

A Collaborative Approach to Teaching Social Skills

Ms. Avery and Ms. Jefferson co-teach as part of their school's inclusion initiative. For the most part, students who have recently been included are having difficulty participating in the center work. Repeatedly, Ms. Jefferson finds them sitting at their desks, engaged in off-task activities while the rest of the class are busy at work at one of the learning centers. When asked why they aren't working with their peers, the students in question typically respond that they don't know what they are supposed to be doing. Ms. Avery has done everything she can to ensure that the directions are clear and that the center activities are fun and motivating.

Mr. Livermore has just returned from a seminar on linking the curriculum to the community. He is enthusiastic about the possibilities for instruction in science. His first unit will have students grow plants in the greenhouse and then make those plants available to senior citizens. Keeping in mind the new science standards which encourage group work and problem solving, he begins to formulate cooperative teams. As he ponders the group composition, he becomes uncomfortable placing some students in groups with others. He knows from past experiences that some students have a difficult time getting along: They hoard materials and make fun of students who are not as able.





A seventh grade team at Bryan Middle School have undertaken an interdisciplinary curriculum unit. As part of the unit, students are expected to engage in sustained study of a topic for a month. During that time, they are expected to research a topic and come prepared to debate the issues as a culminating event. The language arts teacher, Ms. Garcia, is concerned that students will be unable to fulfill the requirements for an oral presentation. Moreover, she has noticed that students rarely ask for assistance if they are having difficulty—a characteristic that could easily undermine their research task.


Kenisha has a difficult time making friends. She will sit alone during recess and put her head down when students are picking teams for physical education activities. In the classroom she never raises her hand, and when asked a direct question, responds in a whisper.

Listening, following directions, sharing resources, asking questions, solving conflicts—these are all skills that are critical for success in school, but also in daily life. They are critical to getting and keeping a job, for being included in community events, and in maintaining a high quality of family life. Every time we come into contact with another individual, our ability to use social skills will determine—to a great extent—our success in that relationship.

Unfortunately, we can no longer assume that students have the social skills necessary for success. Increasingly, students are coming to school without having learned basic social skills—and as a result, are finding it difficult to get along with their peers and adults in the school environment. Additionally, new curricular reforms are requiring students to learn core information in groups. Without basic social skills such as listening, following directions, waiting one's turn, using manners, seeking help appropriately—to name a few—our students will lose out on essential academics, and be denied positive learning experiences with their peers.

In addition, the less-than-successful adjustment of students with disabilities to the behavioral and social demands of least restrictive school settings has been related to the absence of effective social skills. When placed in inclusive educational settings, disabled students with social skill deficits tend not to be accepted by peers and teachers. Further, children with poor interpersonal skills do not generally outgrow their social deficits; rather, they are likely to develop more life adjustment problems. Research has linked deficits in social skills to academic underachievement, delinquency, poor self-concept, and other maladaptive processes, in addition to later life adjustment difficulties.

Taken as a whole, the professional literature offers ample rationale for encouraging social competence in all students, but particularly those students with disabilities or who are at risk for failure. Major reasons for providing social skills training can be summarized as follows:

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- Some students need social skills training to derive maximum benefit from academic instruction.
 - Social skills training can facilitate inclusion efforts, contribute to peer and teacher acceptance, and improve prospects for postschool employment success.
 - Social skills training can facilitate some students' capacity for independent living and recruitment of adequate social support networks.

A Collaborative Approach to Teaching Social Skills is a program created by The Foundation for Exceptional Innovations. Designed for educators who are working together either on teams or as partners—such as classroom teachers, special education teachers, guidance counselors, school psychologists, special education aides, media and library specialists—the approach offers a practical way to teach social skills to **all** students in the classroom and across other school settings.

A Collaborative Approach to Teaching Social Skills offers educators a practical approach to teaching social skills by combining an instructional framework with a collaborative model. In this approach, social skills instruction serves as the technical content or intervention focus of collaboration. Social skills instruction lends itself well to collaboration. Due to the complex nature of social skill development and the primarily academic nature of most classrooms, students with social skill deficits place considerable demands on teachers. Working in a collaborative relationship can provide the teacher with needed support in an area that has traditionally been tough for classroom teachers to manage.



Because it is an instructional framework, **A Collaborative Approach to Teaching Social Skills** offers teachers total flexibility in planning and implementing lessons which are appropriate to their students. It provides teachers with an effective and easy method for infusing social skills into the school day, rather than adding on another subject. Teachers continue to make the critical decisions of what to teach and how best to teach it—so that the skills being taught have direct meaning in their classrooms and school.

A Collaborative Approach to Teaching Social Skills shows teachers how to teach social skills. There are three phases that teachers move through when planning and implementing the instruction:

- Curriculum Planning.
- Instruction and Implementation.
- Student Self Control.

During the first phase, teachers plan the curriculum. They determine what social





skill they want to teach, as well as which students will be involved. In some cases, teachers will decide to target an individual student or small group of students who need individualized assistance. But in other cases, teachers will target the entire class—especially when the academic activities require social skill proficiency for participation.

Next teachers identify the specific behaviors—or steps—that make up the social skill that they will be teaching. This step is critical as it defines what teachers will be teaching and what students will be learning.

Once teachers have identified the skill they will be working on, they move into the second phase where they decide how to implement their instruction. They are free to use their own style and creativity in planning lessons—the only requirement is that they use the five instructional strategies which research and best practice have demonstrated to be critical to success:

- Direct teaching of the social skill steps.
- Modeling.
- Practice.
- Social reinforcement or feedback.
- Self control.

A Collaborative Approach to Teaching Social Skills uses the data-based program, **Teaching Social Skills: A Practical Instructional Approach** (Rutherford, Chipman, DiGangi, & Anderson, 1992), as the foundation for social skills instruction because it incorporates all of the above-mentioned best instructional practices. However, it should be noted that the collaborative model can be adapted for use with any social skills program. Additionally, we have chosen the **Teaching Social Skills Program** by Rutherford and his colleagues because it:

- Is a comprehensive instructional approach for remediating and developing positive social skills in elementary-aged students.
- Is intended to be implemented in general classroom settings, as well as in more specialized contexts.
- Does not require the teacher to “add-on” another subject area; rather, it focuses on incorporating the social skills instruction into the teacher’s instructional repertoire of behaviors.
- Promotes generalization.

Everything you need to implement this approach is included in this manual.



Using the Training Materials

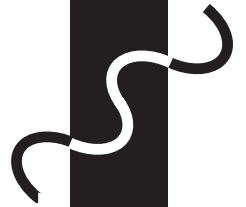
A Collaborative Approach to Teaching Social Skills is a professional development package that provides facilitators—teacher leaders, staff developers, consultants, administrators, and course instructors—with the tools to help educators working as a team or in a partnership teach social skills. The materials can be used by educators in a variety of contexts:

- Planning meetings for teams or pairs of teachers (e.g., grade level teachers; interdisciplinary teams; special and general education teachers; teacher assistance teams).
- School-based or district-based workshops and other staff development sessions.
- Teacher preparation courses.
- Individual teachers who choose to work through the materials.

A Collaborative Approach to Teaching Social Skills was designed for general education and special education classroom teachers who are working together or with other school specialists such as guidance counselors, school psychologists, classroom aides, librarians, and technology coordinators. It offers an instructional framework that can be adapted to fit any teaching style and classroom configuration, rather than a prepackaged set of curriculum lessons that must be strictly followed.

A Collaborative Approach to Teaching Social Skills was successfully field-tested in schools across the country as part of a Department of Education, Office of Special Education personnel preparation grant (#H029K3017293). Schools with a diverse population of students located in urban, rural, and suburban areas took part in the field-testing. Special education students with mild disabilities were also included. This facilitator's manual is an outgrowth of that work. It contains everything a facilitator needs to implement the program in a school: background information; training materials; training activities; and a videotape showing the program in action in Louisiana, New Mexico, and Arizona.

There are countless ways to organize a workshop for ***A Collaborative Approach to Teaching Social Skills***. A lot depends on your style, the characteristics of your participants, and the time frame. At a minimum, it takes the equivalent of two days to cover all of the topics. If you are conducting training, then expect to increase the amount of time to allow for practice and feedback.






The guide is organized around the following chapters:

- Chapter 2 introduces the model and presents background information. Use this chapter as an orientation to **A Collaborative Approach to Teaching Social Skills**. Included are suggestions for introducing participants during a professional development event to teaching social skills.
- Chapter 3 explains the **Teaching Social Skills Program**, by Rutherford, et al (1992), which was the social skills intervention program that we piloted with this framework. Refer to this chapter if you are interested in one-on-one small group intervention work.
- Chapter 4 offers suggestions for leading a workshop on the **Teaching Social Skills Program** presented in Chapter 3.
- Chapter 5 shows how the **Collaborative Approach to Teaching Social Skills** framework can be tailored to a whole classroom context. Included are suggestions for leading a workshop on the framework. Also, the components of the **Teaching Social Skills Program** are adapted for large group, preventive work. Refer to this chapter if you are interested in implementing the collaborative model in a classroom setting.
- Chapter 6 describes implementation. Included are suggestions for how to organize training as well as how to troubleshoot issues that typically arise.
- Appendices contain activity handouts and blackline masters of overheads.

Included is a videotape which shows the approach in action. The tape features teachers using the instructional approach in elementary classrooms. Video segments include:

- **Introduction:** An overview of the approach and instructional components are presented (running time: 9 minutes and 54 seconds).
- **Teaching Listening Skills—First Grade:** A classroom teacher and reading recovery teacher collaborate (running time: 6 minutes and 52 seconds).
- **Teaching Waiting One's Turn - Third Grade:** A Co-teaching assignment (running time: 7 minutes and 38 seconds).
- **Teaching Asking Questions - Third Grade:** A classroom teacher and counselor collaborate (running time: 5 minutes and 3 seconds).
- **Teaching Conflict Resolution - Third Grade.** A classroom teacher shows how the approach can be implemented independently (running time: 5 minutes and 52 seconds).

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- **Teaching Following Directions - Second Grade:** A classroom teacher, special education aide, and technology specialist collaborate. (running time: 5 minutes and 24 seconds)
 - **Teaching Listening Skills - Fifth Grade:** A special education and general education teacher collaborate (running time: 3 minutes and 57 seconds).

These video segments are designed to be used during training activities. Rarely would you show them all at the same time; however, we suggest that as a facilitator you take some initial time to familiarize yourself with them.

Moving Ahead

Educators are beginning to see the importance of teaching social skills—and the importance of building collaborative partnerships among instructional and support professionals to carry out the work. Across the country, educators are identifying and teaching social skills that are critical to their students' success. And what's more, they're finding that it doesn't require a lot of time, considerable preparation, or pre-packaged sets of materials. Rather they are discovering that the same instructional strategies that are used to teach reading, writing, and arithmetic, can also be used to teach social skills effectively.

Before using **A Collaborative Approach to Teaching Social Skills** to plan your professional development, we suggest that you familiarize yourself with the materials. Keep in mind that these materials offer a way to get started in the area—in fact you might call them a “starter kit” because they provide a framework for teaching social skills.

Helping our students develop social skills is worth the effort. We've heard repeatedly from teachers across the country of the value of such an approach. The words of one teacher sum it up well:

I never thought that social skills could make such a difference. The students are proud of their new behaviors. And what's even better, they're learning more and enjoying it!

