

Behavior Management: Getting to the Bottom of Social Skills Deficits

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When someone mentions behavior management, our first thought may be about controlling students or stopping them from performing inappropriate behaviors. We expend a great deal of energy managing students so that inappropriate behaviors will not occur. However, successful termination of inappropriate behavior is no guarantee that appropriate behavior will take its place. One of the most puzzling and frustrating problems encountered by parents and teachers of students with learning disabilities (LD) is not the student who obviously acts out or engages in overtly antisocial behaviors, but rather the one who simply fails to perform the appropriate behavior for a given circumstance or setting. This problem is frequently labeled a social skill deficit (Gresham & Elliott, 1989).

Students with LD may exhibit social skill deficits that are either skill-based or performance-based. In other words, either the skill may not be in the student's repertoire or the student may have acquired the skill but it is not performed at an acceptable level. Effective intervention requires identification and remediation of the specific type of deficit exhibited by the student. This article will delineate the differences between skill-based and performance-based social skills deficits and present intervention approaches in each area.

Skill-based deficits

A skill-based deficit exists when a student has not learned how to perform a given behavior. For example, a student who has not learned to do long division could be said to have a long division skill deficit. Similarly, a student who hasn't mastered the skill of greeting others appropriately may have a skill deficit in that area. Few parents or teachers would punish a student for not knowing how to do long division. Unfortunately, however, we sometimes become angry with students when they don't demonstrate the social skill we desire them to display. Reprimands and loss of privileges are common reactions. A critical issue is whether the student actually possesses the desired skill. If not, it is unreasonable to demand that it occur or scold the student if it doesn't. Our anger and punishment can only add to the frustration of the student who knows he or she did something wrong, but has no clue as to how to fix it. We may determine if a student has a skill deficit by observing whether the desired skill has ever been performed. If not, one may hypothesize that the skill is not in the student's repertoire. This may be tested further by providing strong incentives to perform the desired behavior. If the student fails to perform under these conditions, it is likely that the problem stems from a skill deficiency. The bottom line: don't scold or reprimand the student for having a skill based deficit; instead, teach the skill.

Teaching social skills

Generally, a skill-based deficit is due to lack of opportunity to learn or limited models of appropriate behavior (Gresham & Elliott, 1989). Even given the opportunity to learn and the appropriate model, students with LD may not learn these skills incidentally or intuitively. In these instances, direct instruction, or skill training, is necessary. The same principles apply to teaching social skills as to academic skills: provide ample demonstration/modeling, guided practice with feedback, and independent practice.

Hazel, Schumaker, Sherman, and Sheldon Wildgen (1981) listed eight fundamental social skills which can be taught through direct instruction:

1. Giving positive feedback (e.g., thanking and giving compliments),
2. Giving negative feedback (e.g., giving criticism or correction),
3. Accepting negative feedback without hostility or inappropriate reactions,
4. Resisting peer pressure to participate in delinquent behavior,

5. Solving personal problems,
6. Negotiating mutually acceptable solutions to problems,
7. Following instructions, and
8. Initiating and maintaining a conversation.

They recommended teaching these skills by providing definitions, illustrations with examples, modeling, verbal rehearsal, behavioral rehearsal, and additional practice.

Similarly, Walker, Colvin, and Ramsey (1995) recommended a nine step direct instructional procedure, the ACCEPTS instructional sequence. The steps include:

1. Definition of the skill with guided discussion of examples,
2. Modeling or video presentation of the skill being correctly applied,
3. Modeling or video presentation of incorrect application (non example),
4. Review,
5. Modeling or video presentation of a second example with debriefing,
6. Modeling a range of examples, coupled with hypothetical practice situations,
7. Modeling or video presentation of another positive example if needed,
8. Role playing, and
9. Informal commitment from student to try the skill in a natural setting.

In summary, students with LD who have not acquired social skills are not likely to learn casually or incidentally. Intervention for skill-based deficits should focus on direct instruction of the skill. Effective instructional methods include demonstration/modeling with guided practice and feedback.

Performance-based deficits

A performance-based deficit exists when the student possesses a skill but doesn't perform it under the desired circumstances. This may occur if there is a problem with either motivation or with ability to discriminate as to when to exhibit the appropriate behavior.

Motivational deficit

When a motivational deficit exists, the student possesses the appropriate skill, but doesn't desire to perform it. A motivational deficit may be hypothesized if observations reveal that the student has acquired the desired skill, but motivational conditions are not sufficiently strong to elicit it. The hypothesis may be confirmed if the student performs the behavior following introduction of a motivational strategy. For example, in the area of conversation skills, we may suspect that a student is capable of interpreting cues from peers that indicate that it is someone else's turn to talk, but instead chooses to interrupt. This theory may be verified if the student waits to speak when rewarded for taking turns. The student could then be considered to have a motivational deficit. In situations such as this, behavioral interventions are effective.

Motivational strategies

Parents and teachers of students with motivational deficits can manipulate contingencies that will encourage performance of prosocial behaviors by using the principles of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA). The steps include defining the target behavior operationally, identifying antecedents and consequences related to the behavior, and finally developing and carrying out a plan to alter the antecedents and consequences so that the desired behavior will occur. For example, the behavior of "interrupting" may be defined as "speaking before your partner has completed his or her sentence." The antecedents to this behavior may be poor models and the consequence to interrupting may be attention from the listener. The next step is to develop a plan which encourages turn taking during conversations. An antecedent technique may be to remind the student about taking turns prior to a conversation and a consequence may be to pay attention only when the student waits his or her turn prior to speaking. Good

school/home communication and collaboration can ensure consistency of carrying out the plan in both settings.

Most students of ABA who have succeeded at a self-improvement program such as a diet or exercise regime will confirm that the principles of ABA can be effectively used on oneself. Bos and Vaughn (1995) postulated that these same principles can be taught to adolescents so that they can implement a self-management program. The adolescent with LD would first learn to identify the behavior he or she wants to change, then identify the antecedents and consequences connected to the behavior, and, finally, develop an intervention which alters the antecedents and provides consequences that will maintain the desired behavior. A further suggestion would be to have the adolescent chart his or her progress toward a self-selected reward. To summarize, once identified, motivational deficits can be remediated using behavior management techniques, either by the adult in the situation, or by the student in question.

Discrimination deficit

A student with a discrimination deficit has the desired skill in his or her repertoire, is motivated to behave properly, but can't discriminate, (i.e., doesn't know when to exhibit the desired behavior). A discrimination deficit may be confirmed if the student frequently performs the desired behavior, but fails to perform it under specific conditions. This may be due to an inability to glean relevant information from social situations. When a discrimination deficit exists, the student possesses the desired behavior but may not be sure as to when, where, and how much to engage in that behavior.

Bryan (1991) reviewed research on social competence of students with LD. Most studies found that students with LD had poorer social cognition than non-disabled or low achieving students. A deficit in social cognition may be apparent in a student who is oblivious to social cues or who lacks understanding of the social demands of a situation (Bryan, 1994).

The hidden curriculum

Given the same information as everyone else, students with LD may not demonstrate appropriate social skills because they do not understand the hidden curriculum ascertained by more socially adept student. Lavoie (1994) suggested assessment of the student's knowledge of the hidden curriculum as a step in teaching the student to discriminate the appropriate behavior for a given situation.

The first step is to determine the hidden curriculum, or culture, pertaining to the school the student attends. For example, what extracurricular activities are viewed by others as important? What are the hidden rules governing social functions? What is the administrative framework? Which teachers emphasize completion of daily assignments, punctuality, and/or class participation? This information can be obtained from teachers, support staff, and school publications such as the yearbook or school newsletter.

Once the hidden curriculum is identified, the next step is to assess the student's knowledge in key areas. There are many things which we may take for granted about which the student may be embarrassed or incapable of obtaining an explanation. Specifically, the following questions should be answered:

1. Does the student understand how the schedule works?
2. Does the student know how to get from one place to another in the school building,
3. Is the student aware of the requirements for participation in extracurricular activities, including deadlines and eligibility procedures?
4. Can the student identify the social cliques?
5. Can the student identify support staff (e.g., the school nurse, the guidance counselor)? Does he or she know how to gain access to their services?

In short, the hidden curriculum must first be identified and then the student's level of understanding of it must be assessed. Only then can information be provided to the student to fill in the gaps.

Teaching discrimination

A common characteristic of students with LD is impulsivity, the tendency to act without considering the consequences or appropriateness of one's behavior. This may be seen as an interfering behavior, which will be discussed in the following section. However, what on first glance appears to be impulsivity may in reality be an inability to understand the limits of acceptable behavior. Acceptability of behavior frequently varies according to the setting or circumstance. For example, a student may not know which teachers tolerate conversation and when it is appropriate to talk with peers. What is acceptable behavior on the playground may not be acceptable in the classroom.

According to Smith and Rivera (1993), "educators must help students learn to discriminate among the behavioral options in each school situation and match that situation with the proper behavior pattern" (p. 24). Some social skill problems occur simply because students do not understand how to read environmental cues that indicate whether or not a behavior is acceptable. In short, when there is a discrimination deficit, we must help the student size up the social situation and determine what to do. If the student cannot discriminate, we must teach what is acceptable in a given circumstance.

Lavoie (1994) introduced a problem solving approach to teaching discrimination called the social autopsy. A social autopsy is the examination or inspection of a social error in order to determine why it occurred and how to prevent it from occurring in the future. When a student makes an academic error, we provide the right answer and use the mistake as an opportunity to learn. In other words, we teach the student how to "fix" the mistake. Similarly, Lavoie (1994) suggested that instead of punishing the student for making a social mistake, we should analyze it and use it as an opportunity to learn. The process involves asking the student, "What do you think you did wrong? What was your mistake?" By actively involving the student in discussion and analysis of the error, a lesson can be extracted from the situation which enables the student to see the cause effect relationship between his or her behavior and the consequences or reactions of others.

Underlying the social autopsy are the following principles:

1. Teach all adults who have regular contact with the student to perform social autopsies. This includes family members, custodial staff, cafeteria workers, bus drivers, teachers, secretaries, and administrators. This will foster generalization by ensuring that the student participates in dozens of autopsies daily.
2. Conduct social autopsies immediately after the error occurs. This will provide a direct and instantaneous opportunity to demonstrate the cause and effect of social behaviors.
3. Use social autopsies to analyze socially correct behaviors as well as errors. This will provide reinforcement which may assist the student in repeating the appropriate behavior in another setting.
4. Help students identify and classify their own feelings or emotions.

There are several advantages of this method: (a) It uses the sound learning principles of immediate feedback, drill and practice, and positive reinforcement; (b) It is constructive and supportive rather than negative or punishing; (c) It provides an opportunity for the active involvement of the student, rather than an adult controlled intervention; and (d) It generally involves one-on-one assistance to the student. To summarize, limited awareness of the conventions of behavior and inability to decode the hidden curriculum and social cues contribute to deficits in discrimination of social skills. Interventions for students with these problems should be geared toward helping the student analyze the components of social situations so that discrimination can occur.

Self-control

This article has discussed the classification and remediation of social skills deficits. However, there is one problem that may inhibit success, even if we are able to classify successfully the student's problem and design an appropriate intervention. Interfering or competing behaviors may interrupt the student's ability

to learn or demonstrate appropriate social skills. Such problems can contribute to both skill and performance deficits so that a student may have difficulty either learning a new skill or performing it when appropriate.

Common interferences experienced by students with LD are impulsivity (the tendency to act without considering consequences or to choose the first solution that comes to mind), distractibility (tendency to focus on minor details, to pay attention to everything), and perseveration (repetition of behavior due to inability to change motoric or verbal responses; inability to shift gears). Hyperactivity (excessive motor activity) can also interfere. Either a systematic behavioral approach or self-management techniques may be helpful, depending on the student, the situation, and the interfering behavior. For the distractible student, self-monitoring and charting of attention or work completed may be helpful. Students who are impulsive can learn problem solving strategies which force them to dissect problems and evaluate possible consequences. Bos and Vaughn (1994) recommended a strategy called FAST for this purpose. The steps in FAST are:

1. Freeze and think! What is the problem?
2. Alternatives? What are my possible solutions?
3. Solution evaluation. Choose the best solution: safe? fair?
4. Try it! Slowly and carefully. Does it work (p.371)?

Conclusion

In conclusion, remediation must be directly related to the type of social skill deficit. If the student has a skill-based deficit, the appropriate intervention strategy is to teach the deficient skill. If motivation is a problem, behavioral interventions are appropriate. If the student has difficulty discriminating what is the acceptable behavior for a given circumstance, we must provide the information needed so that discrimination is possible and assist the student in analyzing positive social behaviors as well as social errors. Interfering behaviors must also be considered. Educators and parents can do much to alleviate social skills problems by discerning whether social skills deficits are skill based or performance based and designing interventions accordingly.

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