

Building Emerging Social Skills

by
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For many parents, it's very important that their children learn to play with and enjoy being with other children. Especially if parents are very social themselves, it may be very painful for them to see their children alone and isolated. Perhaps there is a feeling that their child "feels lonely" and the emotions the parents associate with "loneliness" are not ones they want their children to feel.

When we consider who we, as adults, choose to spend time and socialize with, it's generally accepted that we choose to be around people who are reinforcing to us. These friends may be reinforcing because they enjoy doing the same things or talking about the same topics we do. They may compliment us, support us when we are in need, or offer some other type of generalized reinforcement. We do the same for them. We generally don't choose to be around people who are aversive or punishing. In addition, while we may tolerate many people who don't generally reinforce us in order to work or participate in organizations, we don't choose to be around them if we don't have to. In this case, the reinforcing value of the activity or work may compensate for the "aversiveness" of an individual. On occasion, people who we initially may find "aversive" we end up enjoying after enough "pairing" with other reinforcing conditions.

If we understand and accept this about why and with whom we choose to socialize, it gives us insight into how we can teach "social skills" to our children. The first important step is to associate (pair) other children with things that the child finds pleasurable (reinforcers). This is the same procedure we use when first teaching the child to enjoy being around adults. We find out what types of touches, sounds, movements, tastes and sights (stimuli) the child enjoys and provide that to them with no expectations of anything in return. (Non-contingent reinforcement).

The problem is other children may not be as interested or as skilled in providing this non-contingent reinforcement to the child. In fact, children, in their typical wonderful nature, tend to be loud, active, pushy and quite unpredictable. Young children tend to be naturally "egocentric" and would much rather take than give. These natural childlike behaviors may be very aversive to some children with autism due to the nature of their sensory system. If this is the case, being forced into contact with typically developing children for long periods of time can actually pair other children with aversive conditions or punishment and thus make it even more difficult to teach social skills.

In addition to making it more likely that the child will steer away from typically developing children, inappropriate attempts to socialize may actually increase self-stimulating behavior. It is important to remember that an overload of sensory input can actually be quite painful to the child with autism. When children are in a painful situation, their self-stimulatory behaviors tend to increase as a defense to the overload. As we know, self-stimulating behaviors are automatically reinforcing. The more they are engaged in, the more they will occur in the future. It is critical that the child not be allowed to just "sit and stim" in the classroom, shutting out all that goes on around him. To untrained observers, it may appear that the child is very good at entertaining himself, but trained observers can tell the difference between "stimming" and solitary play.

What are we to do then? Do we keep the child isolated if contact with other children appears to be aversive? The author suggests this is not necessary and in fact it is quite important to determine environmental modifications that may help to gradually desensitize the child with autism to the environment. Our goal is not social isolation but a gradual increase in the child's ability to tolerate the environment and learn to enjoy being around other children. In the meantime, pairing just one child



with reinforcement can be conducted during play dates or other carefully controlled and monitored situations.

1. Modify

Determine if any changes can be made in the environment to allow the child to be more comfortable. Some ideas to consider include the following. If the child has exhibited sensitivity to different types of lighting, perhaps that can be changed. Are children allowed to wander from center to center or are there limits to the number of children that can be in any one center at a time? Often, the presence of fewer children in the immediate environment will be more tolerable. Limiting the number of children allowed in each center using sticks or other choice type materials can help. During circle or group time, perhaps the child can sit away from the group if too much "closeness" is difficult for the child to tolerate. If there tends to be too much confusion and unpredictability during transition times, perhaps the child can transition just before or just after the other children. The specific modifications necessary can only be determined on an individual basis because each child with autism differs in what they can and cannot tolerate.

Unfortunately, the child is unable to tell us what bothers him so we can only infer based on his behaviors in the specific and/or other similar settings in the past. While we don't want to intentionally subject the child to anything that he may find aversive, we also have to be careful not to reinforce any negative behaviors by removing the aversive conditions immediately following a negative behavior (negative reinforcement). Therefore, it is better to plan ahead and avoid situations which may be difficult rather than react after the child "tells us" he's uncomfortable in the only way he knows how.

2. Desensitize

To desensitize the child to a classroom full of other children, take him into the classroom for very short periods of time, reinforce heavily before the child begins to show any signs of "distress", and leave promptly after reinforcing. Gradually increase the length of time spent in the classroom as the child is able to tolerate the environment. It is often helpful to bring all of the child's favorite reinforcers into the classroom situation at least initially to pair the setting with reinforcement. Many parents have found it helpful to visit the setting when no other children are present. The child and parent play in the setting with all the child's favorite toys and all of the child's favorite reinforcers are given freely. The pairing of the "place" often makes it easier for the child to tolerate when other children do arrive.

3. Pair

Initial pairing with other children is often best conducted with one other child present. Perhaps a somewhat older child can be enlisted to help teach the child with autism. Some children really enjoy being "teacher helpers" and will gladly take on the role. It is important to offer the typically developing child reinforcement for their efforts. First have the child deliver all of the child's favorite reinforcers with no demands. Play the child with autism's favorite games, including the typically developing child. Talk to the typically developing child about how the child likes and does not like to be talked to, touched, played with etc. and reinforce the typically developing child when he/she takes these factors into considerations when playing with the child.

Try to enlist the help of a child or two in the class if the child is mainstreamed in a typically developing class. If the child is in a self-contained setting, check out the possibilities of enlisting a child in the same grade in the school. Perhaps an entire classroom can be recruited with specific children rewarded for completion of their work or demonstrating appropriate behavior by being allowed to participate. Again, be sure the reinforcement for the typically developing children is very "dense". Soon, all of the children in the typical classroom may be working for the chance to become a "special friend"! This type of "reverse mainstreaming" is often most effective for the child with autism who has difficulty tolerating different settings or large groups of people.



Teachers can often be of assistance in determining which children would be good candidates. Call the parents of the children you wish to enlist prior to speaking with the child. While some parents may be fearful of a situation or disorder they do not understand, most are eager to be of help. Make sure you stress the benefits to the typically developing child as well as the benefits to your own child. Let the parent know the teacher recommended their child because of their helpful attitude and recognize that this attitude is because the parent has instilled helpfulness as a value in their home! Offer to meet with the parents ahead of time and allow them to meet your child. Give them information about autism in general and about your child in specific. Sometimes the general public has a very strong misconception about the nature of autism and each child is so different that it is not possible for them to “know” your child based on information they’ve received in the media. People are typically most frightened of things they don’t understand so the more information you can offer, the less likely it is that the parents will express concerns.

The typically developing children involved in such supportive roles often gain a great deal of self confidence and pride in helping others. In addition, it’s often a first step in understanding how and why people are all different and special. During these times, it should be easy to convince parents and teachers how important it is for all of us to understand and be sensitive to the differences between us!

Typically developing children often begin to support the child with autism in the classroom, in the cafeteria or on the playground. For example, the child might inform another student or teacher that the child with autism “doesn’t like loud sounds” nor “needs a break”. This can be very helpful to the classroom in general because often the teacher has so many things requiring attention that she is unable to “tune in” to the special needs of the child with autism. The more people who are aware and sensitive to the child’s behaviors, the more likely it is that problems can be addressed before a tantrum begins! In addition, long, fast friendships are often formed between the children that can grow as the children grow allowing additional opportunities for the child with autism to participate in social settings such as birthday parties and play dates.

4. Request (mand)

Once the child with autism is approaching his friend for reinforcement, teach the typically developing child how to prompt the child to request his reinforcers. Model the appropriate prompting techniques, taking turns with the typically developing child. Reinforce the child’s ability to prompt correctly. Children can be very quick learners and can become wonderful teachers! Early mands should be for the child’s strongest reinforcers and multiple situations should be contrived throughout the school day. For example, let the typically developing child deliver snacks at snack time and toys during play time.

For the “early learner” or those just beginning to tolerate being around other children, the socialization process should occur gradually and carefully. While the final outcome we desire is that all children are able to learn in the same setting, we have to be sure that we place the child in a setting that he can tolerate as well as learn.

If it is not possible to gradually immerse the child in a classroom setting, parents often have reported success starting this gradual process in a class that is geared towards a favorite activity of the child. For example, a child who loves music may be successfully mainstreamed in a Kindermusic class or a child who enjoys movement may be enrolled in a gymnastics class.

