

Foundations for Social Competence



Theraplay Social & Thinking Skills Groups Parent Participation is the Key to Success!

By Linda Aber

- Six-year-old Derek argues with friends and insists on having things his way. He is rigid and has difficulty with turn taking.
- Seven-year-old Tina is bullied by peers at school.
- Nine-year-old George is aggressive both at home with his siblings and at school with his peers.
- Eight-year-old Mark often plays alone in the schoolyard, left out by his peers. He is seldom invited to birthday parties or children's homes to play.
- Amy, a shy ten-year-old, has difficulty making and keeping friends.
- Harry, a lively seven-year-old, continuously calls out answers and interrupts during class. His parents are receiving notes from the teacher.
- Twelve-year-old Tony is glued to his home computer, instead of engaging with peers. He is self-isolative and becomes enraged when his parents set limits around his computer use.

The Importance of Childhood Memories

When reflecting upon our childhoods, the memories we often quickly recall are those around our cherished times spent with friends. Those magical days filled with fun and play, while interacting and exploring, were valued opportunities and precious treasures. For a child with learning disabilities [1], attention deficit disorder [2] or asperger syndrome [3], however, those memories unfortunately may not be as pleasant.

This is due to the fact that many such children often find themselves isolated from the valued world of friendship. According to Richard Lavoie, Associate Professor and renowned educational consultant in the field of ADHD and Learning Disabilities, "their impulsive, immature and unpredictable behavior is often misunderstood and misinterpreted by peers and adults. Although they often receive assistance with academic problems, their lack of social competence is viewed as willful and negative."

In order to understand the importance of social competence, we must first define the term "social skills". According to Lavoie, social skills are "a collection of isolated and discrete learned behaviors. Social competence refers to the smooth sequential use of those skills in an effort to establish an ongoing social interaction."

Social Incompetence

The long and short-term effects of social incompetence have devastating effects on the development of an individual with any of the above disorders. As social skill difficulties can occur throughout the life span, they may begin at a young age and persist throughout adolescence and into adulthood.

While most children learn "naturally" or "automatically" through observation, modeling, receiving, and interpreting feedback in the form of verbal and nonverbal communication from others, children with learning disabilities, attention deficit disorder and asperger syndrome, may not have these natural abilities and often miss social cues and meanings.

For those with social-cognitive deficits, their weaknesses such as sensory overload, changes in routine, critical thinking skills, can lead to anxiety, rigidity and behavioural meltdowns. Many are rigid black or white thinkers living in a gray world. They have low tolerance to frustration and trouble shifting their thoughts and plans around the plans of others to adapt to the social world around them.

Some children may also experience difficulties with self expression, reading others faces and body language, waiting turns, receiving and giving directions, touching appropriately, problem solving, anger management, conflict resolution, expressing and dealing with feelings, making eye-contact, negotiating, asking permission, respecting boundaries, accepting "no", and cooperating. Needless to say, those who experience difficulties in their developing years are often perceived more negatively by their peers and are prone to being labeled "weird". This in turn often makes them the victims of bullying.



When parents observe their child experiencing difficulties in a given domain, their initial response is often to search diligently for effective resources that might assist him. If a child has difficulty in math, for example, his parents might hire a tutor. When a child or teen exhibits social skill deficits, experiences difficulty with peers, is rejected, isolative or shy, parents may be less aware of effective available interventions.

An Effective Solution for Social Incompetence: Theraplay Social & Thinking Skills Groups For Children, Teens and their Parents

Our groups provide children, adolescents and their parents an arena for acquiring and modeling appropriate pro-social, perspective taking and thinking skills. Moreover, they encourage cognitive restructuring, reframing and foster

novel strategies for building social competence.

The goal is to provide a fun, motivating and non-threatening way for youth to explore social thinking while increasing their knowledge of social expectations, awareness of their own behavior and how it impacts on others. They learn to modify their behaviours using concrete strategies.

Children and teens have the best prognosis for comfortably grasping information and meaning when abstract concepts (for self-regulation, emotional control, perspective taking, flexible thinking, problem solving and peer relationship skills) are broken down to their most concrete components. They are introduced to the hidden social rules and learn to regulate physical presence, eye watching, language, emotions and reactions.

Sessions are designed to help youth understand their internal emotions, sensory needs and thinking patterns that result during daily situations. They explore a variety of tools (sensory supports, calming techniques and thinking strategies) that they then utilize to self regulate.

Targeted skills are presented through visual teachings, then modeled and role-played with props, amongst peers. The curriculum helps youth gain insights on events that trigger their reactions / behavior, problem solving and more.

Theraplay activities provide the "here and now" teachable moments, for during the fun and laughter, participants practice expected behaviour. Video clips, social stories, cartoon characters and group discussions are also incorporated to reinforce session lessons.

Sessions are playful and engaging, so youth are open and responsive to acquiring the new skills. Group interaction creates a cohesive atmosphere where children and teens can learn trust and acceptance from peers and develop new friendships. Learning self-regulation, emotional control and perspective taking skills does not develop overnight - it takes understanding, support and practice.

The key to success in helping children to integrate and hone the many skills that they are taught, is their parents' involvement. Parent participation within every group session empowers them to become proficient with strategies helping their children develop the tools they lack.

Social Skills

- taking turns
- praising (no put downs)
- sharing materials
- asking for help
- using quiet voices
- participating equally
- staying on task
- saying kinds things
- using names
- encouraging others
- waiting patiently
- communicating clearly
- accepting differences
- listening actively
- resolving conflicts
- following directions
- paraphrasing
- staying with the team
- sharing ideas
- recording ideas

Skills continue to be generalized beyond the confines of group and home, as parents share tools with their child's teachers. Educators eagerly embrace the strategies promoting self-confidence and social competence within their classrooms.

Building social competence is of tremendous importance for children with learning disabilities, ADHD and Asperger syndrome, for they too deserve to benefit from the valued world of friendship and create treasured childhood memories.

[1] AD/HD

is a neurobiological/behavioral disorder that affects an estimated 3-7 percent of the school-age population. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-IV (DSM-IV), published by the American Psychiatric Association, describes three subtypes of AD/HD:

- 1) Inattentive - can't seem to get focused or stay focused on a task or activity
- 2) Hyperactive-impulsive - very active and often acts without thinking
- 3) Combined - inattentive, impulsive, and too active

[2] A Learning Disability (LD)

is a neurobiological disorder in which a person's brain works or is structured differently. LD affects the way kids of average to above average intelligence receive, process, or express information and lasts throughout life. It impacts the ability to learn the basic skills of reading, writing, or math.

[3] Asperger Syndrome (AS)

is a pervasive developmental disorder commonly referred to as a form of "high-functioning" autism. Individuals with Asperger's are considered to have normal to high intellectual capacity and an atypical social capacity. There are three main categories of difficulties:

- 1) Impairment in social interaction
- 2) Impairment in communication
- 3) Restricted and/or repetitive patterns of behavior, interests and activities