Social Skill Development in People with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities

Inclusion and full involvement in community is critical for people’s social well-being. As supports and services for people who have intellectual/developmental disabilities (IDD) continue to grow and develop in their focus on physical and mental wellness, they continue to focus on social well-being. Supporting people with IDD to achieve true community inclusion involves:

- Supporting people to build relationships
- Encouraging a sense of belonging
- Encouraging people to do what they want to do
- Ensuring people have the ability to make use of opportunities to satisfy their interests
- Ensuring people have opportunities for new experiences
- Ensuring people have choices.

Inclusion ensures people who have an IDD have the opportunity for full and effective participation in their communities and the opportunity to develop and preserve their identities. Providing people with choice and control over their lives is a founding principle in person-centered planning, self-determination, and many other positive initiatives undertaken by families, self-advocates and professionals over the past 10 to 20 years. The promotion of choice and control is based on the belief that all people prefer to have choices and that making those choices has positive benefits.¹

Functioning well in social situations, work situations and relationships relies on good social skills. Supporting people with IDD to manage these situations must rely on supporting them to develop the social skills necessary to do so. Most people learn social skills as they start interacting with other people, learning through observing other relationships, and evaluating and changing their own actions over time. However, people with IDD may need more in-depth support to learn social skills. Their different intellectual/cognitive development means that skills are not learned as quickly or innately as typical people.

To really be included as part of a group, in relationships and in most social settings, people need to understand interactions and relationships. Supporting people who have IDD in these situations means supporting them with developing social skills such as:

- Understanding give-and-take relationships with others
- Understanding that different behavior is expected in different situations and being able to differentiate when to use a specific behavior
- Understanding when physical contact is appropriate and what type (e.g., hug, handshake, pat on the back)
- Being able to start and end conversations
- Being able to observe and interpret body language and other nonverbal communication
• Anger management
• Recognizing/understanding others' point of view
• Social problem solving
• Conflict management
• Being able to listen carefully to others
• Having empathy with and interest in others
• Knowing what to share about yourself and where to share it
• Good manners (e.g., saying hello, goodbye, thank you, please, etc.)
• Safety skills (e.g., recognizing safe situations and unsafe situations)

The complete list of skills needed to interact well in different environments can seem endless. People without IDD are able to learn these skills through observation, effective language and communication development and self-management skills. They may not even realize they are using as many skills as they are. It is more likely that people notice what social skills are needed in different situations and environments when those skills are missing.

Assessing and developing social skills

Understanding the skills people already have and what skills they need to be able to do to meet their personal goals are good places to start when supporting people with IDD to develop skills. Once that assessment is done, the next step is figuring out how to help people learn those skills in positive, creative and fun ways. There are a variety of ways people can learn skills, but the most effective ways make accommodations for the natural differences in learning styles that people have; visual learning (learning by being shown), auditory learning (learning by being told) and kinesthetic learning (learning by doing or through touch or movement).

When a person is learning a skill, it’s important that:
• Tasks are broken down into small steps — how big each step is depends on the person’s ability.
• The person is able to practice or learn by doing.
• Instructions are concrete and not complex.
• A combination of different visual aids is used.

Teaching tools can include:
• Social stories*: Social Stories were first developed by Carole Gray in 1990. They are short descriptions of a particular situation, event or activity, which include specific information about what to expect in that situation and why. The terms “social story” and “social stories” are trademarks originated and owned by Carol Gray. However, variations of these trademarks using picture stories or short videos showing examples of specific situations can be useful for people with IDD when combined with discussion about the specific skill being targeted by the story. Their use can help a person understand the expectation in the given situation.
• Role play: Simply describing how to act in various situations is not always effective for people who have an IDD. Interacting and problem solving by acting out various scenarios is an effective and engaging way
for people to learn. Role plays can provide a fun and active environment, which is very positive for learning.

- **Real world practice**: People who have IDD may need direct coaching to learn social skills. Practicing skills in actual situations should be approached carefully to avoid correction or pointing out mistakes in front of other people. Structuring encounters, rehearsing them before they happen, and reviewing them immediately after they happen may be useful activities to assist with learning.

The Skills System is an adaptation of Linehan’s model for DBT and focuses on four skills:

- Mindfulness
- Emotional regulation
- Distress tolerance
- Interpersonal effectiveness.

The Skills System can be taught without the whole DBT program. The Skill System can be used to assist people who have an IDD work on developing skills that will help them build relationships and be more confident with interactions.

Helping people learn social skills can involve any number of activities that are fun. For example, a simple way to help someone learn to listen and show they are listening:

**Skill Steps:**
1. Look at the person who is talking and keep quiet.
2. Wait until the person is finished talking before speaking.
3. Show that you heard the speaker by nodding your head, and using positive phrases, such as “okay” or “interesting.”

**Activity:**
Take turns telling jokes to practice active listening. Build a collection of short jokes and take turns in the role of speaker and listener. Examples such as this are relatively easy to find through Internet searches for teaching socials skills to students. Many of them are designed for teaching children or young adults. With minor modifications for content, they can easily be adapted for older adolescents and adults.

“Applied Behavior Analysis is the process of systematically applying interventions based upon the principles of learning theory to improve socially significant behaviors to a meaningful degree, and to demonstrate that the interventions employed are responsible for the improvement in behavior.” Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) provides a more formal method for teaching skills and can also be used to effectively assess what social skills a person wants to learn. It uses the principles of learning theory to increase behaviors, generalize learned behaviors or reduce undesirable behavior. ABA can be used in social skills classes to break down specific social skills into smaller components and then teach those step by step. ABA involves assessments to analyze and adapt teaching and test for learning.
For more information on social skill development

**JSC Blog - Social Skills Activities for Adults with Developmental Disabilities**

**YouTube** – link to a series of videos on understanding how to assist a person build skills

**Oregon Behavior Consultation - Cognitive Skills List (PDF)**

**Carol Gray Social Stories**

**Skills System**

**Do2Learn – Social Skills Toolbox**

**101 Ways to Teach Children Social Skills by Lawrence E. Shapiro, Ph.D. (PDF)** - can be adapted for use with adults

**Behavior Analytic Interventions for Developing Social Skills in Individuals with Autism (PDF)**


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