

Information for parents

Social skills training and enhancement for children and adolescents with developmental disorders

Prepared by Mr Neil Nicoll, Psychologist (Psychologist No PS0003047), CHERI

- Students with developmental disorders are often in need of specific programming to develop appropriate and functional social skills, anger and impulse management skills, and communication skills. Students with developmental disorders may lack these skills, not because they are being rude, inappropriate or aloof, but because they do not know what to do. It is important that this point be understood by schools and parents so they can accept the limits of children with developmental disorders and help them to learn new skills.
- Social skills programs teach students what to do. It is important to understand this basic point.
- Social skills programs generally consist of structured lessons that teach specific skills such as greeting and initiation, conversational skills, play and interaction skills. They also teach advanced and abstract skills such as dealing with rejection and criticism, sharing interests, understanding and communicating emotions and feelings. These programs can also teach anger management skills, as can other specific programs.
- Commercially available programs such as "Room 14", available from Pro-ed in Queensland, are an excellent starting point for the development of school-based social skills training programs. Many teachers and psychologists begin with programs like "Room 14" and then gradually make changes to suit specific problems.
- The best known anger management program is "Talk Sense To Yourself". Once again this is a structured program that teaches students what to do in specific situations of anger or frustration.
- The program teaches students to become more aware of their emotions, and then teaches skills to help students manage their anger and frustration and redirect it. It also teaches students to express anger more appropriately.
- One specific problem of students with developmental is their inability to generalise skills from one context or situation to another. A student with developmental disorders may be quite capable of learning a set of social 'rules' in a clinical setting such as a School Counsellor's office, but may not automatically apply these skills and strategies in the playground. Students with developmental disorders need assistance in transferring skills from one setting to another.
- A useful way to maximise a Teachers Aide's time and skill is to assist and monitor the child's social and behavioural progress. This can be in the playground, the corridors, the library, the bus stop, the sports field, or any location where there is less structure than in the classroom, and where there is less direct supervision from teachers.
- Another way to help generalise skills is to use other pupils as 'buddies'. For example, a small group of students can be taught to help and reinforce the social and behavioural skills that the child is learning.
- Buddy systems such as this can be beneficial for all involved. The child with developmental disorders receives support from students instead of rejection, ridicule and bullying. The 'buddy' students develop a sense of civic responsibility for which they may be rewarded. Many schools organise peer support programs and find them to be successful.



- Parents can develop their own 'buddy' systems at home, by inviting one or two children over to play with their child. These are called 'playdates', and work very well if some simple rules are followed:
 1. Pick one or two nice children who are happy to help. Sometimes your school can tell you the names of parents and children who would be happy to help.
 2. Explain to the helping children exactly what you want them to do. Children love to help, and do this better when they know exactly what to do.
 3. Have them play a short, successful game with your child. Structured games such as dice and board games are best, because the rules are so clear.
 4. The parent should help with the play, ensuring that it goes well and everyone has a good time. The parent may feel that he/she is acting as the 'ringmaster' in these games, and that is perfectly appropriate.
 5. Quit whilst ahead! Always finish these play sessions whilst they are still going well. Never try to make them last too long.
 6. Finish these sessions in a 'ritualised' manner, for example the children shake hands and promise to meet each other again to play.
 7. If necessary, reward the children who helped with some kind of treat or certificate.
- Some organisations conduct formal social skills groups which are a combination of training sessions and social gatherings. These are extremely valuable and productive.
- Another method of helping children develop 'transportable' social skills is to use written rules, 'social stories' and other augmentative systems. The child can read and rehearse specific rules, behavioural sequences, modes of conversation, responses and questions prior to undertaking difficult social tasks and interactions.
- Students with developmental disorders are often more able to interpret and understand visual material than orally presented information. This is why written rules and social stories are more effective than telling the child what to do. Social rules and stories can be augmented with pictures, photographs and symbols to clarify and simplify messages and rules and add to understanding.

For more Information

If you require further information please contact:

CHERI
The Children's Hospital at Westmead
Locked Bag 4001
Westmead NSW 2145

Tel: (02) 9845 0418
Fax: (02) 9845 0421
Email: info@cheri.com.au

Disclaimer: This fact sheet is for personal use only. Please consult with other professionals, where appropriate, to ensure this information is suitable for your needs.

Copyright © CHERI

