



Quality Indicators of Effective Social Skills Instruction: Best or Bust? **A Parenting Guide Brought to You By: The Hangout Spot, LLC.**

Social skills are incredibly complex to learn and even more difficult to teach. Effective instruction requires a deep understanding of cultural norms, social nuances, age appropriate development, and how learning occurs in the first place. A dynamic approach is required to teach a dynamic skill. Missing one or more of these considerations has the potential to set the learner up for social failure and exclusion. Teaching social skills is a big responsibility that impacts the child's quality of life, for better or for worse. As such, it is important to thoroughly research social skills programs prior to getting started; due diligence is definitely required. But, where do you even begin? Below are important variables to consider when exploring and selecting a social skills program for your child.

1. **Be wary of programs that focus on a different skill every session.** Instead, look for repeated practice opportunities to work on the same skill over time. Children don't learn calculus in one lesson, so why would we expect them to learn something as complex as social skills in one sitting either? A quality program hones in on targeted skills, providing continued instruction until true mastery is achieved.
2. **Look for programs that are sensitive to cultural norms.** Programs that take culture into consideration are aware of varying values, goals, and practices of people from different origins. We live in a melting pot society, and within our dominant culture exist many different subcultures. For example, in Western cultures, eye contact is an expected social norm, but in Eastern cultures, this same behavior, under certain circumstances, would be considered rude. A quality social skills program takes these factors into consideration and adjusts instruction accordingly.
3. **Effective social skills instruction teaches “kid skills,” not “adult skills.”** Adults are quick to reduce behaviors they perceive to be inappropriate without first considering what constitutes age-appropriate interaction. For example, trying to teach a kindergartener to stop telling potty jokes sets him up for ultimate failure because this type of humor is the key to making friends amongst young children. To squash this skill eliminates the child's ability to gain acceptance from same-age peers and instead transforms his behavior into something that would be perceived as odd or different by the group. Similarly, ridding a teenager's repertoire of all gossiping behavior or teaching a middle schooler to always tell an adult when something is wrong (i.e. excessive tattling), is likely to have similar effect. Careful consideration must be given to teaching age-appropriate behaviors instead of forcing adult social skills on our kids.
4. **Find behavior analytic programming.** A common question often asked in regards to social skills instruction is “what curriculum are you using?”. While a curriculum is helpful in identifying potential deficits and possible activities through which skills can be taught, a curriculum is only as useful as the procedures used to teach it. The teaching methodologies selected must be rooted in evidenced-based processes. For example, using elements of *The Social Thinking* curriculum is likely to be beneficial when taught in accordance with the

principles of Applied Behavior Analysis. On its own, such a curriculum serves to provide children with a set of rules without using a scientifically-rooted means of teaching, which is likely to be unsuccessful. Keep an eye out for the principles of ABA within the social skills program. If you notice reinforcement systems, error correction procedures, and other behavior analytic elements, there is a higher chance of success.

5. **Quality social skills instruction is data driven.** Data is collected regularly on a child's ability to apply skills to the natural environment. But, data collection alone is simply not enough. Data must be displayed in graphical form to allow for effective analysis. Analysis should occur frequently, after every two or three sessions, rather than once in a while. Otherwise, instructors miss critical opportunities to adjust teaching along the way. Data-based decision making is at the heart of an effective social skills program.
6. **Ask how the program defines mastery.** Rule memorization does not constitute skill mastery. Watch out for statements like, "he knows the rules but chooses not to use them." This logic, when applied to other skills, is faulty. For example, let's pretend that a child did not know how to swim and read a book detailing all of the rules about swimming. Then, he fell into a pool and drowned. Would the logic "he knew the rules of swimming but chose not to use them" still apply? Of course not. When it comes to social skills, children are often able to describe the right thing to do, but the challenge arises when these same children are required to apply their skills in real life. Quality instruction does not consider a skill mastered when the child can simply describe it. Instead, it ensures that a child is able to apply a skill in real life situations before checking it off the list.
7. **Lastly, a quality social skills program teaches for generalization from the start.** All instruction is intended to support the child to use his or her skills across different people and settings. Teaching for generalization requires loose instruction that constantly rotates between different scenarios. The peer group, activity, and location must change frequently. Running a social skills group with the same teacher and same friends, playing the same games over and over in the same exact spot is destined to fail. The result will unfortunately be a child who can demonstrate a skill only under certain circumstances. Remember, a social skill is only socially relevant if it is utilized across all applicable facets of a child's life.

The importance of selecting the right social skills program cannot be underscored enough. However, being selective when there are limited options to begin with is incredibly difficult. Knowing the right questions to ask and characteristics to look for will help identify the program that is best able to make a difference. Whatever program you select should take into account cultural norms, social nuances, and age appropriate development. The program should have a thorough understanding of how learning occurs and use data to guide decision making. Most importantly, the program must use a dynamic approach to social learning. Together, these characteristics separate a "best program" from one that is a "bust" when it comes to social learning.

About the Authors

Justyna Balzar, M.Ed. BCBA LBA (CT) and **Meghan Cave, M.Ed. BCBA LBA (CT)** are the Co-Founders and Chief Executive Officers of The Hangout Spot, LLC, coming soon to Fairfield County as Connecticut's first center using the **fundamentals** of science to foster social smarts by providing instruction in a safe, fun, inclusive "home away from home" environment. The Hangout

Spot is a behavior analytic social skills development center where we believe that all children have a right to meaningful relationships with others. We strive to eliminate barriers to friendship and empower children to be socially successful across the lifespan using the principles of Applied Behavior Analysis. Everything we do is rooted in research, empirically validated, and proven to work. We conceptualize critical, previously considered “tricky to teach” skills through a scientific framework. In doing so, we achieve socially significant change for our clients, by providing the support they need to develop real connections with other people beyond our walls.

To learn more and follow our grand opening, visit www.thehangoutspotllc.com, and connect with us on Facebook or Instagram @thehangoutspotllc.