

Promoting Social Skills Among Students With Nonverbal Learning Disabilities

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The numbers are staggering: About one-third of students with learning disabilities (already the largest group of students with disabilities) have nonverbal, or social, disabilities. Students with nonverbal learning disabilities, then, not only face academic challenges but have difficulty meeting social expectations, as well as many of life's other demands (see box, "What Does the Literature Say?").

This article discusses the difficulty with which children with social disabilities establish and maintain friendships, as well as the significance of this difficulty within the school setting. The article also illustrates practical classroom strategies and interventions that target select social-skill deficits frequently encountered by students with nonverbal learning disabilities. These include

- Entering/initiating conversation or play with classmates.
- Working in groups.

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- Exhibiting empathy.
- Resolving conflict.
- Managing frustration.

Social-Skill Difficulties: Effects on Classroom Life and Learning

Children experiencing learning and behavioral disabilities are unable to establish and maintain friendships as effortlessly as their peers without disabilities (Elksnin & Elksnin, 1998). Unlike children with disorders such as autism or Asperger's syndrome, children with nonverbal learning disabilities desire and enjoy social interactions. They want to relate intimately and in other meaningful ways to their peers and other people (Palombo, 1994). Although a natural and essential part of human existence, friendship involves a series of complicated social interactions, often using many or most of the social skills and competencies these children lack, including social perception, interpersonal communication involving nonverbal language, and self-regulatory behaviors (DeGeorge, 1998).

Specifically, these students have trouble initiating various interpersonal behaviors including introducing themselves to join in conversation, work, or play; offering their assistance; and apologizing. They are less empathetic to other people's feelings and moods and can be uncooperative. They may have little regard for typical school behavior-related expectations, such as listening,

following directions, and waiting to take a turn. Confused and frustrated and unsure of how to express and have their needs met, these students often exhibit aggressive behavior (Allsopp et al., 2000; Elksnin & Elksnin, 1998).

School is both an academic and a social setting and requires a student's successful navigation of both spheres of influence. Children and youth with social disabilities find it difficult to adapt and conform to the group behaviors required in school; such disabilities negatively interfere with adjustment to school and productive learning and progress. These children often show extreme anxiety, high levels of frustration, and poor self-esteem; and they experience mild to severe social isolation from their peers (Palombo, 1994). These deficits often thwart academic and social success in school. Prone to feelings of diminished self-worth or a poor self-concept, these students are easily discouraged, quickly disappointed, less resilient, and more distractible and off-task when confronted with academic challenges in the classroom. As Thompson (1999) stated:

The typical school campus offers a complex, constantly changing and often unpredictable milieu. Students are required to cope with multiple stimuli, varying behavioral expectations, and complex social interactions, as well as the academic tasks presented to

What Does the Literature Say About Nonverbal Learning Disabilities?

Neurological Basis. Educators and researchers are paying more attention to the difficulties of students with nonverbal learning disabilities, who frequently have deficiencies in social skills. In fact, in 1981, the Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities advised that the nationally accepted definition of a learning disability include difficulties in the acquisition and use of social skills as one of the disorders manifested by those experiencing learning disabilities. This invited the consideration of social disabilities as something that distinguishes students with learning disabilities from those with other types of learning difficulties (Vaughn, Zaragoza, Hogan, & Walker, 1993). The disorder called “nonverbal learning disabilities” is believed to be neurologically based and located in the right hemisphere of the brain. It causes several neuropsychological deficits. These deficits primarily include

- Difficulties in tactile and visual-spatial perception.
- A lack of psychomotor coordination.
- An inability to perceive and read environmental or nonverbal social cues (i.e., body language, facial expressions, personal space, touch, and tone of voice).

Because people with nonverbal learning disabilities are unable to process nonverbal communication and have difficulty conveying and interpreting emotion, they do not experience the benefits of the essential social cues that enable people to handle many social interactions effectively. A student with nonverbal learning disabilities often has impaired interpersonal skills, as well as a lack of other social tools necessary for these types of interactions; consequently, such a student faces formidable challenges in navigating many social situations present in life, both inside and outside of school (Harnadek & Rourke, 1994). Students with such social-skill deficiencies display inappropriate kinds of behavior that are disabling in both academic and nonacademic situations (Elksnin & Elksnin, 1998).

Social Consequences. Students with normal learning disabilities are described as lacking social competence (Vaughn & Haager, 1994), essential to establishing and maintaining peer, familial, teacher, and other adult relationships. Those that lack social competence have difficulty adapting to new situations, often exhibiting maladaptive behaviors (i.e., poor self-control, anxiety, inattention, and disruptive outbursts). These students also show ineffectual social behaviors, such as poor social perception and a lack of judgment and empathy in school, where students are always functioning as part of a larger group (Lerner, 2000). Because people with nonverbal learning disabilities in the social sphere present recurrent patterns of socially unacceptable behavior that cause problems in school by impairing both learning and successful social exchanges, they struggle with peer acceptance. People gain and enhance social competence through successful and satisfying peer interactions. Therefore, the prevalence of what is regarded as low peer status underscores the need to address and develop well-informed intervention strategies for these students (Allsopp, Santos, & Linn, 2000; Stone & La Greca, 1990).

Although a student’s nonverbal or social disability may be an entirely separate and distinct diagnosis from his or her academic or learning difficulties, it is estimated that more than one-third of students with learning disabilities have problems with social skills (Lerner, 2000).

them on any given day. They are expected to know how to behave appropriately in a myriad of situations. Such exacting

conditions can pose a challenge for any student, but for the child with nonverbal learning disabilities these demands can prove to

be totally overwhelming and may appear insurmountable at times. Unless the entire school staff is conscious of the unique neurobehavioral characteristics which impede the student with NLD [nonverbal learning disabilities], and seeks to provide appropriate intervention strategies, this student will be destined to fail in school. (n.p.)

A student’s social problems will negatively affect self-esteem, personal satisfaction, and growth, as well as his or her positive attitudes towards learning. These children, often ignored by their teachers and peers, may also isolate themselves. Receiving little affection and feeling insecure, rejected, and unrecognized, students may retreat into a spiral of disruptive behavior and potential academic failure (DeGeorge, 1998).

Suggested Strategies

Teachers should take an active role in helping students acquire, develop, and refine the social skills necessary for meaningful social relationships and interactions. We can do this by developing a positive environment within the classroom. Through modeling, encouraging collaborative learning, and providing direct instruction in social skills, we can develop a community of learners that is accepting of all.

Modeling Prosocial Skills

Noticing Children. We must make it a priority to consistently model prosocial skills and positive self-talk, abilities that may be innate for some children, but that often present daunting challenges for many others. We can model social skills in many ways; if the skill is prac-

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ticed consistently, it has lasting influence. Taking care to regularly mention every child's name in the class, aiming for at least once per day, is a simple way to begin. In addition, specifically and publicly noticing and complimenting children who often go unnoticed by their peers or are known better for disruptive or problematic behavior, can invite new or renewed interest and attention from others.

Providing a Forum. Modeling can be done with the entire class during circle or group time by presenting problems, discussing them, and imagining potential solutions. This is a productive way to more subtly assist students with non-verbal learning disabilities with entering/initiating play or conversation and resolving conflict with their classmates. An open forum such as this allows *all* students to openly express themselves and their feelings without feeling threatened. For those children specifically struggling with social competence, direct instruction through modeling of the social skills they lack is warranted so that they may compensate for and overcome these difficulties by learning to respond to and comprehend various social situations more effectively.

Getting Personal. By anticipating situations in which children might have difficulty, such as unstructured playground time, teachers can ensure that the class discusses them beforehand (during meeting or group time) in a general sense without using individual children's names or alluding to specific events. Perhaps you can frame the discussion as a problem you are experiencing yourself, eliciting honest responses and suggestions that can be given comfortably and safely by the class. This is a time where we can "think out loud" and scaffold, or build on, the students' efforts by prompting and guiding the students in proposing hypothetical solu-

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tions to any number of issues being discussed that parallel realistic situations.

Jump-Starting Social Skills. The support offered and perceived during whole-group discussions often jump-starts the development of social skills that students will later use independently, particularly those necessary to negotiate and resolve conflict. In this way, we can facilitate positive outcomes when and if these issues arise in the real world. These valuable teaching moments give students the foresight to anticipate these kinds of troublesome or frustrating interactions themselves. The students will emerge empowered with a repertoire of alternative responses to handle a number of situations on their own more appropriately and competently. This allows students the chance to be heard and seen in a manner in which they do not feel intimidated, ultimately instilling confidence and stronger feelings of self-worth developing into future independence.

Positive Reinforcement. Throughout the process of modeling, we must consistently and positively reinforce students' hard work as they use appropriate social skills during the school day. Such reinforcement or encouragement must be immediate, and the child must perceive it as meaningful. Appropriate reinforcement will also invite peer recognition, and, more importantly, will maintain the student's motivation and culminate in intrinsic, self-monitoring behavior. We must also ensure that we are reinforcing specific behaviors and following up with a clear, concise explanation of why and how the particular social skills demonstrated are beneficial, as well as when, where, and how stu-

dents can use the skills again in the future (Rosenthal-Malek, 1997; see also box, "Reinforcement").

Providing Opportunities for Cooperative Groupwork

Inviting Collaboration. Students with social skill deficiencies also frequently encounter difficulties when attempting to work collaboratively and effectively in cooperative learning situations. As teachers, however, we must persistently arrange for such valuable learning opportunities to occur regularly throughout the curriculum to ensure positive social encounters. Beginning on a small scale, arrange the classroom so that it is conducive to intimate, spontaneous collaboration among students. Ensure that comfortable learning centers or other locations within the classroom are arranged in ways that invite informal groupwork, not just individual achievement/reflection or collaborative learning that is arranged and guided by the teacher. Regularly assigning and rotating work partners or buddies ultimately prompts children to seek such companionship more independently.

Role-Playing Successful Cooperation. When moving onto larger collaborative group projects, make sure that group assignments are teacher mediated. Work should not commence until you have modeled appropriate class-made "rules" crucial for successful cooperation, while simultaneously incorporating student role-playing. Guiding, not directing, students in this manner establishes expectations that the students understand and are willing to meet. Actively engaging the children (especially those that are specifically at risk for difficulty) in constructing their own learning opportunities promotes their vested interest, as well as their commitment to and confidence in success. This is a critical opportunity for students to understand the necessity and significance of exactly which skills they need to employ and practice during what essentially is a trial run. The following are some prerequisite skills for these types of interactions (Goodwin, 1999):

- Transitioning into groups.
- Respectful listening to group members.

Reinforcement That Praises or Encourages?

Teachers must offer encouragement, rather than praise, when responding to students. Here are some differences:

- Reinforcement considered to be *praise* includes comments that are very general in nature, such as “Good job!” or “I liked the work you did today.” Rote and potentially overused statements such as these do not describe or refer back to specific behaviors. They also embody a label that places a value judgment on the child and his or her work by the teacher.
- *Encouragement*, or effective praise, is specific in its reference to the behavior it is intended to reinforce. Specific encouragement could include comments like these: “I noticed how you and Jon cooperated by taking turns with the ball on the playground today. You worked that out all by yourselves,” or “You volunteered a lot of information today during our class discussion on the rug. I noticed that you raised your hand three times.” These statements explicitly refer to the child’s efforts without judging or evaluating the quality or interpreting the result.

Encouragement is process rather than product oriented and focuses on progress. Only the individual child’s prior behavior or achievements serve as points of comparison (never that of other students) intended to highlight his or her own acknowledgment and appreciation of such progress. Encouragement should reinforce children’s efforts at achieving social interactions that are meaningful and appropriate for the classroom, as well as any other type of behavior:

[Encouragement] does not take away from the intrinsic rewards of the behavior itself or the child’s ability to evaluate his behavior. . . . Children will thrive in environments where they do not fear being evaluated, where they can make mistakes and learn from them, and where they do not need to always strive to meet someone else’s standard of excellence. . . . Encouragement, on the other hand, fosters autonomy, positive self-esteem, a willingness to explore, and an acceptance of self and others” (Hitz & Driscoll, 1988, pp. 12-13).

- Using appropriate strategies to voice disagreements.
- Turn taking.
- Exhibiting and maintaining eye contact and self-control.
- Sharing and trusting.

Obtaining Student Buy-In and Consensus. A productive way to begin encouraging collaboration is by asking the students for their input into creating a class agreement pertaining to group-work. All students need to accept it and sign it, after which you should post it prominently in the classroom for their reference.

During “open-forum” discussions leading to this agreement, provide the class with constructive criticism and feedback; students will more likely be less resistant to criticism than when you give it during more formal lessons. It is easier for students to exchange ideas, offer opinions, ask questions, and get

clarifications in this context before work on the actual assignment begins.

Providing Direct Instruction

Taking Advantage of Storytime.

Providing direct instruction of other essential social skills, including empathy, conflict resolution, and managing frustration is also important. We can introduce these skills through relevant literature, because they are frequent literary themes and extend naturally from a variety of books. The enjoyment students derive from books may serve to increase motivation for learning and facilitate a heightened awareness of the story’s relevancy. This results from a perceived connection to the book’s characters that allows a student to put himself or herself in their shoes (DeGeorge, 1998). Storytime, where teachers and students share books and talk about them together, leads smooth-

ly and comfortably into a nonthreatening class discussion where students can voice their opinions and validate their concerns.

Generating Class Expectations. You might use a reading activity to initiate the production, by the group, of another list of more general class rules or expectations, perhaps with a social slant. This is something the students can take ownership of and responsibility for, because it was their input and suggestions that stimulated and contributed to its creation. Moreover, a situation or conflict that occurred in the story can be reenacted, with the students taking on the roles of the characters in the book and creating new responses, ideas, or solutions. Role-playing offers students a valuable opportunity to empathize with others.

Ensuring Safe Practice of Skills. Role-playing also provides a safe medium through which to explore unfamiliar, diverse, complex, or dangerous situations where you can encourage essential risk-taking and critical thinking which the students can see through with less trepidation. This kind of activity also supports students’ knowledge of themselves and their relationship to the real world and other people in it. Taking on the role of someone else also frees students to develop new perceptions of both themselves as individuals as well as others. In the social sphere, role-playing changes the power structure in the room where even teachers can assume subordinate roles.

Helping Students Prepare for Adulthood

A study by Strain and Odom (1986) concluded that deficiencies in social skills

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best predicted significant and lasting consequences for adulthood. As teachers, however, we can effectively address such difficulties early on in school. Relevant research shows the adverse effects of nonverbal learning disabilities on both a student's academic and social lives, regardless of the severity of the initial diagnosis (Matte & Bolaski, 1998). By taking advantage of valuable teaching moments and taking the time to consult and collaborate with parents, we can make a positive difference and confidently guide our students in initiating and partaking in meaningful social interactions.

Benefits experienced by all students include enhanced social competence, an increase in the use of prosocial interpersonal skills, and greater self-esteem and personal satisfaction stemming from achievement in both the academic and social domains.

Final Thoughts

Using modeling, cooperative learning, and direct instruction, we can assist students in identifying and understanding their social disabilities, developing effective problem-solving strategies, and securing their attainment of independent self-regulatory behaviors. All students can benefit from this instruction.

Students will be able to confront both academic and social challenges with more competence and confidence and ultimately alleviate the obstacles they represent. We must persist in redefining these difficulties into indispensable teaching opportunities.

Appropriate and effective interventions will engage a student's strengths and abilities in learning to reject and work through the limitations of his or her disabilities. When teachers effectively use prosocial strategies, they can

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Resources

Learn more about nonverbal learning disabilities and social skill deficiencies through these books, videotapes, and Web sites. Check out the Web sites for information on how to order resources, in addition to abundance of other teaching, reference, and scholarly and layman's materials pertinent to this subject area.

<http://www.nldline.com>
<http://www.nldontheweb.org>
www.ldonline.org
http://ldonline.org/ld_indepth/social_skills/lavoie_quest.html

positively and significantly affect their students' rate of academic progress and productivity. These techniques can help to encourage students to attain personal achievement, fulfillment, and meaning from their entire school experience.

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