



Social Interactions... A Barrier to Inclusion?

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Even though learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) all have their own unique characteristics, they often share a common challenge: social interactions. Skills such as approaching others and initiating interactions, speaking and listening to others, considering others' feelings and maintaining eye contact can be difficult to master for a learner with ASD. Some of them do have a desire to connect and interact with their peers but others prefer individual activities. All these factors can certainly contribute to awkward, complex or even problematic social relationships with peers.

February is National Inclusive Education Month in Canada. In order for all learners to feel fully included in our schools and communities, it is important that they have positive, enriching and authentic social experiences.

Structured social activities can allow learners of all ages and with various strengths and difficulties related to social interactions to work on certain skills. This context allows school staff to teach certain social skills to learners with ASD while guiding peers to ensure positive interactions. Here are some steps that could help school staff plan structured social activities to teach social skills to learners with ASD:

1. Determine the learner's current level and the target skill

It is important to know the learner's level of functioning before starting the intervention. Assessment can be informal (interviewing parents, teachers and caregivers) or direct (observing the learner in a social context and taking data). Once the baseline is identified, the facilitator or team can target a skill that will be worked on during the structured activities.

Questions to ask to determine which ability should be a priority:

- What is the learner's greatest barrier to learning the skills required to participate in school, community or family activities?
- What skills would facilitate future learning?
- What ability would give the learner access to new environments or new social activities or opportunities?
- What are the family's expectations and values?

Other tips:

- Formulate a SMART goal in relation to the targeted skill;
- Include the goal in the learner's intervention plan to keep track of progress.

2. Determine whether it is a skill deficit or performance deficit

Once the skill is targeted, it is important to determine whether the problem is a skill deficit or a performance deficit. Depending on the situation, the intervention focus will be different. If the learner is simply not able to demonstrate the skill (e.g., Caroline cannot discern sarcasm in other people's tone of voice), this skill should be taught. However, if the learner masters the skill but does not demonstrate it at appropriate times (e.g., Julian makes eye contact with his parents, brother and music teacher, but never with peers in the classroom), then he or she should learn when to use the skill properly. You can determine which situation applies to the learners by talking to different people who know them well and by observing them in different settings.

Note: This document does not constitute clinical advice, but rather serves as an example of an effective practice for a particular student. Intervention plans should be based upon assessment, and evidence-based teaching strategies should be carefully selected according to the child's needs, and learning profile.

3. Choose intervention strategies

Skill deficit

If the learner does not demonstrate the targeted skill, it will need to be taught. There are different evidence-based strategies that will allow the learner to achieve the targeted objective. Here are a few:

- ***Peer-mediated interventions:*** This approach teaches peers to initiate some interactions or to respond or react appropriately to the interactions of the learner with ASD. Let's take the example of 12-year-old Lisa, who is experiencing several challenges and frustrations because her peers no longer want to discuss her favourite subject: the movie "Tangled". School staff chooses 4 peers from Lisa's class with whom Lisa likes to interact. They meet with them to explain what role they will have to play during the activity and give them advice and strategies to help them react appropriately in case Lisa would mention her favourite film. When the peers feel ready, the facilitator organizes a "Board Games" activity during lunch hour with Lisa and the 4 peers. She supervises the activity while the peers ask Lisa questions and help her maintain an appropriate topic of conversation.
- ***Social stories:*** Social stories are a way to present certain concepts or rules to learners. There are many resources that outline the process to follow when creating social stories. Here is one of them: <https://autismcanada.org/living-with-autism/treatments/non-medical/communication/social-stories/>
- ***Role-playing:*** Role-playing is an integral part of behavioural skills training (BST)¹. Role-playing allows the learner to practice the skill taught in a positive context. The role-play can be written in advance or spontaneous, depending on the need. For example, 15-year-old Simon interrupts his peers during conversations. The facilitator meets with Simon individually to teach him the ability to "wait for his turn to speak". After clearly explaining expectations and showing him an example, the facilitator leads a role-play session with Simon where he plays the role of the student and Simon plays the role of the adult. The facilitator continually provides feedback to Simon to encourage and assist him. Together, they repeat this exercise several times, reversing roles. Simon then has the opportunity to practice the skill in his usual environment.
- ***Video modelling:*** During the video modelling, the learner watches a video of a specific behaviour and then imitates the behaviour of the model. The video can be prepared by peers, adults, or the student himself. It is an effective strategy that provides the learner with specific visual cues that can be replicated.

Performance Deficit

If the learner demonstrates the skill in some environments or with different people, it means that it will not be necessary to teach the skill explicitly. Instead, it will be necessary to use reinforcement. The frequency of a behaviour that is reinforced is expected to increase. In the case of Julian, for example, who is making eye contact with his parents, brother and music teacher, but not with his peers, the facilitator could set up a reinforcement program to encourage Julian to make eye contact with his peers. For some learners, it may be possible to fade the "extrinsic" reinforcement (e.g., giving one sticker every 5 eye contacts) to make way for more natural reinforcement (e.g., the pleasure of interacting with others). It is certainly recommended that the reinforcement be as natural as possible in order to be comparable to everyday situations.

4. Implement the Intervention

Once the intervention is planned, it is time to implement it. It is important to vary the environment during teaching to encourage the generalization of the skill. The objective should be to promote peer interactions in a natural environment. It is therefore possible that part of the intervention take place in a 1 to 1 context with the facilitator, but the transfer to the natural environment should be done as quickly as possible.

¹ To learn more about BST, see *Keep it Simple Using Behavioural Skills Training*, that was posted on December 7th

5. Evaluate and Record Progress

It is important to collect data during the implementation of the intervention in order to record the learner's progress. The type of data to be collected will depend on the targeted objective. Data related to the frequency of the targeted behaviour, or the time spent performing the targeted behaviour can be collected. If the learner progresses, the activities should also progress. Social interactions are fluid and very complex. We can always continue to work on them.



Challenges related to social interactions can certainly hinder the inclusion of learners with ASD. All learners should have access to pleasant and enriching activities according to their interests. When a learner experiences social difficulties, their academic, community and social experiences are likely to be affected. The 5 steps above could help teams plan activities aimed at teaching and developing social skills in our learners with ASD.

Reference

<https://www.iidc.indiana.edu/pages/Making-and-Keeping-Friends-A-Model-for-Social-Skills-Instruction>

About Us

Autism Learning Partnership (ALP), a branch of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (EECD) in New Brunswick (Canada), is the sole provider of the Provincial Autism Training curriculum for preschool autism agencies and educational personnel in New Brunswick. The Autism Learning Partnership provides bilingual, evidence-based, high-quality professional learning and resources to support families, preschool agency personnel and educational personnel in the province, and has a mandate to establish partnerships with organizations nationally and internationally.