



TEACHING SOCIAL SKILLS

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I often get asked by school boards to help them choose a good Social Skills training program for their students. Their intentions are the best; they want to help their students to get along with each other and they want life to flow more smoothly in the classroom, in the hallways and on the playground.

At first, I took this quest seriously and developed a list of programs that I thought were among the best. I had hopes that, in addition to what the children were going to learn, the teachers would understand that students need to be taught social skills step-by-step, with lots of coaching to apply these skills, just as is done with academic subjects.

However, since I have become more familiar with Dr. Neufeld's developmental paradigm, which includes the newest brain research, I see more clearly the error of trying to teach children something for which they may not yet be ready.

The ability to get along with others, to put others' needs into perspective along with our own needs, is a long and slow process. It is as much dependent on the development of the capacity for integrative thinking as it is on the knowledge of what to do. Integrative thinking is tied to the development of the pre-frontal cortex of the brain and the research now tells us that the pre-frontal cortex of elementary school children is only starting to develop, a process that will take them until well into their twenties to complete. And it is the pre-frontal cortex that enables us to keep both our needs and the needs of others in mind in any social situation.

With a developing prefrontal cortex, children can't always manage their emotions, especially intense ones. And when in a crowded corridor, on a rough and tumble playground or in a noisy lunchroom, it is very easy for a child to become overwhelmed. The skills that they are learning seem to "fly out of their head" and they respond instinctively instead of rationally. We, of course, become frustrated – why don't they DO what they KNOW? But then do we, as adults, with supposedly fully developed brains, always DO as we KNOW? I wish I could say that I do!

If your school has a well functioning Social Skills program, then, continue, as long as you understand that the program can't "cure" the underlying condition – natural immaturity for some, and situational immaturity for others. Reflection sheets and consequences cannot hurry the developmental process.

While research does show that in schools with Social Skills Programs children's negative behaviour seems to decline, implementing these programs requires a lot of energy and commitment and even then, success is only temporary.

If you are searching for a way to help your students "do better", I suggest that the energy and money be put into educating the school staff about the true developmental needs of children: right relationships with adults; discipline that does not divide, and lots of structure to compensate for natural immaturity and to prevent children from getting into trouble.

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