

Autism Information Fast Facts



How to Collect Data on Social Skills

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We are well aware that two of the chief characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder are deficits in social reciprocity and effective communication skills. Struggles in these areas lead to difficulties in other areas such as academic progress. School divisions across Virginia have tackled these issues in a myriad of ways. There are many options for addressing social skill development. Some divisions have put social skills groups that meet during lunch time, after school, or during certain times of the school day in place. Usually there are teachers or related-services staff facilitators of these groups who choose skills to work on activities aimed at increasing the skills of all of the students in the group. Another way schools have supported social communication needs is to embed instruction throughout the day based on individual student goals. There are other options school divisions have explored as well. Regardless of the method of deliver, a common conundrum faced by staff is exactly how to measure progress on these “soft skills.” In other words, how do we know students are making progress in social and communication skills?

Assessment Tools

“Where do I start?”

This is a question many teachers and related services personnel ask when embarking upon a social skills initiative. There are many social skills curriculums available and school divisions may already have options or may opt to develop their own. Once a curriculum is developed or chosen, gathering information on a student’s baseline of skills is the first step in data collection. Unfortunately, there are very limited psychometrically sound, standardized and norm referenced tools for this exact purpose. However, there are many tools available as part of a pre-packaged curriculum, or created by school or division teams. Perhaps the school team decides to craft their own way of measuring progress. The most critical element in deciding on which tool is deciding on what you need to measure.

- You’ll want to consider:
- Do you want to focus on an entire range or set of social communication domains? or
 - Are you considering an overall “snapshot” of social communication skills?

Also examine what level of teaching needs to occur for your particular student (i.e. one-on-one, small group, large group, or generalization).

- When considering a specific tool, determine:
- what the costs are,
 - what it measures,
 - can it measure growth over time, and
 - who can administer the tool.

Some tools can be costly and require a specific training or credentialing to administer. Also, your division may already have some tools available.

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Process of Assessment

“How do I start?”

This is another question that frequently comes up. Baseline measurements are just as important for social skills as they are for academic skills. If we don't know where a student is prior to instruction, how can we accurately determine if our teaching is effective and if the student is gaining knowledge?

The answer:

- run baseline data collection prior to intervention
- then determine when it will be repeated and how often.

You'll need to decide, do you want to assess every week, quarter, at the end of year, or some other marker? Examination of social communication skills is not as distinct and definitive as an academic subject like spelling or math. Therefore, having an interrater-reliability step in your data collection can ensure the assessment of a particular skill set is accurate. This simply means having more than one person collect data on the same skills to ensure you are seeing the same things. Incorporating this step can also improve the definitions of the behaviors you want to teach or decrease because everyone will have to have the same understanding of what they are looking for. Otherwise, the data collection will not be very accurate.

After you consider baseline performance, defining the behaviors you're looking for, and gaining consistency on data collection, you'll want to think about some other areas as well. When it comes to social skills, it is incredibly important to look not just in your class for behaviors or skill demonstration, but to reach out to all the school and home environments that pertain to that skill. Remember, we are teaching these skills so the student can use them in any appropriate environment. Gather information about whether the skill is observed in other appropriate places and to what degree? You may find the skill is only demonstrated in certain classes or with certain people and your focus will be mainly to help the student generalize across environments.

Always keep an eye on your prompting hierarchy. Are you keeping track of the level of prompting? Is there a fading protocol in place? Having consistent data collection will help with this as well. If you notice one person is getting drastically different data than others, you may want to consider the prompting levels that are occurring. Sometimes people aren't even aware of how they are prompting students! Having a plan for fading will also help with this.

Summary

We know teaching social skills to students is significant and can be very effective. These are vital functional skills that can make a dramatic difference in the success of post-high school endeavors, like employment, post-secondary education, and participation in community groups. Therefore we should see these as an essential part of the IEP process. As with any targeted goal, accurate data on progress is required to determine supports, effectiveness of instruction, and future needs. Furthermore, as with any academic goal, social goals can be defined, measured, and analyzed to determine progress and increase the skillset of the student. Collecting data on these skills can require a bit more thinking outside of the box, but is well worth the additional planning and research in order to help our students with Autism Spectrum Disorder be more included in school, home, and community settings.



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