4 Key Areas in Developing Effective Social Skills Programming

#1 Social Skills Assessment

The first step in developing effective social skills programming is an assessment of your child's social skills---both strengths and deficits. Best practices in social skills programming involves identifying those target areas in need for programming. As mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA-97), school-aged children with developmental delays are required to have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that specifies the services necessary for a student's successful performance in a given setting. By identifying your child's social skill abilities, you increase the likelihood that a social skills program will match the target areas in which your child needs intervention.

What strategies can be used to measure a child's abilities?

Observing, Asking Others, Formal Assessment Strategies.
Informal observations and feedback from a parent or other individuals who are very familiar with a child can provide helpful information regarding potential target areas to address with social skills programming (e.g., joining into an activity, asking for help in an appropriate way). Formal assessment strategies help to provide objective information about how a child's current abilities compare with same-aged peers. Formal assessment tools are designed for various purposes such as tests of cognitive and intellectual ability, tests of adaptive functioning, personality measurements, and functional behavioral assessments.

> While formal assessments can take on various forms depending on the purpose and goal of the evaluation, there is a clear *advantage* in using empirically-based assessment tools.

What are "empirically-based" assessment tools?

Empirically-based assessments are those measures or surveys that are developed through careful testing with the intended population such that the results of testing during its development indicate that the test is highly accurate for achieving its purpose. Testing is often conducted with many, many children of various ages, backgrounds, and abilities to determine whether the assessment measure or tool is *reliable and valid* for understanding the patterns of behaviors that occur in children.

Reliable - use of the assessment tool consistently provides the intended information in an accurate fashion each time it is used.

Valid - the assessment measure really does measure what it is supposed to measure (e.g., intelligence, social competence, achievement).

In the process of testing the measure in an empirical way, steps are also taken to standardize the assessment tool with typical populations of children. This strategy yields 'normative' information or what someone might expect from a typically developing individual. These factors, therefore, combine to yield an 'empirically-based' or data-based assessment measure or tool.

The benefits are that the results will provide information about:
Your child's social competencies as compared to typical students—this allows the parent and others working with the child a better understanding of the child's developmental progress in developing age-appropriate skills.

- ☐ Your child's social competencies as compared across raters – especially useful since children commonly show different behaviors/skills when in different settings with different care providers.
- ☐ Your child has both strengths and weaknesses in the area of social skills. These assessments will more precisely measure these strengths and weaknesses.
- ☐ Your child's improvement or changes over time—by using the same assessment tool to track progress, parents and teaching staff can determine if the social skills intervention is working or areas needing additional intervention.

Standardized Empirically-based Assessment Tools (Examples)	Other Types of Assessment Tools
Walker-McConnell (K-6/7-12) Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scale Scales of Independent Behavior—Revised	Teacher Skill Checklist Parent Skill Checklist Child Skill Checklist Skill Situations Measure Skills Grouping Chart Progress Summary Sheet Teacher Record

One type of formal assessment --> Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA)
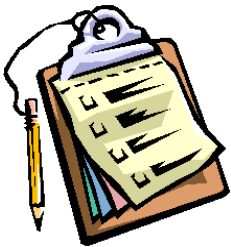
For those students with challenging behavior, a functional behavioral assessment may be necessary. Functional Behavioral Assessment is a process for gathering information that can be used to maximize the effectiveness and efficiency of behavioral support because the problem behavior is evaluated in context. In other words, an FBA is a process for understanding the context (antecedents and consequences) associated with social skill deficits in that it provides information about when, where, and why problem behavior occurs. An assumption of FBA is that behavior is functional---the individual engages in patterns of behavior that work for him/her in some way. There is a logic to the target behavior, and functional assessment is an attempt to understand that logic. By looking at the relationship between behavior and a child's environment (e.g., schedules, activity patterns, curriculum, teachers, physical settings), we can identify clues as to what factors help to maintain the target behavior.

Several strategies are used when conducting an FBA and these include interviews, direct observation, and sometimes manipulation of variables that seem to maintain the behavior. An FBA is especially helpful 1) when there is no agreement about the consequences that appear to maintain the behavior and 2) because it allows confident prediction of the conditions in which the problem behavior is likely to occur and not occur. An FBA should be done particularly when severe problem behaviors are a concern. In fact, IDEA-97 now requires that an FBA be conducted for any child who is suspended from school for more than 10 days due to behavioral problems. In short, conducting an FBA is now a professional standard.

Answers to the following help to inform an FBA evaluation:

What are the problem behaviors that are causing concern?
What events or physical conditions that occur significantly earlier in time prior to the problem behavior increase the predictability that the problem behavior will occur?
What events and situations that occur just prior to the problem behaviors reliably predict occurrence of problem behaviors? What events reliably predict when problem behaviors will not occur?
Given a specific situation when the problem behavior occurs, what are the consequences that appear to maintain the problem behavior?
What appropriate behaviors (if any) could produce the same consequences that appear to maintain the problem behavior?

Developing IEP Goals & Objectives based on Social Skills Assessment Results

Best practices in IEP development support the development of goals and objectives that are:

Measurable
Reasonable in number
Include measurable benchmarks
Objectives that can be achieved in 1 year
Addresses parent priorities

Common Goal Areas	Specific Social Goal Areas
Social interactional skills Communication development Appropriate behavior development Functional academics Daily living skills	Initiation of social interaction Shared activities/cooperation Asking for help & information Negotiating for space/activities Alertness to social contexts & appropriate behaviors Understanding & expressing affect

Behaviors considered for priority intervention are those which:

1. are physically dangerous
2. would enable the student to have better access to more inclusive activities
3. provide a positive rather than a problem-focused approach
4. are precursors to later, more complex skills;
5. alter the perceptions of others and thus have long-term positive implications

IEP Goals & Objectives: An Illustration

	Poor Example	Good Example
Goal 1	Bobby will get along with others.	Bobby will demonstrate a 3 percentile increase in social skills over baseline levels as measured by a standardized social skills assessment.
Objective #1	Bobby will try to begin conversations with others.	Bobby will initiate at least 1 conversation daily with peers.
Objective #2	Bobby will play games with others.	Bobby will take turns on a board game an at least 3 occasions on a daily basis.

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