Social Skills as Part of Class Instruction

Module 18

Gwendolyn Cartledge, PhD
Porsha Robinson-Ervin, M.Ed

Ohio State University

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Virginia Department of Education Division of Special Education and Student Services
Web site: www.doe.virginia.gov/special_ed

Mr. Burton Burns noticed several of his students were having trouble working cooperatively in their science groups. He organized his students in small groups of 3 or 4 but he observed most of his students to be off tas~~k~~.~~k,~~ They were frequently in conflict, and the projects rarely were completed. Mr. Burns wanted the students to do science experiments with their groups, which he viewed as beneficial. But, during the experiments, Mr. Burns spent most of his time addressing problem behaviors, which wasted valuable instructional time. A few of the students had IEPs for emotional disabilities and a few others appeared to be at risk for this designation. These students understood the material but their problem behaviors were easily triggered by even minor distractions. Although tempted to give up, Mr. Burns was convinced that these cooperative groups would enhance the learning for all of his students, especially his special needs students, so he decided his students first needed to learn the requisite group social skills. Therefore, Mr. Burns embarked on teaching his students the social skill of working cooperatively in groups during science class.

He began the lesson by providing a rationale to students, explaining why it is important to work cooperatively with others. He then introduced the skill with a science related story, which illustrated what it means to work cooperatively with others. After introducing the skill, he task analyzed the skill into multiple steps such as: 1) Plan how to divide the work, 2) Start working, 3) Do your part, 4) If necessary, ask your partners for help, 5) Help your partners, if needed, 6) Say nice things to your partners, 7) If a partner isn't working, politely ask him or her to work, and 8) If necessary, get assistance from the teacher. Mr. Burns knew he could not teach all of the steps during one science class. He observed his students and decided which subskills the students needed most and which one was most critical to teach immediately. He selected, for example, "saying nice things to your partners," modeled it, guided the students in making the response, and gave the

students many opportunities to practice during science lessons. Mr. Burns provided students with feedback and reinforced their appropriate behavior with their group members. While evaluating the students' performance Mr. Burns recorded quite a decline in problem behaviors and an increase in pro-social behavior. Due to Mr. Burn's consistent social skill instruction and ability to address social skill deficits, his students made progress and were able to work successfully with their peers during science experiments.

Social Skills Instruction

By definition, children with emotional disabilities (ED) are characterized by behavior deficits and excesses. These students are prime candidates for social skill instruction, a proactive intervention intended to prevent some problem behaviors from developing and to reduce or eliminate other problem behaviors that already exist. Social skills have been variously defined but they essentially are behaviors that foster positive social relationships and enable the individual to be adaptive in various environments, including school settings (Cartledge & Milburn, 1995).

A basic model for social skills training (SST) has been a social modeling or model, where the targeted skill is modeled, the instructor guides the individual to perform the behavior, and then the learner performs the skill independently, without trainer prompting. An important feature of this model is to get the newly learned behavior to persist over time and to generalize to other settings and conditions.

Support for Social Skills Instruction

Numerous studies of SST have been conducted over the past three decades in general education, special education, and school wide settings with some positive but inconsistent findings (Bardon, Dona, & Symons, 2008; Cotugno, 2009; Gresham, Van, & Cook, 2006; Meier, DiPerna, & Oster, 2006; Sugai & Horner, 2009). In an analysis of this research literature, Maag (2005) observed the importance of social validity and peers in this instruction. That is, to make the instruction more meaningful and increase the positive effects, skills taught should be replacement behaviors that serve the same function as the problem behaviors. Additionally, peers should be included in the instruction to create a natural community of reinforcement to increase the likelihood of behavior acquisition and generalization.

As noted by Maag (2005), social skill studies that include peers are limited in the research literature. Lo, Loe, and Cartledge (2002) taught social skills to elementary-aged children in both small group and classroom settings. The focus was to reduce antisocial behaviors and to promote positive peer interactions and cooperating in groups. The social skill lessons were

based on the curriculum, *Working Together: Building Children's Social Skills Through Folk Literature* (Cartledge & Kleefeld, 1994), which provided scripted lessons and supportive materials. The small groups consisted of targeted students perceived to be at risk for ED, students diagnosed with ED, and socially skilled same age peers. The first author taught the lessons, which were first taught in small groups and later the classroom teachers taught the same lessons to all the students in the class. Results showed substantial reductions in antisocial behaviors for all the targeted students, especially during the condition where students were receiving both small-group and classroom instruction compared to small-group instruction alone. This finding suggested that instruction in the natural setting with the entire peer group helped students to acquire and employ the skills more effectively. A study shortcoming was that the researchers failed to determine prior to the intervention which skills were more socially valid to teach.

A subsequent study did include a functional assessment to determine the function that specific problem behaviors served (Lo & Cartledge, 2006). The participants involved four elementary-aged boys with or at-risk for disabilities. Assessments showed the function of the problem behaviors to be teacher attention for all participants. The intervention involved teaching the boys task-related behaviors of staying on task and completing their work on time. The trainer taught the replacement behavior of how to appropriately solicit teacher attention. A private signaling device facilitated on-task behavior and helped the students to monitor whether they were staying on task. Outcomes showed reductions in off-task behavior, particularly while self-monitoring, and an increase in appropriate teacher recruitment. Although the data were collected in the classrooms during academic periods and peer assessments were collected for social validity, the students were not taught the skills with their peers.

Somewhat akin to the Lo et al. (2002) study, Kellner, Bry, and Colletti (2002) taught anger management skills in small pull-out groups of middle school students diagnosed with ED. The instruction was subsequently moved to the classrooms where the staff could integrate the principles of anger management into the classroom activities. Twenty-seven students received the small group and classroom interventions compared to 19 students who did not receive treatment and only completed anger management logs. The researchers found that during the intervention students completed more logs and had fewer reports of peer conflict than did non-intervention students.

Revisiting the issues of teaching replacement behaviors and increasing instructional effectiveness (e.g., Maag, 2005), Gresham et al. (2006) discussed a study where they taught replacement behaviors to elementary-aged students considered at-risk for ED. Although the authors taught the four participants in pullout groups, teachers and parents were instructed on ways to reinforce desired behaviors in their respective settings. An important feature of this intervention was the fact that the researchers intensified the treatment so that the students received 60 hours of instruction compared to the 30 hours typically reported in most SST studies. Results showed substantial reductions in negative social interactions, total disruptive behavior, and alone time for the participants and that these effects were maintained for up to two months following the intervention.

Bardon et al. (2008) used a commercial social skills curriculum (PATHS, Kusche & Greenberg, 1994) to teach cooperative play skills to three 3rd grade students showing risk for ED. The

classroom teachers, who had been trained by the researchers, provided the instruction to the entire class for approximately 20 to 30 minutes two to three times a week over a 10-week period. The researchers closely monitored the instructional integrity of the teachers. A multiple baseline across students revealed modest increases in cooperative play for two of the three students. Statistical analyses of increases in cooperative play also yielded significance. This study points to the potential benefits of class-wide SST, if delivered consistently and with integrity.

All of the studies reviewed used either small pullout groups and/or designated periods for social skill instruction in the classroom. Many classroom teachers would argue that their academic teaching schedules would not allow them to allocate two to three periods a week solely for social skills. Others might further contend that social skill instruction might be more effective if infused with the regular curriculum. Schoenfeld, Rutherford, Gable, and Rock (2008) provide a model for infusing social skill instruction in the daily academic lessons. The authors refer to this model as the *ENGAGE Blueprint* which involves 1) *examine the demands of the curriculum/instruction* and provide accommodations/adaptations for less skilled students, 2) *note essential social skills* that are currently underdeveloped such as sharing materials with peers or managing differences, 3) *teach* – prior to the academic lesson, briefly teach the skill(s) essential for that session, 4) *actively monitor* – during academic lesson monitor, prompt, and reinforce students' adherence to desired skill(s), 5) *gauge progress* – record the degree to which individuals/groups display the desired skill(s) and the need for more instruction in the social skills, 6) *exchange reflections* – at close of lesson review briefly academic and social skills learned. Although not tested empirically, this model has merit if teachers employ evidence-based procedures for teaching social and academic skills. It is especially useful when attempting to include students with or at risk for ED.

Circumstances Under which to Consider Social Skills Instruction

Social skills instruction requires specific criteria to be addressed but it also provides teachers with flexibility to incorporate the basic elements of sound social skills training into regular classroom routines. Social skills instruction can be fairly well integrated into regular academic instruction. Specifically, it can be implemented on three levels: (a) classroom interventions, (b) subgroup targeted interventions, and (c) pupil-specific interventions. Social skills instruction is appropriate in multiple contexts due to the many social interactions that take place daily in schools (Schoenfeld et al., 2008).

Guidelines for Implementation of Social Skills Instruction

1. Select target students who would benefit from the intervention. The selected students should have been previously observed and significant deficits in social skills should be identified for each student.
2. Determine the social skills each student needs. Therefore, to intervene effectively, it is imperative to distinguish between students who fail because they have not acquired the skill (acquisition problem) from those students who have the skill in their repertoire but fail to exhibit it (motivation problem).

3. Help the desired behavior to occur through either direct instruction (acquisition problem) or reinforcing contingencies (motivation problem). Teachers should model the behavior, making certain students understand and are able to perform the skill components. Instructional materials can include pre-packaged social skills curriculums that can be integrated during regular classroom instruction (e.g., Cartledge & Kleefeld, 2009, 2010). Social Skills instruction can be implemented during reading and writing instruction, and cooperative learning activities (Cartledge & Kiarie, 2001; Rutherford, Mathur, & Quinn, 1998; Rock, 2004). Teachers should provide students with models through literature or real life examples that demonstrate prosocial behaviors and strategies.
4. Provide guided rehearsal where students are verbally/physically prompted through the steps of the skill until they are able to display the skill without prompting.
5. Provide discrimination training so that students know when the skill does and does not occur.
6. Provide multiple opportunities for students to practice appropriate social behaviors. Set up role playing opportunities during classroom instruction that will allow students to practice and receive feedback. These opportunities should reflect the normal daily situations that students experience to allow for increased generalization and maintenance of the skills. Socially competent peers should be included to serve as additional models during these activities.
7. Directly reinforce socially appropriate behaviors and strategies. Give feedback that is specific, immediate, frequent, positive, and corrective. The feedback should be tailored to the needs of individual students.
8. Monitor student progress to determine if students are acquiring the appropriate social skills. If students are not exhibiting social skills after instruction, teach a prerequisite skill, re-teach the target skill, and/or increase reinforcing contingencies. Implement self-monitoring strategies to facilitate maintenance and to help students monitor their own behavior.

Cautions Regarding Social Skills Instruction

When considering social skill instruction, it is imperative that educators consider the severity of the social skill needs of each student. Some students may need more intensive instruction than others, so it is also important that social skills instruction is actively monitored and evaluated as well as student progress. These measures will ensure accurate assessment of the skills and facilitate the appropriate changes, when changes need to be made (Schoenfeld et al., 2008).

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Websites

Model me:Videos for Modeling Social Skills
http://www.modelmekids.com/

Practicing Social Skills: How to Teach Your Student Social Interactions
http://www.ldonline.org/article/21025/

Social Skills and Autism (Materials can be adapted for students with and at-risk for ED)
http://www.teachervision.fen.com/autism/resource/10154.html