

ASD and Social Interactions: Improving Everyday Life Through Better Skills

Summary

Humans are, by nature, social beings. Every day, many socializing opportunities arise, enabling us to practise and use our social skills to develop healthy, meaningful relationships with others. Individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often face challenges in relation to social skills, because of the disorder's characteristics. According to Leaf (2017), social skills are the skills of interacting with others in an appropriate and effective manner. However, the simplicity of this definition contrasts with the complexity of such skills. To promote the development of social skills in individuals with ASD, it is important to understand how the disorder's characteristics affect these skills, and to adequately plan how they will be taught by focusing on a priority and choosing an effective teaching approach that will make it possible to achieve the goal that has been set.

ASD and Social Skills

ASD is characterized by persistent challenges in communication and social interactions. These challenges often arise in the form of a lack of social and emotional reciprocity (while communicating involves a bidirectional exchange between at least two individuals) and deficiencies in non-verbal communication and social relationships. Therefore, it is common to observe individuals with ASD showing behaviours that can be viewed as inappropriate or objectionable when they attempt to interact with others. One might even think that individuals with ASD do not want to interact with others or prefer to be alone. It is absolutely acceptable for someone to want to spend some time alone, but we must not understate the importance of teaching appropriate social skills to individuals with ASD to encourage the natural development of language, allow for exchanges with others, promote the development of friendships, make social situations more pleasant, and improve their quality of life.

Planning Social Skills Training

Social skills training is a difficult, ongoing process. First, the list of skills to be taught can be very long and, second, every social situation is unique and requires an ongoing adjustment from the persons involved. We continue to develop and perfect our social skills throughout our lives, and the same is true for individuals with ASD. Because it is impossible to teach every skill in every situation, it is important to strategically plan social skills training so that individuals with ASD can be given the tools and resources they need to continue their learning.





Identifying a priority

To start social skills training, one must choose the skill to be prioritized. To do so, it is important to fully understand the learner's strengths and challenges in terms of social skills. You can collect this information through direct observations, or interviews and conversations with people who know the individual. We always recommended to use direct observation as it gives a chance to see and confirm strengths and challenges. As for discussions or conversations with persons in the individual's circle, they are a way to collect additional information that may supplement direct observation.

Once the learner's strengths and challenges have been identified, you have to choose a starting point. In other words, what is the skill that needs to be worked on? The following questions may guide you in making the choice:

- What skill would enable the learner to be more engaged in family and community activities?
- What skill would enable the learner to participate more actively with peers?
- What skills, if acquired, might facilitate the learning of other skills?
- What skill would provide the learner with access to new environments or new activities or social opportunities?
- What skill could facilitate the learner's social interactions?

The individual should be included in the discussions when it comes to identifying a training priority, whenever that is possible. The individual may have personal goals or aspirations that could serve as incentives when specific social skills are taught.

Define an objective

Once the priority is identified, it is important to set a learning goal, which will help assessing the learner's progress. This goal should be written in a way that is:

- **Specific:** the goal is directly related to the target skill and personalized to meet the learner's needs.
- **Observable:** the goal should include a behaviour or an action that can be observed.
- **Measurable:** the goal should be quantified and include a mastery criterion.
- **Achievable:** the goal must be realistic and promote the learner's success.

Choose a teaching strategy and offer ongoing support

Interventions based on Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA) are effective for teaching social skills to learners with ASD. Several approaches can be used, including modelling, video modelling, behavioural skills training (BST), prompting, reinforcement, discrete trial training (DTT), and peer-mediated instruction and intervention. Regardless of the approach selected, it is important to plan the generalization and maintenance of learning. A specific social skill will be used in multiple contexts, with different people, and will develop over time. It is therefore essential to provide ongoing support for learners, even when it has been determined that they have achieved the goal that was set. Developing social skills is an ongoing process and must continue to be incorporated into everyday life to promote success.

Behavioural Skills Training

Behavioural Skills Training (BST) is an evidence-based approach that is an effective way of teaching new skills to both children and adults. It is an approach that can easily be tailored to individual needs and that consists of four main steps:

1. Instruction

The adult (or person offering the training) provides the learner with oral or written instructions, presents the skill that will be taught, and explains its importance or purpose. The instructions must be adapted to the learner's level of language and can be accompanied by visual supports (e.g., images or drawings).

2. Modelling

The adult then models the target skill or uses video modelling to demonstrate the skill to the learner. Regardless of the method chosen, the modelling must provide the learner with a clear example, so they fully understand what is expected. The adult should offer a number of different examples and even some counter-examples, if appropriate. Modelling enables the learner to make the link between the information received orally or in writing and what the skill might actually look like in a real situation.

3. Practice

After modelling, the learner will have an opportunity to practice using the skill. The adult may therefore create situations where the learner can adopt the target behaviour. During practice, adults may help learners providing them with physical, gestural, verbal, visual, or textual prompts. It is important for the learner to have multiple opportunities to practice the skill and experience success. Adults must therefore adjust their expectations and the level of difficulty, as needed. During this step, the adult can actually figure whether the learner fully understood the instructions and was focused during modelling because the learner can be observed in action.

4. Feedback

You must provide feedback along with practice exercises. This step is used to let the learner know what they did well and what they could improve. You should first praise the student's strengths, then offer suggestions for improvement, and finally, you could share some encouragement. The adult should carefully adapt their explanations and comments to the learner's level of language. Depending on the learner's performance, the adult can decide whether it is necessary to provide more modelling or further opportunities for practicing.

Factors Contributing to the Success of the Intervention

During social skills training, some factors could contribute to the learner's success. It is important to consider the environment variables that precede and follow the target behaviour or skill. The adult can actually manipulate the antecedents, or the variables that precede the behaviour, to create conditions that support learning. You can for example modify the learner's environment, add elements of support or consider the factors that motivate the learner. Adult can then encourage the development and maintenance of a skill through reinforcement. When learners receive reinforcing consequences immediately after they demonstrate the desired skill, they are more likely to demonstrate that skill again.



Individuals with ASD often encounter obstacles during social interactions because of the disorder's characteristics. It is important to strategically plan social skills training so that it is possible to select the skill and the teaching approach that will promote the individual's success. Behavioural Skills Training (BST) is an evidence-based approach that can be very effective in teaching social skills. The key principles of Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA), namely antecedents and consequences, should also be considered in order to maximize the chances of success and promote positive, authentic social interactions.