login on this website in order to access this and other free instructional modules on evidenced-based practices]. This module, developed by Scott Bellini, provides an overview of common social skill deficits in individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and the importance of distinguishing between skill acquisition deficits and performance deficits. The module also discusses methods for assessing social skills and social competence. Finally, it provides a summary of social skill strategies that have been empirically examined. It will take you approximately 1 ½ hours to complete this instructional module.

Scott Bellini (2006) reports that the purpose of social skills assessment is to identify (1) critical skills that hinder student’s social performance as well as (2) skills that students need to be socially successful. Bellini identifies four components of an effective social skills assessment: general interview of social performance (includes collecting information from the parent, teacher, and student), problem identification and analysis interview, observation of social functioning, and rating forms.
Commercially available, standardized social skills assessments are available and include at least the following assessment measures that Bellini and others have utilized in clinical practice: Social Skills Rating System (SSRS), the Multidimensional Anxiety Scale for Children (MASC), the Social Anxiety Scale for Children/Adolescents (SAS-C and SAS-A), the Behavioral Assessment Scale for Children (BASC), the Adaptive Behavior Assessment System - Second Edition (ABAS-II) and the Multidimensional Self-Concept Scale (MSCS). The above referenced assessment measures are not autism specific and are utilized to assess students with a varying issues and difficulties. Bellini and others have developed measures that have been specifically designed of for use with children with autism spectrum disorders. See Appendix A for copies of protocols you can utilize to collect information related to Bellini’s four components of social skills assessment.

Jed Baker (2003) has developed a useful social skills training resource that also includes an assessment component. We have included rating scales from his text in Appendix B for your consideration and use.

The SCERTS model is another framework that we find useful when structuring social skill intervention for students with autism spectrum disorders. The SCERTS model is a comprehensive approach for children with autism spectrum disorders. It does not focus solely on the social dimension of a student’s program. Rather, it addresses the Social, Communication, Emotional Regulation, and Transactional Supports (SCERTS) dimensions of a student’s program. Although this model, in its entirety, extends beyond the focus of this mini-reference module, the assessment component of the SCERTS program provides useful questionnaires and observation forms that school staff and families will likely find useful when collecting their assessment data.

There are three variations of these protocols that represent three different developmental levels at which the student may be functioning: social partner stage, language partner stage, and conversational partner stage. These protocols are available for your review in Appendix C of this module.

Pamela Wolfberg (2003) developed the Integrated Play Group (IPG) model for supporting the social skills needs of students with autism. IPGs are based on the fusion of philosophy, theory, research and practice. The IPG philosophy places high value on
the purpose and place of play in childhood where small groups of children play together under the guidance of an adult facilitator.

Children's socialization and imagination are guided through a carefully tailored system of support, with an emphasis placed on maximizing children's developmental potential as well as intrinsic desire to play, socialize, and form meaningful relationships with peers. An equally important focus is on teaching the peer group to be more accepting, responsive and inclusive of children who relate and play in different ways (Wolfberg, 2003, p. iii).

More will be said about IPGs in upcoming sections of this reference module. However, within the IPG framework, Wolfberg provides some protocols for how school staff and families may collect social skill assessment information (See Appendix D). Wolfberg also provides some useful frameworks to guide observations of students in order to assess their developmental play patterns, social communication, and play preferences. See Appendix E for copies of those observational frameworks.

**Hidden Curriculum** is yet another dimension that school staff and families should consider when assessing the social skills of students with whom they are supporting. Hidden curriculum refers to those skills that we take for granted that everyone knows and understands, those for which children are not explicitly taught. Temple Grandin and Sean Barron (2005) refer to this as the “unwritten rules of social relationships” and define ten such rules (p. 119):

1. Rules are not absolute. They are situation-based and people based.
2. Not everything is equally important in the grand scheme of things.
3. Everyone in the world makes mistakes. It doesn’t have to ruin your day.
4. Honesty is different than diplomacy.
5. Being polite is appropriate in any situation.
6. Not everyone who is nice to me is my friend.
7. People act differently in public than they do in private.
8. Know when you’re turning people off.
9. “Fitting in” is often tied to looking and sounding like you fit in.
10. People are responsible for their own behaviors.

Brenda Smith Myles et al (2004) provide a resource that defines what the hidden curriculum is, addresses the impact of this on students with autism spectrum disorder and provides guidance regarding how school staff and families can teach the hidden curriculum. Examples of hidden curriculum items are provided in 13 different categories ranging from "slang" to "school" to "bathroom" to "friendship".

An addition resource that defines the hidden curriculum is a series of one-a-day calendars that identify an unstated rule for each day of the week. These daily calendars have been developed for kids for the past 5 years, and starting in 2010, a hidden curriculum daily calendar for older adolescents and adults was written by Judy Endow. These resources can be useful to school staff and families in identifying specific rules and situations that students will require targeted instruction and support in order to successfully navigate the social environments in which they participate.

**Social Thinking®** is an additional conceptual area for which we want to bring your attention, especially for those developing social skills groups for students with Asperger Syndrome or others on the spectrum who may be thought by some to be “higher functioning”. Developed by Michelle Garcia Winner and her colleagues, Social Thinking is a term for social cognition and is required prior to the development of social skills.

Social Thinking strategies teach individuals:

- How their own social minds work – why they and others react and respond the way they do;
- How their behaviors have emotional affects on those around them;
- And from this, how behaviors are affecting their own emotions, responses to and relationships with others across different social contexts (see [www.socialthinking.com](http://www.socialthinking.com)).

A separate mini-reference module has been developed on the topic of Social Thinking and is available online at: [https://specialedweb.madison.k12.wi.us/node/110](https://specialedweb.madison.k12.wi.us/node/110). NOTE: A copy of Michelle’s The Social Thinking—Social Communication Profile™ is posted as a separate mini-reference module on the above-referenced site.
IDENTIFYING OBJECTIVES

Once targeted skills are defined, social goals and objectives are developed; these provide the structure and focus for the student’s social skills program. Bellini (2006) suggests that goals represent long-term expectations (i.e. one year) and objectives represent short-term (i.e. 3 months), measurable behaviors. For example: A student may have a goal “to learn the skills necessary to establish and maintain positive social interactions with his peers”. One of his/her objectives (linked to that goal) may be to “join in activities with peers at recess in 30% of observed intervals”. The following skills may need to be taught in order for the student to achieve that objective: reading nonverbal cues, knowledge of social rules, personal space, inferring the interests of peers, coordination of motor movements, timing of initiation, conversational planning, and perspective taking.

Bellini (2006) recommends that three to five social objectives are sufficient for a given three-month quarter. He advocates that school staff and parents focus on critical skill deficits and target instruction for those component skills that are needed to successfully reach the social objective. He cautions us against setting unrealistic criteria for the student’s short-term objectives. The criteria should be based on the student’s present level of performance and represent realistic, meaningful and incremental increases in student behavior. For example if the student’s present level of performance specifies that a skills is performed 15% of the time, the objective criteria should be set at 35-45%, not 75-90% as is frequently seen in students’ IEPs.

In addition to establishing realistic criteria for student objectives, it is equally important to write objectives that focus on what we want the student to do, NOT on what we want them to not do. This requires reframing problems into teachable skills. For example, instead of decreasing blurting out, we increase raising hand before answering. On occasion, it may be necessary and appropriate to write an objective that targets the elimination of harmful behaviors. However, “behavioral reduction techniques should be used sparingly and cautiously in social skills programs” (Bellini, 2006, p.92).
When deciding where to begin when defining and developing a social skills program for students, it’s easy to get overwhelmed by a vast number of skills and behaviors that the student needs to work on.

Select no more than five treatment or educational objectives per three-month period. It is critical to remember that social objectives involve the performance of specific social skills, which are comprised of component skills (i.e., sub-skills) and related skills. When you select an objective, you may need to teach the child all the component skills to reach the objective (or at least those skills that he currently does not possess). Therefore, when selecting treatment objectives, clearly state the component or related skills that will be required to successfully perform the skill targeted in the treatment objective. Also remember to maintain a developmental perspective when determining what component skills will be required to reach an objective (Bellini, 2006, p. 93).

Wolfberg (2004) also provides guidance and support to school staff and families regarding the construction of goals for teaching social skills. She advises that after gathering preliminary assessments, that goals should be established that correspond to one or more of the following play domains (symbolic dimension, social dimension, communication, play preferences, generalization, and other). An example of sample goals in these areas also are included in Appendix F.

After completing an assessment of the student’s social function and identifying the objectives that will be the focus of a given student’s social skill program, Bellini (2006) indicates that a determination needs to be made as to whether the skill deficits you identify are the result of skill acquisition deficits or performance deficits, successfully social skills instruction depends on your ability to make this determination (see chart on next page).

“Social skill acquisition cannot be adequately explained by a “present” or “no present” dichotomy. Instead it should be viewed as a continuum from progressing from novice to mastery (or automaticity)” (Bellini, 2006, p.104).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Skills Deficit</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Focus of Intervention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Skills acquisition deficit</td>
<td>Child does not possess skill; therefore, child cannot successfully perform the skills</td>
<td>Promote acquisition of new skills (teach skills!)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance deficit</td>
<td>Child possesses the skill but does not perform the skill</td>
<td>Enhance performance of existing skills (remove barriers that impede performance)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Similarly, Wolfberg (2003) refers the work of Vygotsky related to “zones of proximal development” which is defined as:

... the distance between the child's actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).

**INTERVENTION STRATEGIES**

“There is no single intervention strategy that will teach the child with ASD to be successful socially!” (Bellini, 2006, p. 119). That said, Bellini offers an extension discussion of the topic in Chapters 7-9 of his book. He presents strategies for teaching social skills based on whether the skill deficit is skill acquisition or social performance difficulty. The following table outlines those strategies, readers are encouraged to refer to Bellini's text for an elaboration of these strategies.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies That Promote Skill Acquisition</th>
<th>Strategies that Enhance Social Performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thoughts, Feelings, and Interest Activities</td>
<td>Reciprocal Intervention Strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Stories™</td>
<td>Role-Playing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Problem Solving and Social Rules</td>
<td>Video Modeling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Monitoring</td>
<td>Relaxation Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prompting Strategies</td>
<td>Emotional Regulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction / Conversation Planning</td>
<td>Video Modeling</td>
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Whereas all the above referenced strategies useful and staff and families are encourage to read Bellini’s chapters on interventions, we would like to focus your attention on two particular strategies that we feel are warrant special attention: Video Modeling and Peer Mediated Instruction.

**Video Modeling** is an evidenced-based practice that has received increased attention in recent years as a strategy to assist students with autism in acquiring new skills. Video Modeling is a topic on which the Autism team will be providing training and support during the school year (see Madison Professional Development Portal for list of course offerings). A mini-reference module on the topic also is being developed. A new book written by Kate McGinnity, Sharon Hammer, & Lisa Ladson (2011) -- Lights! Camera! Autism! -- will be a must have for any staff and families interesting in incorporating video modeling within the framework of support they provide their students. Bellini (2006) also devotes substantial attention in his book on the topic of video modeling as an instruction strategy for teaching social skills to students with ASD.
Peer Mediated Instruction also is a useful strategy to utilize in social skills instruction with students. Both Bellini (2006) and Wolfberg (2003) discuss the process by which peers are recruited, chosen, trained, and supported to be effective peer models for students with ASD. Another excellent resource that staff and families can access on the topic is through the Autism Internet Modules (www.autisminternetmodules.org). Here you will find an instructional module that explains peer-mediated instruction and intervention and provides concrete examples and steps for intervention. Developed by Jennifer Neitzel, staff and families will find this a helpful support for increasing your knowledge and skills regarding this useful instructional strategy. Appendix G includes implementation guides and checklists from the online module that we find useful. These are provided to give you some ideas about the module but not as a reason not to complete the 1 ½ hour module.

Within the above-referenced online training resource, strategies and information about how to talk with and train peer models regarding the needs of identified students with autism is included. Jed Baker (2003) also provides some useful sensitivity training guides that school staff and families should find helpful in helping peers understand the needs of students for which they are helping to support. These sample sensitivity training guides are provided in Appendix H. Another useful resource for helping peers understand autism is a book written by Kate McGinnity and Nan Negri, “Walk Awhile in My Autism”.

IMPLEMENTATION

At this point in the process, you will have collected lots of information regarding the needs of the student and how best to respond to those. Now it’s time to put your best foot forward and design and implement your social skills group. This may in fact be a group or in some cases it may be individual instruction or in all likelihood, a combination of both. The later allows for individual skills development while allowing for practice with peers in a group setting (Bellini, 2006). When setting up groups, carefully attention needs to be given to the composition of the group so that the focus of the group is on social interaction skills and not behavior management. Does your group include typical models? Bellini (2006) prefers to work in small groups that consist of two to five
children in each group. Group size should be smaller for children with more intensive needs (student and 1-2 peers).

The materials that you utilize in your social skills groups should be “hands-on” type materials that are developmentally appropriate. Make sure you provide manipulatives, functional play items that promote constructive play, and symbolic-pretend items. Board games, card games, multi-player video games, building supplies and models are appropriate materials to consider using with adolescents. See Appendix I for a sample list of materials that may be utilized in your social skills groups.

Jed Baker (2003) provides an excellent chapter in his book that provides 70 activity sheets and skill handouts in the following skill areas: conversational skills, cooperative play skills, friendship management, self-regulation, empathy, and conflict management. These activity sheets lists ways to demonstrate, practice, and reinforce the identified skills at home and in the classroom. They are designed to guide teachers and parents in how to teach and practice the skills.

The final area on which to focus regarding program implementation is place, number of and length of sessions, and the schedule of what happens during a given session. Appendix J has IPG action plans and session structures suggested by Bellini that you will find helpful in designing this aspect of your social skills program. Appendix K includes visual cues and reminders that Jed Baker recommends utilizing in social skills training regarding the schedule group rules, and how to keep the conversation going whether the skills training is occurring in the classroom, small groups, and/or play dates.

**EVALUATION AND MONITORING PROGRESS**

As social skill deficits are identified during assessment, methods for evaluating the efficacy of intervention should also be determined (Bellini, 2006). The methods used to monitor progress are similar to those used to assess social functioning. Social performance should be measured at the beginning (baseline) and, at the very least, at the end of each three-month quarter. Ideally, some measure of social competence should've be collected each month, and even each week, Social performance...
may be monitored via observation, interviews, and rating scales; data should be collected across settings and across informants. Appendix L has sample evaluation and monitoring tools recommended by Bellini (2006) and Wolfberg (2004).

**SUMMARY**

We hope that you find this mini-reference module a useful framework for guiding your work in developing, implementing and evaluating social skills groups for students with autism. A wealth of knowledge and resources borrowed from well respected researchers and clinicians in the field are represented in this framework. Certainly every social skills group will not incorporate every resource represented in this framework. Whereas the overall framework model (assessment, developing goals, designing intervention, implementation, and evaluation) will be important to address for all students, the means by which this work happens will vary greatly. Hopefully you will find some useful strategies and information to guide your efforts. The Autism PSTs stand ready to help support your efforts in this area. Please let us know how we can support you in your endeavors.
Bibliography

Autism Internet Modules. Linking Research to Real Life. An online collection of instructional modules developed by noted professionals in the field covering 30+ evidenced-based practices for students with autism spectrum disorder.
www.autisminternetmodules.org


