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Helping Kids Learn

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Information Sheet 35

One of the Group – learning social skills

By Samantha Hornery, Director Southern Suburbs Branch

One of the Group is a program designed by Learning Links to help children from seven to 10 years of age who have had difficulty acquiring age appropriate social skills.

The program suits children with low self-esteem and those who find it difficult to make new friends, don't get invited to birthday parties and are often the last one picked for a group activity. Children who seek adult conversation in the playground and/or find themselves in trouble because of their reactions in challenging situations would also find this program of assistance.

One of the Group uses practical exercises and activities to help children develop skills that are needed to interact positively with their peers.

Social situations arise whenever we are in the company of another person – the minute we cease being on our own we are in a society.

To make friends and be accepted by others, we need knowledge of and proficiency in a variety of verbal and non-verbal behaviours that are socially valued. We often refer to this as social awareness or social competence. Some children find it harder to learn these skills than others do.

We all have similar basic needs – things like survival, power, love, belonging, freedom and fun. Our society helps us achieve these and being successful in society gives us a better chance for fulfilling life.

How does One of the Group help children?

One of the Group helps children develop a range of skills that will make social situations much easier. These skills include the following:

- **Intrapersonal Skills** – building self esteem, knowing who you are and why you're worth knowing – an important first step in confidently approaching new people.
- **Communication Skills** – such as making eye contact, greeting people, active listening, starting and taking turns in conversation.
- **Interpersonal Skills** – such as asking to be included in games, inviting others to play with them, being a friend and responding appropriately to emotions.
- **Conflict Resolution Skills** – such as thinking before acting, devising a plan of action for difficult situations and identifying cues before reacting poorly.

The program also considers the processes used when we interact with others in a social environment.

It looks at what others do (both verbal and non-verbal), how we interpret the messages and what we do to others as a result.

For most of us social skills come naturally, by casual observation of the world around us.

Learning Links is a non-profit charity assisting children who have difficulty learning and their families.

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

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We know how to greet a stranger or loved one, how to start and maintain a conversation and how to manage ourselves in most of the situations life presents us with – making phone calls, having dinner at a restaurant, shopping and dealing with conflict and emotions.

You probably won't recall being specifically taught how to do these things and yet have handled them well, with maybe the odd hiccup.

Unfortunately, many children experience difficulty talking to others or being able to walk into a room full of strangers (or acquaintances) with confidence.

Children without good or age appropriate social skills find it hard to be accepted and this lack of acceptance or social disability can be the most painful and difficult problem many child will face.

Technical assistance (or compensatory equipment) can be given for a lot of other difficulties or disabilities (hearing aid, glasses, calculator, computer, voice-activated software and talking books), but there is nothing available for the lonely child in the school playground, party or new environment.

These children act without regard for consequences, they are unaware of how or why events occur around them, feel exposed and are often chastised by those around them. A child with poor social skills can lead a lonely life.

There is increasing interest in the area of social skills and their relationship with learning difficulties, social adjustment and mental health.

Identification and assistance for children with social skill difficulties is an important topic on the agenda of parents, educators and psychologists. We cannot ignore the impact that poor social relationships have on children.

Some children need to be taught social skills to promote their acceptance by teachers, adults and their peers. Social skills can help children make better choices and respond in ways that produce, maintain and enhance positive interpersonal relationships.

One of the Group is a program available at selected Learning Links' branches during the year. Please enquire at your local branch to discuss your child's needs, suitability and availability.

Learning Links' One of the Group school holiday program

By Lauren Varlow and Tessa Gallagher

In January 2005, a Speech Pathologist and an Occupational Therapist from Learning Links' School Age Services team ran our school holiday social skills program, One of the Group.

Two groups, each consisting of five children, attended four two and half hour sessions spread over two weeks. The children were grouped according to their age and specific social skills needs.

The focus of the first day was building self-esteem and developing group rapport.

Practical exercises and activities helped the children to learn more about who they are and why they are worth knowing.

Self-esteem was described as "the little voice inside you that tells you that you are important". The children were able to identify the importance of being unique and learnt that the world would be a boring place if we were all the same. Addressing self-esteem provided the foundation skills for the program and allowed the children to confidently approach what was to come.

The second day targeted communication skills.

The children enjoyed role-playing different scenarios and discovered the importance of taking turns, being a 'talker' and a 'listener' when interacting with others.

The children were asked how they felt when there was a communication breakdown, became reflective learners and began to make constructive suggestions as to how the group's communication skills could be improved.

As we entered the third day, the children were openly and confidently exploring the emotions and feelings attached to building and maintaining friendship skills.

They were able to identify qualities they would like in a friend and discussed the qualities they possessed.

When one child was asked if being trustworthy was a quality of a good friend, he was quick to respond with an affirmative answer. When another child was asked if 'giving room to change' was a quality of a good friend he spent some time pondering the answer before responding, "Of course, you should always turn around or close your eyes when your friend is getting dressed!"

By the fourth day, the children were confident in assertively expressing their opinions, while taking into account other people's opinions. Without realising it, they had begun to develop their conflict resolution skills, which was to be the focus for the final day.

The children were taught how to devise a plan of action for difficult situations and identify important cues before reacting.

While the group worked together, each child absorbed the information with respect to what was most important for them. We also provided focused support to children individually to address the specific needs that had been highlighted by parents and teachers or become evident during the program.

A parent information evening was offered to all parents to supplement the information packs they were given.

The majority of parents were able to attend this session and many opportunities for feedback and discussion were provided.

Parents benefited by simply meeting other parents and discussing the difficulties they were experiencing.

The notion of other families having perfect children was a common feeling. As a result, they often felt alone and other families were unable to adequately empathise. The information night became a forum for parents to give each other helpful suggestions as to possible activities for their children.



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School Age Services
– contact your local branch

Family Services
– contact your local branch

All other enquiries
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