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# Social Skills

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## What are Social Skills?

In the world of Autism, social skills and communication skills are one and the same. After all, it is hard to imagine socializing with someone without also communicating with them. In the past, challenges in social and communication skills were considered separate for individuals with ASD. Recently, these two domains have been combined. An individual diagnosed with ASD experiences challenges in social/ communication skills and repetitive or restricted patterns of behavior or interests. This research brief will provide an introduction into social and communication skills for individuals with ASD with an emphasis on how challenges in this area can impact an individual's employment potential.

Skills falling under the social/ communication domain are the SOFT skills. These are the skills that humanize you, make you relatable, and help others to get to know you and like you! A deficit in these so called soft skills can make daily living and independent functioning very difficult.

Having a range of social skills in your back pocket is necessary to develop and maintain meaningful relationships. However, social skills go beyond relationship building. They are also necessary to help an individual achieve other factors that are associated with a high quality of life: participation and access to community, recreational, and employment settings. Supporting an individual with ASD to acquire social and communication skills is an important part of their transition from school into the world of work and adulthood.

## Why are Social Skills important?

Deficits in appropriate social and communication skills impact an individual's ability to fully integrate and participate in different aspects of society. Just for fun, I challenge you to come up with a life activity that takes place outside of the home that does not require some sort of ability to communicate or socialize. Think of ordering a meal, going shopping at the mall, picking out and trying on an interview outfit, and then scheduling and participating in that interview!

Social and communication skills are the gateway to inclusion. Access to inclusive environments is important because they provide new opportunities for acquiring and practicing social skills. A lack of attention and emphasis on these skills can create barriers throughout an individual's lifespan. Individuals with ASD have a lot to offer to the community and to work environments. However, a lack of social and communication skills can prevent an individual from being given a chance to access these settings.

It is important to start working on social and communication skills early and to continue to monitor and evaluate how an individual's skills are developing. As environments change and individuals develop, the expectations in social and communication skills also change and increase. Support staff and family members should be cognizant of how

social skills that are needed in elementary school are going to change as their students enter middle school, high school, and as goals are developed for work or post-secondary education. This way instruction and practice can be modified for the different settings and expectations that are placed on a student. An awareness of social skill expectations and skills that are needed will help to promote inclusion into the different environments that a developing student with ASD will encounter!

## Social Skills at Work



Social skill impairments exist in individuals with ASD regardless of their intellectual or language abilities. These skills do not naturally increase with development, they continue to require targeted instruction and practice. In fact, as individuals with ASD age these deficits may become more readily apparent as expectations in social and employment arenas increase (White, Keonig & Scahill, 2006). Continued exposure to negative experiences with social settings can lead young adults with ASD to withdraw and become increasingly isolated. Take a moment to consider how spending increasing time in isolation could impact a student with ASD who is exiting the school system and has a goal of obtaining employment.

Being able to interact with different types of people (supervisors, coworkers, and customers) is a necessity in an employment setting. It is important to remember that just because an individual with ASD may have challenges with communicating that it DOES NOT mean they do not wish to communicate or interact. Their mode of communication may be different or take some getting used to, but it is important for the individual with ASD and those in their work environment to get comfortable interacting with each other.

Here are some examples of social/communication skills needed at work:

- Greeting coworkers
- Reciprocal communication with coworkers, patrons, and other community members
- Knowing when and how to ask a question
- Appropriate interactions and conversations in the employee breakroom
- Participating in work social functions: birthday parties, showers, holiday events

Routine can be important to individuals with ASD; repeated practice with different people can prevent communication/ social skills from becoming too scripted. Identifying skills that will be needed and that an individual needs instruction on will allow the practice to begin early and in different environments. Practicing early and in various settings will set an individual up for success and foster the ability to demonstrate social/communication skills across various environments!

## What do we know about social skills instruction for students with ASD?

We know that there are some evidence based practices that have been found to support the acquisition of social skills in students with ASD. Some examples of these are the use of social narratives and social skills training groups. Often, a combination of different techniques in addition to prompting and reinforcement can help students with ASD to acquire and maintain social skills. For example, using a visual support and reinforcement schedule to support skills that were learned and practiced in a social skills group. An individual may need different levels of prompting to acquire new skills. An individual might first need a teacher or job coach to model how to greet a coworker and have a short conversation before the individual with ASD participates in an interaction themselves. Eventually, this person may only require a visual cue card to keep on hand to help them remember the steps involved in that particular social skill.

## What do we still have to learn about social skills instruction in the workplace?

Social skills instruction has been found to be successful in school and research settings. There is still work to be done on the best way to implement this type of instruction in contexts outside of school. A lot of research has been done on the successful instruction of social skills with preschool aged students with ASD, but less emphasis has been placed on social skills instruction for older students with ASD or those transitioning from school to employment. Even less research has been done on how to teach social skills at work or what type of instruction will most help an individual to be successful in a work setting.

When a student with ASD is preparing for employment consider:

- Will the social skills this student has acquired in school generalize to the work environment?
- Will a different set of social skills be necessary for this student to be successful and independent at work rather than in the classroom?
- Include the individual and their caregivers in planning how to address the above questions

## What are some examples of practices that have been used in the classroom setting for youth with ASD transitioning to work?



**Group Conversation Cards:** Conversation cards are placed in the middle of a group and each student takes a turn pulling a card with a topic of conversation on it. A group leader helps to facilitate the conversation and provides various levels of prompting (depending on the needs of the individual) to encourage conversation. Reinforcement is provided to the students for demonstrating new and appropriate social skills and feedback is provided immediately and in the moment.

**Video Modeling:** Students are videoed in the classroom setting demonstrating appropriate and inappropriate social skills. Group discussion occurs after the videos about what was good and what could be done differently. This is fun and students get to actively participate in all aspects of instruction!

**Visual Supports:** Students are given a cue card with a social skill that has been broken down into explicit steps. The student then practices the social skill with the support of the cue card with teachers and amongst themselves. This technique works great for skills such as initiating greetings, asking a question, or engaging in reciprocal conversations.

**Self-monitoring:** An employee with ASD keeps track of the number of interactions and whether they were appropriate interactions with coworkers or customers and administers their own form of reinforcement if they reach their goal.

**Case Study:** Social skills instruction at work.

**Scenario:** An employee with ASD, Sarah, works on the Labor and Delivery Unit of a local hospital. Sarah is responsible for cleaning, stocking, and preparing new cribs. Sarah also delivers linen to patients and performs various clerical tasks as needed (making copies, assembling packets, filling printers). The day shift staff have made various attempts to get to know Sarah and to talk to her on a daily basis. Sarah tends to not respond, respond in a whisper, or walk away. Sarah never makes eye contact with staff, patients, or visitors. She also has a difficult time initiating conversation with coworkers or engaging in break room conversations with staff.

**Resolution:** Sarah's job coach meets with Sarah in private and talks to her about some of the feedback that her manager has provided regarding her social and communication skills at work. The job coach speaks with Sarah about why it is important to say hello and greet not only your coworkers but also patients and visitors that come to the unit. Sarah tells her job coach that talking to her coworkers makes her nervous and she is worried about completing all of her tasks. She does not want to waste time talking. Her job coach lets her know that it is great to get all of her work done and focus, but that it is also important to talk to her coworkers and become a part of the team. Sarah and her job coach discuss the best way to approach this situation. They decide to practice in private and role play different social situations. This allows Sarah and her coach to identify the best ways to support Sarah in learning these skills and where she may need additional supports.

Sarah's coach makes:

- A script for greeting coworkers
- A cue card with typical steps for engaging in conversation with coworkers, patients, and visitors
  1. Stop what you are doing
  2. Make eye contact
  3. Listen to the individual
  4. Respond to the individual
  5. Ask a question if needed
  6. End the conversation with a "good bye" or a plan to check in later

The script and conversation steps are practiced every day for a week before work with her job coach. These supports are kept in a folder for Sarah to review as needed. The job coach and Sarah make a plan to meet with her supervisor at the end of each week to talk about how Sarah is doing at work and point out how Sarah's interactions have improved. Eventually, the job coach checks in only periodically and is no longer present for the meetings.

## Additional Tips and Resources for Social Skills Instruction at Work

- Co-worker education: With the permission and input of the employee with ASD, education is developed and provided to employees about the best ways to approach and interact with the employee with ASD.
- Additional information on social skills instruction: <http://www.vcuautismcenter.org/>

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