**EFFECTIVE TECHNIQUES USED TO TEACH SOCIAL SKILLS WHICH WILL HELP CHILDREN BETTER INTERACT WITH PEERS**

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Autism is estimated to affect about one in 59 children. Generally, diagnosis occurs between two and three years of age, but some developmental delays can result in a diagnosis as early as 18 months old. One of the main characteristics of ASD is difficulty and impairment in social situations. These challenges can include trouble initiating social interactions, maintaining eye contact, appropriately responding to the initiations and emotions of others.

How to Improve Peer Interaction by Teaching Social Skills By Dorian TOWNSEND, PhD Autism, also known as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), refers to a broad range of conditions that can affect a person’s social skills as well as verbal and nonverbal communication. Autism can also cause sensory sensitivity and repetitive behaviors for some. Children with autism have unique challenges interacting with their peers and others, and can benefit greatly from consistent and supportive instruction and practice in developing social and interpersonal skills. SOCIAL SKILLS Autism Parenting Magazine | Issue 85 | 11 Teaching social skills to people on the autism spectrum can make an immense difference in how they are able to interact with others and have long-term positive impacts on future relationships and overall happiness. and understanding nonverbal communication, and having empathy for another person’s perspective.

 Lacking these abilities can cause a child with autism to withdraw, resulting in fewer opportunities to practice and acquire social skills. With fewer experiences in social situations, anxiety and fear tend to increase in these areas, making it even harder for children to be successful. Ultimately, the lack of skill and the resulting isolation make it difficult for children to cultivate and maintain meaningful, satisfying personal relationships. It’s important to keep in mind that it is inaccurate to assume lack of skill in social interaction comes from a lack of interest. Many children with ASD do need and crave social involvement, but just lack the necessary skills to achieve it effectively.

 While children with autism do face neurological challenges in social arenas, it is clear that social skills instruction can significantly minimize and ameliorate these difficulties. Teaching social skills to people on the autism spectrum can make an immense difference in how they are able to interact with others and have long-term positive impacts on future relationships and overall happiness. As you teach social skills and help kids with autism develop their abilities to interact in social situations, be understanding and compassionate. Recognize that every child has his/her own level of comfort and anxiety in this area. Abilities and deficits will vary widely from child to child. Be sensitive to fears, but consistently encourage the child to make progress in his/her skills. It’s important to evaluate the abilities and limits of current social skills.

 Watch how he/she interacts with peers in the classroom and on the playground. Talk to the child about how he/she feels around friends or other students. As you assess personal abilities, you can better tailor your instruction to his/her personal needs. For example, if a child is struggling with one-on-one interactions, then the instruction and help need to begin here, rather than in a larger group setting. Other kids may be comfortable in one-on-one exchanges but become overwhelmed in large, busy group settings like a classroom.

 The more you can understand a child’s individual needs, the more successful you will be. Dr. Scott Bellini, associate director of the Indiana University Resource Center for Autism, notes that as you make this assessment, it is important to differentiate between un-acquired skills and unperformed skills. In other words, determine if a child lacks the knowledge, or if he/she has the skills but is unwilling to exercise the skills. This will also make a difference in the way you instruct and help the child. Dr. Bellini believes that, most often, students lack the “how,” and this is where we should focus our efforts. There are lots of possible social skills to teach and many ways to teach them. There are many recent studies that have examined the best approaches.

 Here are a few of the techniques and components that should be a part of any social skills instruction program: Modeling and explaining- One of the most important ways to teach social skills is to model appropriate social behaviors. However, most children with autism will not understand what to do just by observation. Whenever you can, take the time to explain your actions. Explain your tone, your body language, your facial expressions, your volume, and your word choice. Help them understand the things they might not have seen and discuss all those less-obvious details.

 Remember that most social and nonverbal clues are being missed by the child with autism. He/She is more likely to model the behavior back to you when he/she understands why you did what you did. The explanation part is key so he/she can start to pick up on the nuances of social situations. Be patient and open, and answer questions with understanding and empathy. Visual learning.

 Another tool that can be used is visual examples. You can begin with picture books, stories, photographs, and pictures of real people. Have the child examine the faces and ask questions about what the people in the pictures might be feeling or thinking. What clues can the child see from the way they hold their arms or their heads or use their facial muscles? Once they can identify different emotions, the next step is to understand “why.” If the person in the picture is sad, for example, can the child figure out why? Going beyond identifying the emotion, to understanding the cause or the reason, will help the child develop empathy and improve interactions. After the children have had some practice with still photographs, you can do the same things with video modeling.

 Studies show that children with ASD who watch videos of desirable social behaviors more easily imitate the behaviors they have seen. The children remember the video clips long after they have finished watching them and can learn to mimic behaviors by carefully observing others. Learning through peers and small groups.

 Studies show that peer mentoring and small group interaction can be very useful in teaching social skills to kids with autism. This allows the student to “have a buddy” or a safe group to practice interactions with to help better prepare for other social situations.

Peers who have been assigned as mentors to students with autism can be taught how to interact without getting offended or worried about their lack of engagement, and they can be positive influences on other peers in their social network in improving empathy and understanding for the student’s limitations. Social stories Social stories teach social rules and concepts to children with autism through “fictional stories.”

You can tailor the stories to a child’s particular needs and demonstrate examples from his/her life in the stories. In a story, a social interaction is described and a skill introduced. The child will read the story and discuss the details with the instructor as well as practice the skill that was introduced. This is a nonthreatening way to introduce new social skills and demonstrate socially appropriate responses. Social stories have proven to be most effective when paired with role playing, which we will address next. Role play Another important element of social skills instruction is practice. This can start with discussions about what to do in certain situations. Before a child has to face a real-life situation, talk through different scenarios, explaining options and strategies as you go. Then try acting it out. Take turns playing the different roles of each scenario. Offer feedback on other ways to approach the situation.

 Point out successes and offer suggestions where the child is struggling. Role play helps children apply skills in a safe environment before attempting application in the real world. Practicing interaction ahead of time allows the student time to think about his/her reactions and responses without pressure and anxiety. Learning through fun and games Very simple games can encourage important simple social behaviors. Many instructors find that bean bag tosses are particularly helpful in promoting socialization. In this and other simple games, you are emphasizing the need for a response, a give-and-take that characterizes most social interactions. Games also demonstrate lots of nonverbal communication cues that can be helpful for children with autism to see over and over again.

Improvisation and acting are other ways to practice social interactions with very little pressure. You can have improve. sessions and make up social situations to help the children have more experience in anticipating and reacting correctly to others. Using games allows children to feel less self-conscious about making a mistake.

 Always keep it fun and enjoyable and help them see that socializing is positive and pleasurable. Whatever techniques and methods you use to help teach social skills to children with autism, it is important to remember that lack of knowledge does not equate with lack of desire. Many children with autism are isolated and withdrawn simply because they don’t yet possess the skills to know how to initiate and stimulate a conversation, how to read and understand the nonverbal cues of body language and tone, or how to respond to the emotional needs of another person appropriately. These children still need friendship, understanding, and love. Improved social skills can be taught and learned, and will greatly enhance the friendships and relationships they will have throughout their lives.