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Helping Kids Learn

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Information Sheet 4

## Socially Speaking ... not always an easy task!

by Ashleigh Freed, Psychologist & Katie Whitworth, Speech Language Pathologist, School Age Services

**A**dequate social language skills are essential for academic, social and success in the workplace.

Since the 1980s, parents and professionals alike have become increasingly aware that effective non-verbal and verbal skills such as starting, maintaining and ending a conversation, expressing emotions, dealing with conflict or understanding humour are not always easy tasks for children with social language difficulties.

Failure to acquire these skills can be the source of anxiety, feelings of isolation and low self-esteem.

Current research suggests that about 15% of primary school children (one in five children in each classroom) have social and/or behaviour problems significant enough to interfere with their ability to make friends. As such, there is a growing need for educators to recognise and support children with social language difficulties to help contribute to each child's overall cognitive and emotional well being.

Children who have been diagnosed with a learning disability and the estimated 3% to 12% in every classroom with a language disorder may not possess the language skills to interact appropriately with their peers. They can have difficulties both in the classroom and the playground.

Unfortunately for these children, the current school curriculum assumes that they will have developed age-appropriate listening and speaking skills to enable them to succeed in the classroom on a social and academic level. Consequently, the educational curriculum has become progressively more heavily language-based.

Current research indicates that children with learning difficulties are likely to have poor social skills.

These children may experience difficulties with:

- solving social problems;
- predicting consequences for certain behaviours;
- using meaningful and concise language;
- interpreting or inferring language used in conversation;
- using complex social interactions successfully, such as persuasion, negotiation, giving or accepting criticism;
- being aware of their listener in conversation;
- tolerance for frustration and failure;
- being accepted by their peers;
- adapting to new social situations; and
- interpreting and using non-verbal language such as eye contact, facial expressions and body language.

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We raise funds to help children from birth to 18 years by offering a range of services including the following.

**Early Childhood Services** for children from birth to six years.

- Early childhood intervention and support for very young children.
- An inclusive preschool for children with and without special needs.
- An assessment and consultancy service for families who are concerned about their young child's development.
- Specialist early childhood teaching and therapy.

**School Age Services** for children from Kindergarten to Year 12 who have low support needs.

- Comprehensive assessments.
- Small group tuition and therapy.
- Occupational and speech therapy programs combining specialist education services and therapy.
- Outreach programs.
- The Ronald McDonald Learning Program for seriously ill children and the Reading for Life Program for children falling behind in their reading.

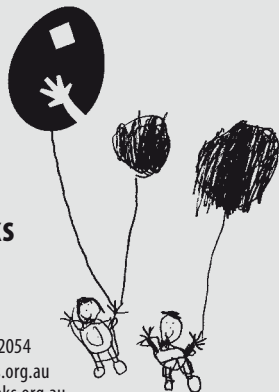
**Family Services** helping and supporting families and health professionals.

- Centre and home-based family counselling.
- Parenting Programs and groups for families.
- Case Management Services.

**Professional Development** for teachers and health professionals.

Presentations, workshops and advice on identifying and helping children with learning difficulties, learning disabilities and developmental delays.

**Learning Links has branches in six Sydney locations at Peakhurst, Penshurst, Fairfield, Miller, Dee Why and Randwick. We also offer some services to children in country NSW, the ACT, Victoria and New Zealand. A complete list of branch locations and contact numbers is on the back cover.**



## Learning Links

### Head Office

12-14 Pindari Road  
Peakhurst NSW 2210  
Tel: 9534 1710 Fax: 9584 2054  
Email: mail@learninglinks.org.au  
Website: www.learninglinks.org.au

Enquiries regarding this Information Sheet should be directed to Robyn Collins  
Tel: (02) 9534 1710 Fax: (02) 9584 2054 Email: rcollins@learninglinks.org.au

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## Developing children's social skills

Practical social skills refer to ways of behaving which help children to develop and maintain relationships.

They include such things as eye contact with the person you are talking to; using expressions on your face such as smiling or frowning to show you are interested or that you don't agree; being aware of personal space and the appropriateness of touch and using or being aware of things such as how fast you talk, the pitch of your voice and the content of what you say.

A table on page 4 outlines some of the basic non-verbal and verbal social skills required for effective communication.

## Who helps children develop appropriate social skills?

Social skills development is a task involving many different skills.

Many people are involved in the process of providing children with the necessary skills to interact appropriately with the people around them. These include parents and/or caregivers, peers, teachers and learning support staff, psychologists and speech pathologists.

Although some children will 'pick up' these skills as they progress through school, most children will benefit from being directly taught appropriate social skills. This can be done in a specific program as well as using naturally occurring opportunities throughout the day to both teach and reinforce appropriate behaviour.

## Developing social skills – a combined approach

For social skills training to be effective, it needs to be incorporated into all areas of the child's environment including the classroom, playground and home environment.

Social background and culture also play an important part in social skills training. Facilitators need to be aware of and plan around cross-cultural differences such as personal space and directness of approach, eye contact and intonation.

The focus of social skills training can be:

- therapeutic to provide positive skills, attitudes and strategies to replace negative or ineffective ones; and/or
- educational and preventative for children with a reasonable level of skill already to enhance friendships, resilience, problem solving and conflict resolution skills.

Training methods can include role-playing, modelling, homework assignments to practise skills and/or reinforcement of skills.

Many programs are designed around a cognitive-behavioural model. This approach encourages the student to identify the problem, recognise the emotions involved and analyse the situation and consequences of their actions in various social situations.

A six-step approach provides the framework for many successful social skills training programs. The approach is as follows.

### 1. Definition

Describe the skill to be taught – it can be demonstrated by video, pictures, cartoons or puppet shows. Discuss the importance of the skill.

### 2. Model the skill

Break down the skill into simple components and demonstrate these clearly.

### 3. Imitation and rehearsal

The student practises the skill in a structured situation.

### 4. Feedback

Feedback about children's skills/behaviour should be immediate, specific and positive, for example saying "that's better, you looked at me and smiled!"

### 5. Generalisation

Where possible, try to create a situation in the classroom or at home where the skill can be generalised. Alternatively, practise with someone outside the group.

### 6. Intermittent Reinforcement

Watch for instances of the student applying the skills without prompting. Provide descriptive praise and reward.

Although most social skills training programs are better run in groups, some cases require individual training.

Franco *et al* (1983) presented a case study of a shy adolescent with poor social skills. The student attended individual 20-minute sessions twice a week for fifteen weeks. Therapy focused on improving conversational skills, asking questions, commenting, acknowledging what others say, showing warmth and using eye contact. The skills were then practised outside therapy with different adults, both male and female, to help generalise the new skills. At the completion of the sessions, lasting improvements were reported in the student's peer interactions in the classroom.

Examples of other successful structured programs, implemented in Australian schools include:

- Friendly Kids Friendly Classrooms (McGrath & Francey, 1991),
- Resilient Kids (Cambell Rate, Gleeson, Kearney & Dale, 2000),
- Room 14. A Social Language Program (Wilson, 1993),
- Socially Speaking (Schroeder, 2003), and
- Stop Think Do (Petersen & Adderley, 2002).

Parents may wish to approach their school counsellor to see if any of these or other programs are run at their school.

### Useful questions to ask about your child's social development

If your child has difficulty with a math homework problem, it is highly likely that you would sit down and show them the correct way of completing the problem. The same should happen when poor social skills occur. Rather than perceive it as 'naughtiness' consider it as a skill that needs to be taught.

Questions to ask yourself about your child's social skills include the following.

- How easily do they make friends?
- Are they confident initiating and maintaining conversations with people?
- Do they know how to share and take turns?
- Do they know how to ask for help?
- Do they know how to make friends?

## Social Skills Useful Websites

Learning Disabilities OnLine

[www.idonline.org](http://www.idonline.org)

Tony Attwood

[www.tonyattwood.com](http://www.tonyattwood.com)

Stop Think Do

[www.stophinkdo.com](http://www.stophinkdo.com)

Carolyn Bowen Speech Language Pathologist

[www.members.tripod.com/Caroline\\_Bowen/slp-eureka.htm](http://www.members.tripod.com/Caroline_Bowen/slp-eureka.htm)

- Do they tend to isolate themselves from peer games?
- Are they regularly invited over to other children's houses to play? Do they ask to have friends over?
- Are they able to express their emotions in words?
- Do they use appropriate volume and pitch when speaking?
- Do they recognise non-verbal cues such as body language and facial expressions?

If you are concerned about your child, it is recommended that you make an appointment with your child's classroom teacher to discuss their social development. Alternatively, your child's school may have a psychologist, school counsellor and/or speech language pathologist, who may be able to assist. These professionals will be able to direct you to the appropriate services in your area. You can also contact your local Learning Links' branch (a list appears on the inside back cover).

A bibliography is available for this article.

## Basic Verbal and Non-Verbal Social Skills for Effective Communication

Skill	Example
Eye contact	Looking at the conversational partner
Facial expression	Smiling, frowning to express interest or disapproval
Social distance	Being aware of 'personal space' and appropriateness of touch
Voice quality	Volume, pitch, rate of speech, clarity and content
Social greetings and farewells	Expressing feelings, asking questions, listening, showing interest, responding to questions
Conversations	Following rules, sharing, compromising, helping others, taking turns, apologising, complimenting others
Playing/working with others	Team activities, sharing, turn taking, understanding peer interaction
Gaining attention/asking for help	Communicative acts such as appropriately requesting clarification or information
Coping with conflict	Controlling aggression, dealing with anger, accepting criticism
Grooming and hygiene	

Source: Westwood, P. (1997) Commonsense Methods for Children with Special Needs (3rd Edition). London, Routledge.



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– all enquiries to Head Office

**School Age Services**  
– contact your local branch

**Family Services**  
– contact your local branch

**All other enquiries**  
– Head Office

**Head Office**  
12-14 Pindari Road  
Peakhurst NSW 2210  
Telephone: (02) 9534 1710  
Preschool: (02) 9533 3283  
Facsimile: (02) 9584 2054  
Email: [mail@learninglinks.org.au](mailto:mail@learninglinks.org.au)

**Northern Suburbs Branch**  
2 Alfred Road  
PO Box 634  
Brookvale NSW 2100  
Telephone: (02) 9907 4222  
Facsimile: (02) 9907 4244  
Email: [nsb@learninglinks.org.au](mailto:nsb@learninglinks.org.au)

**Western Suburbs Branch**  
Unit 7/9 William Street  
PO Box 1026  
Fairfield NSW 1860 (2165)  
Telephone: (02) 9754 2377  
Facsimile: (02) 9755 9422  
Email: [wsb@learninglinks.org.au](mailto:wsb@learninglinks.org.au)

**Southern Suburbs Branch**  
10 Railway Parade  
Penshurst NSW 2222  
Telephone: (02) 9580 4888  
Facsimile: (02) 9580 4788  
Email: [ssb@learninglinks.org.au](mailto:ssb@learninglinks.org.au)

**South West Sydney Branch**  
88 Shropshire Street  
PO Box 42  
Miller NSW 2168  
Telephone: (02) 8783 7111  
Facsimile: (02) 8783 7222  
Email: [sws@learninglinks.org.au](mailto:sws@learninglinks.org.au)

**Eastern Suburbs Branch**  
1/20 Silver Street  
Randwick NSW 2032  
Telephone: (02) 9398 5188  
Facsimile: (02) 9326 5364  
Email: [esb@learninglinks.org.au](mailto:esb@learninglinks.org.au)

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