

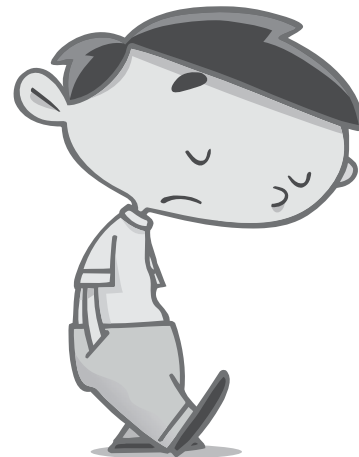
Why Is It Hard for Some Children to Learn Social Skills?

By Becky L. Spivey, M.Ed.

What are Social Skills?

Having good social skills allows individuals to have positive relationships with others. The term “social skills” includes your child’s communication, problem-solving, decision-making, self-management and control, and relationships with classmates and friends. Difficulties with social behaviors may interfere with learning, teacher acceptance, and/or exclusion from school activities.

Poor social skills are common in children with learning disabilities. Social skills are especially difficult for children with nonverbal learning disabilities. Professionals use the term “pragmatic communication deficits” to describe people who have difficulty with social skills.



How do I know if my child has pragmatic communication deficits?

Pragmatic communication skills develop with age. Young children usually exhibit *physical* communication difficulties very early, while *verbal* difficulties appear later as children begin to talk. In addition to difficulties with verbal communication, these children also have trouble *thinking* through social situations. A child with pragmatic communication difficulties tends to display the following characteristics.

Physical difficulties:

- Poor eye contact (usually the first sign of a communication difficulty)
- Cannot maintain appropriate conversational distance
- Body language does not match speech (stares into space; emotions are too strong or too unenthusiastic for the situation; no body language to reinforce emotion)
- Facial expressions do not match the topic or situation (forgets to smile; does not nod to show understanding)

Verbal difficulties:

- Talks constantly about random topics or may not speak at all; interrupts conversations of others; does not know when/how to interrupt someone; shares too much information in conversation (to the point of irritating the listener)
- Poor turn-taking—does not acknowledge that it’s someone else’s turn; consistently interrupts without regret; insists on being first when playing games, or having another turn if he/she has not been successful (do-over)
- Speaks too softly or loudly without regard for others feelings; or speaks in a monotone voice (sounds like a robot)
- Does not know how to give or receive a compliment and may insult someone unintentionally (“*You’re a lot fatter than you used to be!*”)
- Does not know how to introduce himself/herself to individuals or groups; avoids groups and gatherings; does not like to shake hands, give hugs, or show affection; or does not acknowledge others when entering a room

Thinking difficulties:

- Does not consider someone else’s emotional state before speaking (“Can I see where you buried your dog today?”)
- Takes jokes, sarcasm, and irony literally; laughs or talks at inappropriate times and in inappropriate places
- Forgets to take his/her turn in conversation; does not pick up on cues to continue a conversation
- Does not consider his/her words before speaking and how it may impact someone’s feelings (in front of friends at a party he/she says, “I like this gift better than all the others.”)

Why are social skills hard to learn?

Most of us learn to use many of our social skills automatically. We do not have to think a lot about what we do and say; it just seems to come naturally. Some people, however, do not know which social skills to use in a particular situation or how to best apply them.

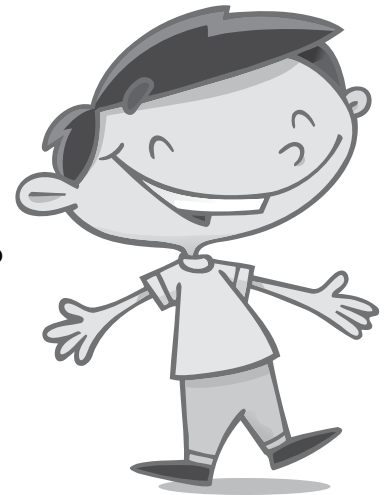
Children with pragmatic communication deficits have difficulty understanding other people's nonverbal behaviors. The ability to understand and relate to other people's feelings and emotions is called *empathy*. A large number of children and young people with learning disabilities have very little empathy. This lack of empathy is what prevents them from being successful communicators.

Use the following Social Skills Checklist as a guide to work on and practice appropriate responses with your child at home, in the community, and among your child's friends and classmates. Remember, some social skills will develop later as your child grows into a teenager. Social skills build on each other one at a time. For example, your child needs to learn to deal with losing without yelling or showing physical aggression before he/she can learn to show good sportsmanship (like congratulating others on a "good game" after they lose a contest).

Do not expect that your children will accomplish these skills on their own. Parents and caregivers must model examples, talk about behaviors and expectations, and make these skills part of their daily routine whenever the opportunities present themselves.

Social Skills Checklist

- Says "please" and "thank you" while making appropriate eye contact
- Deals with anger and frustration appropriately; does not yell or physically act out
- Asks questions appropriately even though the subject may be difficult for the other person to talk about ("Why did your dog die?")
- Accepts responsibility for his/her own mistakes and decisions
- Deals with losing without yelling or showing physical aggression; shows good sportsmanship; apologizes for wrongdoing
- Starts a conversation with others or interrupts appropriately when joining a group discussion/conversation already in progress
- Accepts "no" for an answer and accepts praise from others without gloating
- Greets others (familiar and unfamiliar) appropriately (with eye contact)
- Follows simple and conditional directions
- Understands feelings of others by showing empathy or giving a compliment
- Seeks attention in an appropriate manner; waits for his/her turn
- Listens; respects the opinions of others; makes friends



Resources

Cooperative Learning Network Teaching Resources, Social Skills, retrieved Sept. 2007, <http://home.att.net/~cnetwork/socialsk.htm>

Teaching Social Skills—Special Education, About.com, retrieved Oct. 2007, <http://specialed.about.com/cs/behaviordisorders/a/social.htm>

Encouraging Social Skills in Young Children: Tips Teachers Can Share With Parents, retrieved Sept. 2007, <http://www.humsci.auburn.edu/parent/socialskills.html>