

Social Skills and School-Age Care

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What are Social Skills?

Social skills can be defined in many ways. One simple definition is “any interaction skill that helps us get through the day.” Whether effective or malfunctioning, social skills guide our interactions, relationships, and behaviors.

Let’s take whining. Yes, whining is a skill. I know many children (and adults) who have mastered this behavior and honed it into a fine art. Whining is an example of a malfunctioning social skill—it gets in the way of truly effective social skills. However, for some people, using ineffective or malfunctioning social skills is all they know.

The interaction skills that children and youth practice every day positively or negatively affect their relationships.

When I was a child, people introduced me like this: “This is Laurie. She’s shy.” I actually learned and mastered the skill set of a shy child. Not exactly the social skill set that I wanted to create, but I created it because that was how people saw me. It wasn’t who I wanted to be, but I had the behaviors of shyness down pat.

I constantly see kids who are introduced as “mischievous,” or “attention-deficit,” or even “bad.” When I hear one of those terms. I

know that it means their current skill-set—it is NOT the identity of the child. This past year I ran a journalism club for ten-year-olds. I was surprised to find how many of the journalism students introduced themselves to me as shy or naughty. Two boys even told me that they hated each other. The students’ descriptions of themselves were based on their behav-

learned.

The profession of school-age care has deep and rich potential to provide a promising future for children. When we create rich environments, supportive relationships, and engaging experiences, children have the opportunity to learn life-skills needed for optimum development.

What kind of Social Skills are There?

There are many ways to identify all the various social skills. One way to divide them up is into two broad categories: intra-personal skills and interpersonal skills. The intra-personal skill set helps us know ourselves. While these skills are influenced by others, they happen, more or less, inside our own skin. Intra-personal skills makes us unique individuals with our own identity and help us answer the questions, “Who am I? What makes me tick?” These skills include: Confidence, Control, Coping, and Curiosity.

The interpersonal skills are the ways we interact with other people. We need these skills to get along peaceably in our world. These skills include: Communication, Community-Building, and Conflict Resolution. We call these



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ior, and how they had been labeled by others. But it was not who they were, and not who they wanted to become.

Social skills are the skills with which we interact with others, and how we see ourselves interacting in the world. When people have effective social skills, they can take cues from others and adjust their behavior. Social skills develop over time. We are not born with these skills. They are



seven skills *The Seven Cs* (created by my husband, Dr. Jim Ollhoff). Below are some synonyms and sub skills for each of the Seven Cs.

Intra-Personal Skills	
Synonyms	Sub Skills
Confidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-esteem • Sense of capableness • Sense of being loved and loveable
Control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal locus of control (understanding I, not outside sources, are in charge of my behavior) • Self-discipline • Responsibility • Impulse control
Coping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dealing with stress • Anger management • Dealing with crisis
Curiosity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intrinsic motivation • Desire to learn and explore • Desire to create adventure

Interpersonal Skills	
Synonyms	Sub Skills
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expressing feelings • Listening • Assertiveness and standing up for oneself • Understanding
Community-Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friendship skills • Working in groups • Cooperation • Empathy • Compassion • Team Work
Conflict-Resolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aversion to violence • Thinks solutions • Negotiates • Understands the importance of peaceful living

Why Do We Need to Teach Social Skills?

Learning social skills used to be a natural part of growing up. A generation or two ago, school-age children learned social skills naturally through the inter-connection between the structures of the family, school, and community. Children had to learn negotiation skills when there were six siblings in one bedroom. Children had to learn sharing when there were only hand-me-downs to wear. Children had to learn responsibility when it was their job to milk the cows in the morning (if they forgot, then no one had milk). A generation ago, children spent an average of three-and-a-half hours per day one-on-one with an adult, usually doing chores. Children learned maturity and social skills by interacting with adults constantly. A generation ago, children learned social skills by just going through life.

Today, children don't learn social skills as a natural part of growing up. Most of the mechanisms that helped facilitate social skills are gone. Conver-

sations with grandparents and extended family are limited. Typically, in today's world, time with adults is minimal and superficial. Instead of interaction, we have television, computers, and video games.

Today, children must be intentionally taught social skills.

The best environment to teach social skills will have three components.

- 1) it will have multi-age groups (so the older kids can help the younger kids)
- 2) it will have a high degree of adult-child interaction (so the adults can teach skills)
- 3) a high degree of spontaneous activities (so that adults can help kids learn the skills at the moment when they need them). The place with all three components is school-age care.

Benefits of Teaching Social Skills

Better grades.

Kids with better social skills learn more in school and test better. In fact, research suggests that spending more time learning social skills, rather than more time on academic content, will help kids do better in learning and in standardized tests.

Long-term success.

Kids who have effective social skills grow up to do better in college, and are more employable.

Improved relationships.

Kids who have effective social skills have better relationships, less adversarial confrontations, and work and play better with other kids.

Peaceful living.

Kids who have effective social skills can think through social situations better. Because of this, they have a much broader range of actions that they can try before resorting to aggres-



siveness. Kids with effective social skills have more empathy, and can better understand others' points of view.

Self-monitoring. Kids with effective social skills are better at taking cues from others and their environment. They can see when their behavior isn't matching their goals, and so can change their behavior. Kids with low social skills lack awareness, and so persist in behaviors that aren't meeting their goals because they can't see that their behaviors aren't working.



How to Teach Social Skills?

Use as many voices as possible. For best results, social skills should be taught by more than one adult. Think about the social structures in place a generation or two ago: Grandparents lived in the same house or next door. Cousins, aunts, and uncles lived within walking distance. All these adults and older children reinforced social skills. Kids respond best when a variety of voices reinforce the same message.

Teach in as many places as possible. Our sense of learning is tied into our sense of place. So, when people learn something in one place, it's not always easy to act on that skill in another place (this is why you can't remember someone's name when they're not in the "right place," or where you first met them). So, for best results, social skill instruction should happen in more than one place. It should happen in the

gym, on the playground, in the art room...and anywhere else you can think of!

Use the teachable moment. Kids learn social skills best in a social setting when and where skills are needed. The best time to teach conflict resolution is during an argument. The best time to teach leadership skills is when there is a new leader. The best time to teach community-building is when there is a new community.

Use many methods. Social skill development happens best when there are many ways to reinforce it. Teach the skill directly. Then reinforce it later. Then congratulate someone who did the skill well in a real-life situation. Then correct a child (privately) who performs the skill poorly. Talk about the skill when it's needed in a real life encounter. Create experiences where the children will need the skill. The more ways kids can see a social skill—the more routes the social skill takes into their brain—the better chance the kids will learn it.

Don't punish the lack of social skills out of children. Many adults try to punish kids when they misbehave. Certainly, kids must be held accountable. However, punishment does not teach new skills. Kids are using old, mis-functioning skills because they have worked for them in the past (or more likely, they *thought* it worked for them). Kids have to be helped to see that their old behaviors aren't working. Boundaries and consequences must be set on the old behaviors. But that will do no good if they are not taught new behaviors.

Some Ideas	
Confidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Know what each child is good at, and then engage the child in discussions about his or her special skills • Help kids make plans, don't do it for them • Help kids self-discover ("I can do this!") • Help kids know they are significant and worthwhile by the way you treat them
Control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help kids understand that they are responsible for their own behavior • When kids try to get out of their responsibility ("Johnny stole my pencil, I <i>had</i> to steal something of his!"), help them rephrase their thinking ("You chose to...") • Provide boundaries and consequences and make them responsible ("I'm sorry you chose to do that, but now you have chosen the consequences, too.")
Coping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach kids relaxation and frustration-management techniques • Help kids know that adults are available who can help them • Talk through frustrating scenarios, and brainstorm lists of responses ("What else could you do if you were in this situation?")



Some Ideas	
Curiosity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide activities where kids can explore new ideas and new things that might interest them • Help kids understand the interconnectedness of nature, through field trips and outdoor activities • Encourage kids' interests ("That sounds really interesting, tell me more about that.")
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help kids learn how to listen when in a one-on-one conversation • Provide activities where kids have to share something about themselves • Help kids express their own needs when someone is trying to exert power over them. • Give kids a voice to help make their own choices and decisions
Community-Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide activities where kids get to know something about each other. • Remind kids of their responsibility to the group ("We are all in this together.") • Model talking, discussion, and negotiating among the staff • Provide spaces and activities for small groups to play and interact
Conflict-Resolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach kids how to listen to each other • Give kids some techniques for handling interpersonal conflict • When doing projects, don't provide enough resources so that everyone has their own—force kids to negotiate and share

Final Thought

School-age programs are not just about keeping kids busy until their parents pick them up. If we assume that is our role, then we'll miss an entire generation of development.

School-age programs, when they are at their best, function to help kids grow in their social skills. That's the gift that we can give to kids that will last forever. We have the potential to have a permanent impact on kids and their development.



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