

Social skills training programmes have been found to have limited effectiveness for students with disabilities. To be effective training needs to be frequent and intensive (over three hours a week), and to generalise to different environments.

(Farmer, Rodkin, Pearl & Acker, 1999; Gresham, Sugai & Horner, 2001)

## HOW DOES YOUR SCHOOL OR CLASS ENCOURAGE SOCIAL SKILLS?

Students with disabilities often have few friendships at school and experience bullying. Their peers can see disability in a negative way. If we then emphasise social skills development for students with disabilities, we suggest that they are the problem and it is their responsibility to change and fit in with the school. This does not leave any room to explore ideas about helping all students understand difference and diversity, or help teachers to consider the other aspects of school life that contribute to friendship.

(Cooper, Griffith & Filer 2003; Davis & Watson, 2001; Evans & Meyer, 2001; Grenot-Sheyer, Staub, Peck & Schwartz 1998; MacArthur & Gaffney, 2001; Watson, Holton & Andrews, 1999)

**Social**



Scott's parent knows he excludes himself, and has difficulties picking up on social cues, so Scott may need some direct adult support to learn strategies to interact with others. However his peers may also benefit from some adult information and support, so that they can understand when he is trying to be socially involved and can respond positively towards him. Research shows that teaching peers how to respond to students with disabilities can make a difference to the frequency and quality of their interactions with their classmates. They can also learn to value the diversity within their classroom.

(MacArthur, 2002; Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2001)

**“It’s just that I don’t have any ideas **how to solve the lack of social contact** he has. His recreation and social time – he’s at a loss. **It’s really hard to solve the problem for him!** Because he can’t! that’s the nature of his disorder ... **he’s on his own.** He always walks around on his own at school, but he doesn’t make it easy! I’ve seen other kids speak to him and say, “Hi Scott!”, and **he sort of goes “Ummmmm”** like this. It’s taken him a long time to teach him to say hullo back to people and now when he does he mutters down in his boots. **He actually excludes himself which is hard”.****

(MacArthur, 2002, p. 14)





**“Friends is the biggest gap. Because I know what Lois is like when we’re in a shop and a group of girls come in. I can see her attitude changing, she’s interested and that makes me sad... I understand it’s tricky because you know they won’t know what it’s like to be Lois and might not be able to find a way of being with her...”**

(Morris, 1998, p.13)

Caring roles are learned by students through their experiences. When they see social strategies modelled by teachers in their interactions with other students and teachers, they continue to learn. Recent literature suggests social skills interventions should focus on developing a responsive social environment (or ecology) in a school that supports the development of friendships amongst all students.

(Cooper, Griffith & Filer, 2003; Davis & Watson, 2001; Evans & Meyer, 2001; Lovitt, Plavins & Cushing, 1999; McCay & Keyes, 2002; Staub, 1998; Watson, Holton & Andrews, 1999)

Depending on the situation, Evans & Meyer (2001) suggest teaching social skills may be effective with some students, but when a child has a significant disability, it is difficult to imagine such an approach being economical or meaningful. In a detailed case study, three years of intensive intervention resulted in very little change for Anne, who failed to learn a simple communication sign. Instead it was possible to reduce her repetitive behaviours, by creating a “responsive social environment.” Anne’s smiling, whimpering, and looking versus staring facial expressions were used as a set of communication cues to others to work out whether or not to continue with an activity. When the social environment in the classroom was restructured to use Anne’s behaviour as information regarding her interests, needs, and emotions Anne was able to achieve better communication with the people in her world.

“This has been extremely trying for me as **I had to fight my autism and many times it overcomes me ...** I am fortunate to be alive when (written) facilitation was discovered and I was opened up as a person who can demonstrate unusual behaviours and intelligence too ... **I am a lot busier than I would have been but I am also a lot happier. I am still trying to make people friends. This is not easy because sometimes my behaviours scare people”.**

(Grenot-Sheyer, Staub, Peck & Schwartz, 1998, p.150)



Listening to student perspectives is a critical starting point in supporting student social experiences at school. Students often differ from teachers in their ideas on ways to solve social problems, and adults often solve the problems of students for them rather than helping students to solve their own problems.

(Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2001)



The following skills are developmentally important and relevant in the context of the classroom. They can be used to support everyone’s social learning in the classroom:

- **Independence skills** – learning to direct activities, make choice, and follow through with plans
- **Assertiveness skills** – expressing needs and wants through “I” statements
- **Social sensitivity** – learning to interpret and understand the feelings of others
- **Friendship building** – learning skills in peer relationships that help support friendships, cooperation, sharing, collaboration, and attention to acts of kindness, caring, and respect
- **Social problem solving skills** – learning when and how to use interpersonal skills
- **Teaching values** – allowing students to experience the values taught through everyday routines and interaction

(McCay & Keyes, 2002; Staub, 1998)