Implementing Social Skills Groups: 
Thinking Outside of the Box

Carla Cay Williams, OT/L 
KidPower Therapy Associates

Marci Laurel, MA, CCC-SLP 
Autism Programs, CDD 
mlaurel@salud.unm.edu

Overview Of Evidence Base

- Social skills groups were used to teach appropriate interaction with peers
- Evidence was based on groups made up only of learners with ASD or other disabilities
- Evidence base from four to 12 years of age (research also supports use with adults)
- Training took place in a variety of settings - school, clinic, inclusive and non-inclusive
Social Groups Were Used to Teach:

- Perspective Taking
- Conversation Skills
- Friendship Skills
- Problem Solving Skills
- Social Competence
- Emotion Recognition
- Theory of Mind
- Including Others
- Sharing
- Initiation
- Responding
- Maintaining
- Greeting
- Giving/Accepting Compliments
- Turn Taking
- Asking for/Offering Help

Important Skills To Consider

Is the Student Able to:
- Imitate the actions of others
- Initiate interaction/communication
- Respond to adults and peers
- Take turns within an interaction
- Persist to get a message sent
- Sustain Attention in interaction
- Shift Attention in response to others
- Ask for Help from adults or peers

Steps for Implementation

- Identify target skills
- Training adults/peers as needed
- Baseline data
- Schedule
- Create structure
- Organize skills for teaching
- Integrate specific strategies
- Collect data/adjust instruction
“Teach It Like Math”
Adapted from: Kristine K. Noel

- Direct
- Intensive
- Prescriptive
- Relentless
- Systematic
- Explicit
- Repetitive
- Purposeful
- Intentional
- Structured

Resources?
Such as...
- Social Thinking
- Skill Streaming
- Non competitive game books
- LEGO Club
- Incredible Five Point Scale
- Navigating the Social World
- Behavior resources
- Alert Program
- Others

Related Strategies
- Social Stories
- Peer Mentoring
- Visual Supports
- Role Playing
- Video Modeling
- Sensory Strategies for Self-Regulation
Organizing School Social Skills Groups

Themes →

Choose a skill focus and work with over a period of time in small group and then applied settings

For Example:
- Expected behaviors in a variety of school settings
- Tools for emotional regulation
- Conversational skills

Organizing School Groups (continued)

Daily →

For a group that meets multiple times in the week, match a skill focus with a day of the week

For Example:
- Monday - Expected behaviors in a variety of school settings
- Tuesday - Tools for emotional regulation
- Wednesday - Conversational skills

Organizing School Groups (continued)

Student Focus →

For students who have been successfully practicing learned social skills, take an “intense” look at one student’s needs

For Example:
“Today is Billy’s day. We are going to spend group helping him with talking about different topics...”

Thanks to Heather Knox for ideas about organizing groups in a variety of ways!
Structure for Social Skills Group:

- Introduction/Warm-Up
- Introduce target skill
- Model target skill
- Practice target skill
- Coaching/Prompting
- Feedback/Problem Solving
- Free time/Reinforcement

Introduction and Warm-Up

- Begin with structure
  - Name Game
  - Imitation Game
- Watch for natural beginnings to occur, fade structured warm up
  - Students initiate social interaction

Introduce Target Skill

- Identify a skill
- Use a structured framework to “cognitively” teach a new skill
- Structured setting/“Talk time”
- Verbal rehearsal/Visual representation
- Remember skills can be different for each student

- Notice the landmarks
  - Adults provide all structure
  - Students begin to play or socialize before the group begins
  - Adults begin to back off and coach (Wait we ARE playing right now!)
  - Students come ready to learn new skills
Model Target Skill

- Guided practice with feedback
  - Role play
  - Imitation games
  - Instant re-play/Rewind
  - Track specific skill and give immediate feedback in structured situation
  - Behavior strategies

Practice Target Skill

- Repeat practice weekly until rote even if they need a retrieval strategy
- Always reinforce that “everyone is working on what THEY are working on”
- Sometimes you might need to separate a child from group to work on the skill and then bring them right back to practice
- It takes however long it takes
  - Within the session itself
  - However many sessions
- Take it wherever you need to go!!

Coaching/Prompting

- Advanced practice with feedback
- Dealing with disappointment - adults and kids
- Retrieve the structure to use in the moment
- More “landmarks”

Autism Programs at the CDD, HSC, UNM
Feedback and Problem Solving

Many ways...
- Immediately following activity where you are
- Leave and go back to structured area
  - How did it go?
  - Did you have fun?
  - Did you use your skills?
  - Did anyone have trouble using their skill?
  - How will we try to do it differently next time?
  - Say something great about how another person used their skill

Feedback to Others

- Generalization and transfer of skills
  - Students share what they learned
  - Adults communicate with other adults

Problem Solving

How do we know when we can move on to the next skill:
- Student can do it without coaching in a minimum of three sessions consecutively
- You are getting feedback or observing that the skill is being used in other settings
Free time/Reinforcement

Planning for August (or Tomorrow!)

- Pick skill focus
- Review steps for implementation
- Plan assessment
- Structure for session
- Propose format for organization
- Consider related strategies

References

- Knox, Heather (2009). Implementing social skills groups. Training provided for Albuquerque Public Schools, New Mexico.
References

- Noel, Kristine K. The Effects of a Narrative-Based Social Problem-Solving Intervention With High-Risk Adolescent Males. Dissertation, University of New Mexico, December 2011
- Taylor, K. & Laurel M. (2007) Social development in persons with ASD, Center for Development and Disability, University of New Mexico