



## "Dos and Don'ts" for Fostering Social Competence

By: Rick Lavoie (1994)

Please note the key at the end of each suggestion: P = appropriate for parent use T = appropriate for teacher use P/T = can be effectively utilized by parents or teachers

### Do

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- observe your child in a wide variety of social situations (e.g., classroom, scout meetings, free play). This will enable you to gain a deeper understanding of his social strengths and weaknesses. (P)
- design an unobtrusive "signal system" with the child to use in social situations. For example, if the child tends to perseverate (talking about only one topic which often is not of interest to the listener) design a signal (touch your nose with your finger, cross your arms) that tells him to change the topic or cease the discussion. In this way, you can halt troubling behaviors without causing undue embarrassment or conflict. (P/T)
- establish reward systems to reinforce and recognize appropriate social behavior. Be willing to recognize and reinforce even the smallest signs of progress and growth. (P/T)
- enroll the child in group activities and pursuits. When selecting these activities, consider the child's interests and abilities. If you are fearful that the child may be rejected by the others because of his negative reputation, enroll him in activities in another neighborhood or town. Thereby, he can begin with a "clean slate". (P)
- continually reinforce social information. Many social skill deficits are caused by a lack of basic social information (e.g., all odd numbered houses are on one side of the street; mayonnaise must be refrigerated; mail deliveries are made only once daily). Never miss an opportunity to teach this invaluable information to a child. View every car ride or trip to the store as a "classroom" for social information. (P/T)
- encourage all members of the family to assist in the creation of a support system for the child. Siblings play a particularly important role in such a system. Create a non-competitive home (and school!!) environment wherein the child learns to celebrate his own small victories. The child must learn to view his progress as compared to his own previous performance, not the performance of others. (P)
- make transitions easier for the child. Students with social skill deficits often have difficulty "changing gears" from one activity to another. This is particularly true when going from an enjoyable activity (e.g., a game) to a less pleasurable one (e.g., math drills). In order to ensure a smoother transition, be certain to "wind down" the enjoyable activity by providing a warning signal several minutes prior to the end of the activity. As each minute passes, inform the child of how much time remains before the activity will conclude. (P/T)
- make modifications and adjustments to accommodate for the child with a learning problem. For example, if he is unable to participate effectively in the homework program because he constantly forgets his books, simply issue him two texts with instructions to keep one at home and one in school. (T)
- work on one behavior or social skill at a time. By focusing the child's attention and efforts on a single skill for a period of time, he is less confused and more responsive to your intervention. (P/T)
- assist the child in expressing his feelings during emotionally charged social situations. (e.g., "I am sure that you feel angry and jealous when Daniel and Sean go fishing and don't invite you.") (P/T)
- each empathy. Encourage the child to be more understanding of the feelings of others. Use role playing to help him "walk in another's shoes". (P/T)

- utilize "real life" or television shows to teach valuable social skills. Discuss the behaviors of significant, high status people (e.g., "On that TV show, how did the policeman make the frightened woman feel more comfortable and at ease?") (P)
- provide the child with choices whenever possible. (e.g., "I want you to clean your room now. Do you want to pick up your toys or make up your bed first?") This approach fosters independence and problem solving skills. It also increases the child's ownership of the task or activity. (P)
- provide the child with a positive model of appropriate social skills. Be certain that your behavior mirrors the skills that you are teaching your students. (e.g., temper control, courteous listening). (P/T)

## Don't

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- necessarily discourage the child from establishing relationships with students who are a year or two younger than he is. He may be seeking his developmentally appropriate level. By befriending younger students, he may enjoy a degree of status and acceptance that he does not experience among his peers. (P/T)
- force the child to participate in large groups if he is not willing or able. If the child responds well when working with another student, plan activities wherein he has ample opportunities to do so. Then add a third person to the group, then another and so on, until the group approximates the entire class. (T)
- place the child in highly-charged competitive situations. These are often a source of great anxiety and failure for students with learning problems. Rather, focus upon participation, enjoyment, contribution and satisfaction in competitive activities. Emphasis should be placed on the development of skills and strategies - not on winning or losing. (P/T)
- assume that the child understood your oral directions or instructions because he did not ask any questions. Ask him to repeat the instructions in his own words before beginning the activity. (P/T)
- scold or reprimand the child when he tells you about social confrontations or difficulties that he has experienced. He will respond by refusing to share these incidents with you. Rather, thank him for sharing the experience with you and discuss optional strategies that he could have used. (P)
- attempt to teach social skills at times of high stress. Rather, approach the child at a time when he is relaxed and receptive. (e.g., "Meghan, next week you will be going to Jilly's birthday party. Let's practice how you will hand her your gift and what you will say when she opens it and thanks you.") (P)
- view praise as the only verbal reinforcement - interest works, too! Expressing a genuine and sincere interest in a child can be as positive and motivating as praise. (e.g., "I watched you playing soccer at recess, Adam. Do you play at home with your brothers?") (P/T)
- encourage the frustrated child to relieve his stress via pointless physical activity (e.g., punching a pillow). Rather, teach him to relieve stress through an activity which has definable and observable goals. (e.g., shoot ten baskets, run five laps, write a one-page letter) (P/T)

## What about punishment?(P/T)

**Don't** expect punishment or negative reinforcement to have a meaningful or lasting impact upon your child's social skill deficits. Punishment may stop specific behaviors in specific settings, but positive reinforcement is the only effective strategy for meaningful and lasting social skill improvement.

Overuse of punishment is largely ineffective because:

- it does not teach appropriate behavior- the child merely learns what he should not do;
- the child often becomes passive in the face of punishment and merely avoids situations similar to those in which he makes social errors (e.g., visiting grandmother, going to the store);
- the child may develop a concurrent set of inappropriate behaviors, such as lying, cheating, or blaming others, in order to avoid punishment;

- the child may adapt to punishment, which will require you to intensify the level and severity of the punishments.

**Do** use punishment only for behaviors that are intolerable; dangerous to the child or others; and seemingly unaffected by a well-planned positive discipline approach. Punishment should be applied immediately following the offending behavior and should be consistently applied. Fair warning should always be given (e.g., "If you belch again at the table, you will be told to eat in the kitchen.") Avoid giving a great deal of attention to the child when applying the punishment and tell him briefly why he is being punished. Avoid numerous threats and never take away something that you had previously given or promised as a reinforcement for positive behavior.

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### **Last one picked, first one picked on**

Playing with friends is a daily ritual for most children. But kids with learning disabilities are often isolated and rejected. Their problems making and keeping friends are compounded by their poor social skills. The challenges confronting learning disabled children in their lives both in and out of the classroom are examined in this video program designed for both teachers and parents.

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