

## Tips From Your School Psychologist

### Good Social Skills Improve Learning and Safety

Good social skills are critical to success in life. The extent to which children possess these skills can influence their academic performance, behavior, social and family relationships, and even school safety. Social skills encompass a range of behaviors, such as waiting your turn, asking to use something, joining a group, managing anger or frustration, respecting other people, not interrupting, asking for help, and understanding the social cues of other children.

Most children pick up positive skills through their everyday interactions with adults and peers. However because of increased negative influences in life today, such as media violence and family pressures, it is important that teachers and parents reinforce this casual learning with direct and indirect instruction. This is particularly true given the critical role that social skills play in maintaining a positive school environment and reducing school violence. Aggressive or disruptive behavior often occurs because children do not know how to express themselves or respond to classmates appropriately.

Effective social skills programs involve parents and teachers working together. They can be implemented at a school-wide, classroom, and individual level and always emphasize teaching a desired skill, as opposed to punishing negative behaviors. Adults can reinforce positive social skills a number of ways.

- **Praise children when they behave correctly.** It may be necessary for children who have particular difficulty to intentionally “catch” them doing the right thing or create situations in which they can make a good choice.
- **Offer alternatives to inappropriate behavior.** Explain why the child’s first choice is incorrect and have them practice the appropriate skills before going on with their activity.
- **Model good social skills.** Children learn through observation. Adults can provide important examples of positive behaviors by how they interact with each other and, importantly, with the children themselves.
- **Create a culture that fosters good social skills.** School and home environments can affect a child’s ability to learn and perform good social skills. For instance, a student may be unruly in the morning because the teacher needs to establish more specific routines for coming into class and getting settled. Schools can also provide visual reminders, such posters and key phrases, throughout the building.
- **Communicate between home and school.** Schools should include parents and other caregivers in social skills training and activities so that they can reinforce skills taught at school. They should also work together to develop individualized strategies for a child who has a specific issue or need.
- **Focus on all age groups.** Adults sometimes overlook inappropriate behavior in young children because they believe that they will “grow out of it.” On the contrary, the earlier children start to learn good socials, the fewer problems they will have as they get older.

- **Avoid a “one size fits all” approach.** Most children will need a combination of strategies that are matched to their particular needs and backgrounds. For example, students who speak English as a Second Language might need intensive social skill instruction to promote acculturation and peer acceptance. Children with disabilities might need adaptive curriculum and learning strategies.

Schools across the country are discovering that integrating social skills into the curriculum has a significant impact on the quality of the school experience. We see improved behavior in the classroom, reduced conflicts at recess and lunch, and an increase in students' ability to resolve problems on their own. This translates into fewer referrals for discipline problems and a better learning environment for all students.

Parents who have questions about either the social skills program or their child should contact their child's teacher, the school counselor, or the school psychologist.