Chapter 6

Improving social skills and peer group acceptance

> Many students with mild disabilities demonstrate difficulties in developing social relationships with adults and peers in their environment. These students often evidence reduced social perceptiveness, finding it challenging to read verbal and nonverbal social cues and appropriately interpret these cues within a social and cultural context.
>
> (Pavri and Monda-Amaya 2001: 392)

The quotation above reminds us of the need to consider how best to enhance the social acceptance of children with special needs when they are placed in a regular classroom. Inclusive educational settings create an opportunity for these children to engage in more positive social interaction with their peers – but social acceptance of students with special needs does not always occur spontaneously (Brodkin 2005; Canney and Byrne 2006). The results of most studies of inclusion give no support at all to the belief that merely placing a child with a disability in the mainstream will automatically lead to his or her social integration into the peer group (Frederickson *et al.* 2005). The situation is most problematic for children who have an emotional or behavioural disorder; and there is a danger that such children become marginalised, ignored or even openly rejected by classmates.

Even students without disabilities are at risk in school if they lack social skills and are rejected or victimised by others (Fox and Boulton 2005). It is for this reason that establishing good social relationships with other children has been described as one of the most important goals of education. It is evident that poor peer relationships during the school years can have a lasting detrimental impact on social and personal competence in later years. The risk of problems is reduced however when children with special needs are able to establish healthy social relationships (Wiener 2004).

Opportunities for social interaction

At least three conditions must be present for positive social interaction and the development of friendships among children with and without disabilities. These conditions include:

- *Opportunity*: Being within proximity of other children frequently enough for meaningful contacts to be made.
- *Continuity*: Being involved with the same group of children over a reasonable period of time; and also seeing some of the same children in your own neighbourhood out of school hours.
- *Support*: Being helped to make contact with other children in order to work and play with them; and if possible being directly supported in maintaining friendships out of school hours.

Inclusive schooling provides the opportunity for friendships to develop in terms of proximity and frequency of contact, and also has potential for continuity. It creates the best possible chances for children with disabilities to observe and imitate the social behaviours of others. What inclusive classrooms must provide is the necessary support for positive social interactions to occur (Sparzo and Walker 2004). This is particularly important for students who are low in self-esteem or confidence and lacking in basic social skills.

When students with disabilities are placed in regular settings without adequate preparation or on-going support, three problems may become evident:

- The children without disabilities do not readily demonstrate easy acceptance of those with disabilities.
- The children with disabilities, contrary to popular belief, do not automatically observe and copy the positive social models that are around them.
- Some teachers do not intervene to promote social interaction on the disabled child's behalf.

There is an urgent need for teachers to identify as soon as possible any children in their classes who appear to be without friends at recess and lunch breaks and who seem unable to relate closely with classmates during lessons.

Identification of children with peer relationship problems

There are several appropriate ways to identify children with social acceptance problems. Each approach will be described briefly, but they can be used in combination.

Naturalistic observation

The most obvious strategy for identifying children with problems is the informal observation of social interactions within and outside the classroom. Naturalistic observation is probably the most valuable method of identification for the teacher to use because it focuses on the child within the dynamics of peer-group situations. A teacher who takes the trouble to note ways in which children play and work together will quickly identify children who are neglected by their peers or who are openly rejected or become the target of ridicule and teasing. It is very important also to try to identify the factors that give rise to this situation. For example, is the child in question openly obnoxious to others through aggression, hurtful comments, spoiling games or interfering with work? Or at the other extreme, does the child seem to lack confidence and skills to initiate contact with others, instead remaining very much on the outside of any action?

Sociometric survey

Naturalistic observation tends to identify the most obvious cases of popularity or rejection. It may not pick up some of the less obvious social relationships in the class. For this reason some teachers find it useful to carry out a whole-class survey in which all the children indicate, in confidence, their main friendship choices. The teacher may interview each child privately or, if the children can write, may give out slips of paper with the numerals 1 to 3 printed on them. The teacher then requests that each child write down first the name of the person he or she would most like to play with or work with as a partner in a classroom activity or at lunchtime. The teacher may then say, 'If that person was away from school, who would you choose next?' and that name is listed second. The procedure is then repeated for a third choice. When the papers are collected the teacher calculates a score for each child on the basis of three points for the first choice, two points for second choice, and one point for third. For example, Susan obtains a total score of ten points if two other children choose her as first preference and two others choose her as second preference. The results will identify children who are popular, those who are reasonably accepted in the group, and those who are not chosen at all by their classmates. Sociometric data of this type can sometimes guide the teacher when establishing working groups.

Peer ratings

This procedure ensures that some children are not overlooked if absent, as may happen with a traditional sociometric survey described above. Each child is provided with a list of the names of all children in the class. They are required, in confidence, to place a score from 1 (not liked very much) to 5 (liked very much indeed) against each name. Summation of the completed scores will reveal the children who are not well liked by class members as well as showing the general level of acceptance of all children. The result may sometimes correlate highly with naturalistic observation, but occasionally quite subtle positive or negative relationships appear that are not immediately obvious to casual observation.

Teacher ratings

The use of checklists that specify important indicators of social adjustment can be helpful in providing a clear focus for teachers' observations. The items in the checklist would normally be those responses and behaviours considered to comprise 'social skills', such as greeting, interacting with others, sharing, and avoiding conflict.

Creating a supportive environment

A positive and supportive school environment is, of course, important for the social development of all children (Bremer and Smith 2004). To facilitate social interaction for children with special needs in regular classrooms three conditions are necessary:

- The general attitude of the teacher and the peer group towards students with special needs must be as positive and accepting as possible.
- The environment should be arranged so that the child with a disability has the maximum opportunity to spend time socially involved in group or pair activities, during recess and during academic work in the classroom.
- The child needs to be taught the specific skills that may enhance social contact with peers.

To enhance social development, teachers must first create classroom environments where competition is not a dominant element. They must then use group activities frequently enough to encourage cooperation among students (Johnson and Johnson 2003).

Influencing attitudes

It has long been acknowledged that one of the key factors influencing the effectiveness of inclusive education is the *attitude* of those involved in the process – teachers, children, and parents. Teachers and classmates tend to become more accepting of children with disabilities when they gain experience in working with them and acquire a better understanding of the nature of disabilities. Children's attitudes are likely to be influenced most when teachers work to build a climate of concern for others and a respect for individual differences. Facilitating and encouraging peer assistance in the classroom can be useful in increasing non-disabled students' closer contact with others who have difficulties in learning. Studies have shown that a combination of information about, and direct contact with, disabled children provides the most powerful positive influence for attitude change in both teachers and in the peer group. It is also evident that attitude change tends to be a gradual process.

The following activities, particularly when used in combination, have proved beneficial in improving children's attitudes towards those with disabilities.

- Viewing videos depicting children and adults with disabilities coping well and doing everyday things. Many videos and VCDs are available showing inclusive classroom environments and the accommodations made for students with special needs.
- Reading and discussing stories about disabled persons and their achievements.
- Conducting factual lessons and discussion about particular disabilities.
- Having persons with disabilities as visitors to the classroom or as guest speakers.
- Using simulation activities, e.g. simulating deafness or vision impairment or being confined to a wheelchair. (But note that two conditions that cannot be simulated are intellectual disability and emotional disturbance. These are also the two disabilities producing the greatest problems in terms of social isolation and rejection in the peer group.)
- Organising regular visits as helpers to a local special school or centre.

Throughout these awareness-raising activities attention should be drawn to the various strengths possessed by every person with a disability or learning difficulty, as well as to any problems or special needs they may have. The theme of discussion should focus on: 'How will we respond positively and supportively to someone with this difficulty in our class?' 'How will we help to make these students feel happy and productive?'

The class activity called 'Circle Time' can be used to great advantage as an opportunity for children to discuss aspects of behaviour such as helping one another, preventing bullying or teasing, building self-esteem, looking for strengths in other people, and showing interest in the ideas of others. Circle Time is often associated with kindergarten and early primary years, but the value of having students coming together in a relaxed situation in which they can voice their opinions can extend easily into secondary schools (Taylor 2003). Circle Time can also be used as an opportunity for social skills development with intellectually disabled students (taking turns; listening to others; sharing; praising) (Canney and Byrne 2006).

Circle of Friends

Circle of Friends is a peer-group support strategy to help children (particularly those with special educational needs) who have difficulty finding a friend and coping in class (Barrett and Randall 2004). The approach originated in Canada but is now used in the US, the UK and Australia as one way to foster social inclusion for students with SEN. Circle of Friends operates by involving some of a child's classmates as natural supporters to help the child acquire more positive behaviours and self-management. Improvements in these areas will make him or her more socially acceptable and successful.

The teacher first discusses with the whole class in a positive manner the particular needs of the child with a social or behavioural problem, and invites up to five or six students to volunteer to form a collaborative support group for this child. They must greet the child each day, be friendly and helpful at all times, assist with routines at lunch and break times, make sure the child is counted in for all activities, and help the child solve any problems that may arise. The members of the group meet frequently to set goals and devise possible strategies. The role of the teacher is to facilitate and encourage this process. Each week a debriefing meeting is held for the volunteers and they report back on any positive progress in the week and discuss any problems that have occurred.

Additional information on *Circle of Friends* can be obtained from these online sources:

http ://www.inclusive-solutions.com/circlesoffriendsarticle.asp
http://www.cesa5.k12.wi.us/SKIP/circleofriends.htm
http://www.ualberta.ca/~jpdasddc/inclusion/raymond/ch4.html

Facilitating social interaction

The following strategies can be used to increase the chances of positive social interaction for students with disabilities:

- Make more frequent use of non-academic tasks (e.g. games; model-making; painting) because these place the child with special needs in a situation where he or she can more easily fit in and contribute.
- 'Peer tutoring' and 'buddy systems' have been found effective. Several versions of these exist, including Classwide Peer Tutoring (CWPT). Research over two decades has confirmed the effectiveness of peer tutoring for improving learning outcomes for students at all age and ability levels (McMaster *et al.* 2006).
- Make a particular topic – for example, 'friends' or 'working together' – the basis for class discussion. 'If you want someone to play with you at lunchtime, how would you make that happen?' 'If you saw two children in the schoolyard who had just started at the school today, how would you make them feel welcome?' Sometimes teachers prepare follow-up material in the form of worksheets with simple cartoon-type drawings and speech balloons into which the children write the appropriate greetings or comments for the various characters.
- Peer-group members can be encouraged to maintain and reinforce social interactions with less-able or less-popular children. Often they are unaware

of the ways in which they can help. They, too, may need to be shown how to initiate contact, how to invite the child with special needs to join in an activity, or how to help that classmate with particular school assignments.

Organisation for group work

The regular use of group work in the classroom is one of the main ways of providing children with opportunities to develop social skills through collaborating with others. Careful planning is required if group work is to achieve the desired educational and social outcomes. The success of collaborative group work depends on the composition of the working groups and the nature of the tasks set for the students.

When utilising group work as an organisational strategy it is important to consider the following basic principles:

- Initially there is some merit in having groups of children working cooperatively on the same task at the same time. This procedure makes it much easier to prepare resources and to manage time effectively. When each of several groups are undertaking quite different tasks it can become a major management problem for the teacher, unless the students concerned are already very competent and experienced in group work.
- Choice of tasks for group work is very important. Tasks have to be selected which *require* collaboration and teamwork. Children are sometimes seated in groups in the classroom but are expected to work on individual assignments. Not only does this negate the opportunities for collaboration, it also creates difficulties for individuals in terms of interruptions and distractions.
- It is not enough merely to establish groups and to set them to work. Group members may have to be taught how to work together. They may need to be shown behaviours that encourage or enable cooperation – listening to the views of others, sharing, praising each other, and offering help to others. If the task involves the learning of specific curriculum content, teach the children how to rehearse and test one another on the material.
- The way in which individual tasks are allotted needs to be carefully planned (division of labour); the way in which each child can assist another must also be made explicit, e.g. 'John, you can help Craig with his writing then he can help you with the lettering for your title board.' Contingent praise for interacting with others should be descriptive. 'Well done, Sue. That's nice of you to help Sharon with that recording.'
- Teachers should monitor closely what is going on during group activities and must intervene when necessary to provide suggestions, encourage the sharing of a task, praise examples of cooperation and teamwork and model cooperative behaviour themselves. Many groups can be helped to function efficiently if the teacher (or classroom assistant or a parent helper) works as a group member without dominating or controlling the activity.

- The size of the group is important. Often children working in pairs is a good starting point. Select the composition of the group carefully to avoid obvious incompatibility among students' personalities. Information from a sociometric survey may help to determine appropriate partners.
- When groups contain students with special needs it is vital that the specific tasks and duties to be undertaken by these students are clearly delineated. It can be useful to establish a system whereby the results of the group's efforts are rewarded not merely by what individuals produce, but also by the way in which they have worked together positively and supportively. Under this structure, group members have a vested interest in ensuring that all members learn, because the group's success depends on the achievement of all. Helping each other, sharing, and tutoring within the group are behaviours that must be modelled and supported.
- Talking should be encouraged during group activities. It is interesting to note that sub-grouping in the class has the effect of increasing transactional talk (talk specifically directed to another person and requiring a reply) by almost three times the level present under whole-class conditions.
- Seating and work arrangements are important. Group members should be in close proximity but still have space to work on materials without getting in each other's way.
- Group work must be used frequently enough for the children to learn the skills and routines. Infrequent group work results in children taking too long to settle down.

Group work can become chaotic if the group tasks are poorly defined or too complex. Other problems arise if the students are not well versed in group-working skills, or if the room is not set up to facilitate easy access to resources. It is essential that all tasks have a very clear structure and purposes that are understood by all. Doveston and Keenaghan (2006) suggest that there is great value in discussing openly with a class the best ways of making group work effective, and identifying the skills necessary to cooperate productively with others.

At times a teacher needs to intervene to help a child gain entry to group activity or to work with a carefully chosen partner. The teacher must also praise and reinforce both the target child and the peer group for all instances of cooperative, helpful and friendly behaviour. In the case of children displaying extreme withdrawal or rejection, simply relying on milieu intervention is not always sufficient. Sometimes it is necessary for a child to be removed from the classroom situation and coached intensively in a particular social skill before that skill can be applied in the peer group setting.

What are social skills?

Social skills are the specific behaviours an individual uses to maintain effective interpersonal communication and interaction. Social skills comprise a set of competencies that allow children or adolescents to initiate positive social interactions with others, establish peer acceptance, and cope effectively and adaptively within the social environment.

Some children with disabilities or with emotional and behavioural difficulties are particularly at risk of social isolation (Gresham *et al.* 2001), although it is important to stress that some students with disabilities are popular with classmates in the mainstream, particularly if they have a pleasant personality. One of the main reasons why certain children are unpopular is that they lack appropriate social skills that might make them more acceptable. They are in a Catch-22 situation since friendless students have fewer opportunities to practise social skills, and those who don't develop adequate social skills are unable to form friendships. It is argued that these children need social skills training (Siperstein and Rickards 2004).

Cartledge (2005) recommends that social skill instruction should begin in the preschool years or the primary grades, when children are most receptive to behaviour change. Early training in social skills can be instrumental in reducing or preventing problem behaviour in later years. Cartledge also advises that social skill instruction should be embedded in the context of events that occur naturally within the children's own classroom setting. Research shows that there is very limited transfer or maintenance of skills when they are taught in contrived exercises unrelated to the real classroom.

Social skills training

Many lists of important pro-social behaviours have been created (e.g. Cohen and Jaderberg 2005), as have many checklists allowing teachers, parents and psychologists to assess a child's social skill level (e.g. Elksnin and Elksnin 1995). Guidelines have also been published to give teachers suggestions for what to teach and how to teach it in the domain of social skill development.

Social skills training usually includes the teaching of some or all of the following behaviours:

- making eye contact;
- greeting others by name;
- gaining attention in appropriate ways;
- talking in a tone of voice that is acceptable;
- knowing when to talk, what to talk about, and when to hold back;
- initiating a conversation;
- maintaining conversations;
- answering questions;
- listening to others and showing interest;
- sharing with others;
- saying please and thank you;
- helping someone;

- making apologies when necessary;
- being able to join in a group activity;
- taking one's turn;
- smiling;
- accepting praise;
- giving praise;
- accepting correction without anger;
- coping with frustration;
- managing conflict.

The basic list above is similar to that found in most texts on social skills training. Each skill can be broken down into smaller sub-skills if necessary, and each skill or behaviour needs to be considered relative to the particular child's age and specific deficits. For example, the conversational skills needed to function adequately in an adolescent peer group are obviously far more complex and subtle than those required by the young child just starting school. Similarly, skills needed to deal with conflict situations become more complex as a child gets older.

There is no shortage of training programmes and curricula available to schools, as reviewed for example by Kavale and Mostert (2004). The designers of these programmes believe that teaching social skills can have lasting positive benefits, particularly for those students with only mild degrees of social difficulty. Studies suggest that programmes for students with special needs can be effective if (a) they target the precise skills and knowledge an individual lacks; (b) they are intensive and long term in nature; (c) they promote maintenance, generalisation and transfer of new skills outside the training context into the individual's daily life (Gresham 2002). The most meaningful settings in which to enhance the child's skills are usually the classroom and schoolyard. It is pointless to teach skills that are not immediately useful in the child's regular environment.

Most programmes for training social skills are based on a combination of modelling, coaching, role-playing, rehearsing, feedback and counselling. At times, video recordings are also used to provide examples of social behaviours to discuss and imitate, or to provide the trainee with feedback on his or her own performance or role-play. In each individual case the first step is to decide what the priorities are for this child in terms of specific skills and behaviours to be taught. The skills to be targeted need to be of immediate functional value to the child in the social environment in which he or she operates.

Typical steps in coaching social skills include:

- *Definition*: Describe the skill to be taught. Discuss why the particular skill is important and how its use helps social interactions to occur. The skill may be illustrated in action in a video, a picture or cartoon, a simulation using puppets, or pointed out to the child by reference to activities going on in the peer group. The teacher may say 'Watch how she helps him build the wall with the blocks.' 'Look at the two girls sharing the puzzle. Tell me what they might be saying to each other.'

- *Model the skill*: Break the skill down into simple components and demonstrate these clearly yourself, or get a selected child to do this.
- *Imitation and rehearsal*: The child tries out the same skill in a structured situation. For this to occur successfully the child must be motivated to perform the skill and must attend carefully and retain what has been demonstrated.
- *Feedback*: This should be informative. 'You've not quite got it yet. You need to look at her while you speak to her. Try it again.' 'That's better! You looked and smiled. Well done.' Feedback via a video recording may be appropriate in some situations.
- *Provide opportunity for the skill to be used*: Depending upon the skill taught, use small group work or pair work activities to allow the skill to be applied and generalised to the classroom or other natural setting.
- *Intermittent reinforcement*: Watch for instances of the child applying the skill without prompting at other times in the day and later in the week. Provide descriptive praise and reward. Aim for maintenance of the skill once it is acquired.

To a large extent, these behaviours once established are likely to be maintained by natural consequences – that is, by a more satisfying interaction with peers. Individuals with acceptable social skills are less likely to engage in problem behaviour, are better at making friends, are able to resolve conflicts peacefully, and have effective ways of dealing with persons in authority (Poulou 2005).

As well as having appropriate positive pro-social skills, a socially competent individual must also *avoid* having negative behavioural characteristics that prevent easy acceptance by others – for example, high levels of irritating behaviour (interrupting, poking, shouting), impulsive and unpredictable reactions, temper tantrums, abusive language, or cheating at games. In many cases these undesirable behaviours may need to be eliminated by behaviour modification or through cognitive self-management.

Is social skills training effective?

Some researchers warn against over-optimism in regard to the long-term efficacy of social skills training (e.g. Frederickson and Furnham 2004; Kavale and Mostert 2004; Maag 2005). While most social skills training produces positive short-term effects, there are usually major problems with maintenance and generalisation of the trained skills over time (Barton-Arwood *et al.* 2005; Cartledge 2005). In particular, it is suggested that social skills training appears to have limited effect when applied to seriously behaviourally-disordered children and others with chronic relationship difficulties (Gresham *et al.* 2001). It must also be noted that even when children with disabilities are specifically

trained in social skills, some may still not find it any easier to make friends. For example, Margalit (1995) found that students with intellectual disability reported on-going loneliness even after successfully participating in a social skills programme. Unexpected outcomes may also occur, for example, Elliott *et al.* (2002) found that some students with intellectual disability may feel *less* socially competent after training because the training has made them more aware of their own deficiencies.

The failure of many social skills programmes to bring about lasting change in students may be due to:

- a mismatch between the exact social deficits a child displays and the activities provided in the training programme (with some programmes reportedly being much too generic and not based on an accurate assessment of the student's specific needs) (Cartledge 2005);
- poor or inconsistent quality of the training provided in some programmes (Gresham *et al.* 2001);
- training sessions too infrequent and too lacking in intensity to have any lasting impact (Bullis *et al.* 2001);
- a failure to plan for and support generalisation from the training or coaching context to natural social environments (Barton-Arwood *et al.* 2005; Gresham *et al.* 2001).

Training in social skills is not a matter simply of teaching a child something that is missing from his or her repertoire of behaviours, but rather it usually involves *replacing* an undesirable behaviour that is already strongly established with a new alternative behaviour. Gresham *et al.* (2001) suggest that the negative behaviours we often take as indicative of lack of social skill in some children (e.g. aggression, non-compliance, verbal abuse) may actually be very rewarding behaviours for the individuals concerned and represent more powerful and effective forces than the new pro-social skills we attempt to teach. This residual influence of pre-existing behaviours is one of the reasons why skills taught during training are often not maintained – they are competing with powerful behaviours that have already proved to work well for the child.

Even given the cautionary comments above it is still a high priority for any students who lack specific social skills to be provided with every opportunity (including specific training) in order to acquire them. There is much still to be discovered about how best to implement social skills training. Bullis *et al.* (2001: 89) are probably accurate in their conclusion:

> Unfortunately we do not know the necessary intensity or duration for the social skills intervention to be effective, and we are uncertain of the precise combination of components that should be added to the treatment to achieve maximum effect.

Poor scholastic achievement seems to be one factor contributing to poor social acceptance, even after social skills have been taught. Unless achievement within the curriculum can also be increased, acceptance may remain a problem for some children. Attention is therefore focused in the following chapters on approaches for teaching basic academic skills to students with special needs.

Further reading

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Kostelnik, M.J. (2006) *Guiding Children's Social Development; Theory to Practice* (5th edn), Clifton Park, NY: Thomson-Delmar.
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Chapter 7

Developing early literacy skills: principles and practices

> Instructional approaches have generated much interest and controversy for several decades, especially in relation to 'best practice' in the literacy domain.
>
> (Ellis 2005: 10)

According to the description in *No Child Left Behind Act* (Congress of USA 2002) in the US, skilled reading is a complex act that requires the integrated use of the following:

- an understanding of how phonemes (speech sounds) are represented in print;
- the ability to decode unfamiliar words;
- the ability to read fluently;
- sufficient background information and vocabulary to support reading comprehension;
- the development of appropriate strategies to construct meaning from print;
- the development and maintenance of motivation to read.

Learning to read is a challenging task even for children of average intelligence. It can be a very difficult task indeed for children with disabilities. Yet despite the difficulties, almost all children can be helped to acquire skills in word recognition and comprehension through application of effective teaching.

The most effective methods for teaching reading have been the focus of recent enquiries in several different countries, for example Australia (DEST 2005), the UK (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee 2005; Rose 2005), and the US (National Reading Panel 2000). The main purpose of these enquiries has been to find methods that are supported by research that proves their efficacy, rather than methods that are simply based on teachers' personal whims and idiosyncratic styles. Some of the conclusions from these reports are included in this and the following chapter.