

Social Skills

What are social skills?



Social skills are the skills we use everyday to interact and communicate with others. They include verbal and non-verbal communication, such as speech, gesture, facial expression and body language. A person has strong social skills if they have the knowledge of how to behave in social situations and understand both written and implied rules when communicating with others. Children with a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Pervasive Developmental Disorder (Not Otherwise Specified) and Asperger's have difficulties with social skills.

Why are social skills important?

Social skills are vital in enabling an individual to have and maintain positive interactions with others. Many of these skills are crucial in making and sustaining friendships. Social interactions do not always run smoothly and an individual needs to be able to implement appropriate strategies, such as conflict resolution

when difficulties in interactions arise. It is also important for individuals to have 'empathy' (i.e. being able to put yourself into someone else's shoes and recognise their feelings) as it allows them to respond in an understanding and caring way to how others are feeling.

What are the building blocks necessary to develop social skills?

- **Attention and concentration:** Sustained effort, doing activities without distraction and being able to hold that effort long enough to get the task done.
- **Receptive (understanding) language:** Comprehension of language.
- **Expressive (using) language:** The use of language through speech, sign or alternative forms of communication to communicate wants, needs, thoughts and ideas.
- **Play skills:** Voluntary engagement in self motivated activities that are normally associated with pleasure and enjoyment where the activities may be, but are not necessarily, goal oriented.
- **Pre-language skills:** The ways in which we communicate without using words and include things such as gestures, facial expressions, imitation, joint attention and eye-contact.
- **Self regulation:** The ability to obtain, maintain and change one's emotion, behaviour, attention and activity level appropriate for a task or situation in a socially acceptable manner.
- **Executive functioning:** Higher order reasoning and thinking skills.
- **Planning and sequencing:** The sequential multi-step task or activity performance to achieve a well-defined result.

How can you tell if my child has problems with social skills?

If a child has difficulties with social skills they might:

- Use fleeting eye contact, does not consistently use eye contact or stares at you fixedly.

- Not be able to take turns when talking to their communication partner.
- Struggle with using appropriate body language (e.g. stands too close/far to another person).
- Fail to use polite forms of communication (e.g. saying: please, thank-you, hello and good-bye).
- Be unable to start and end conversations appropriately.
- Interrupt others frequently.
- Be unable to maintain a topic of conversation and provides irrelevant comments during a conversation.
- Talk 'at you' in a conversation as opposed to engaging in a two way conversation 'with' you.
- Not ask appropriate questions.
- Repeat information in conversation and tend to talk about topics of their own interest (e.g. trains, a favourite TV show/person).
- Show little or no interest in what the other person has to say.
- Fail to understand jokes and language, such as sarcasm, idioms and non-literal information (e.g. 'This place is a pig sty!').
- Interpret what you say in a very literal way (e.g. when you say "Can you open the door?" the child "yes" without moving to actually open the door).
- Talk with unusual speed, stress, rhythm, intonation, pitch and/or tone of voice.
- Be unable to understand different tones of voice or read facial cues.
- Fail to ask for clarification if they are confused or if the situation is unclear to them.
- Struggle to respond appropriately when asked to change their actions.
- Tend to disclose (excessively) personal information to unfamiliar people or strangers.
- Appear unaware of others and fail to read other people's feelings based on their verbal and non-verbal cues.
- Be unable to respond to teasing, anger, failure and disappointment appropriately.
- Be unable to adjust or modify their language appropriately according to the communication situation.
- Lack empathy (i.e. is not able to imagine what it is like to be somebody else or in their situation).
- Lack imagination.
- Appear self-centred.

- Fail to understand the consequences of their actions.

What other problems can occur when a child has social skill difficulties?

When a child has social skill difficulties, they might also have difficulties with:

- **Behaviour:** The child's actions, usually in relation to their environment (e.g. a child may engage in behaviour, such as refusing to go to social events including birthday parties or engage in inappropriate behaviour, such as tugging on a peer's hair or yelling at someone to get their attention).
- **Sensory processing:** The child may have trouble attending or focusing and have difficulty interpreting information they receive from the environment.
- **Completing academic work** (e.g. the child may misinterpret verbal or written instructions for tasks and/or struggle with imaginative writing).
- **Receptive (understanding) language:** Comprehension of language.
- **Expressive (using) language:** The use of language through speech, sign or alternative forms of communication to communicate wants, needs, thoughts and ideas.
- **Articulation:** Clarity of speech sounds and spoken language.
- **Fluency:** The smoothness or flow with which sounds, syllables, words and phrases are produced when talking.
- **Voice:** The sound that we hear when someone talks which is unique to each person.
- **Self regulation:** The ability to obtain, maintain and change one's emotion, behaviour, attention and activity level appropriate for a task or situation in a socially acceptable manner.
- **Executive functioning:** Higher order reasoning and thinking skills.

What can be done to improve social skills?

- **Play** with your child to help develop joint attention, turn-taking, shared interests, cooperation and appropriate play with toys.

- **Emotions:** Help the child to understand and display their own emotions and to recognise these emotions in other people.
- **Empathy:** Help the child to understand and recognise how other people are feeling in particular situations.
- **Social stories:** These are stories which are used to teach children specific social skills that they may find difficult to understand or are confusing. The goal of the story is to increase the child's understanding by describing in detail a specific situation and suggesting an appropriate social response.
- **Social skill groups:** These are groups run with the express purpose of mastering social interaction with others.

What activities can help improve social skills?

- **Visuals:** Make up a poster of rules to remember when starting a conversation (e.g. using a friendly voice, making eye contact, using appropriate greetings, such as 'hello').
- **Role play:** Practise playground/party scenarios where the child does not know anybody. Model and create a list of different things you can say:
 - To join others who are playing (e.g. "Can I play too?").
 - To introduce yourself (e.g. "Hi my name is").
 - To politely negotiate with peers (e.g. "I don't want that one. Can I have the blue car please?").
- **Sing songs,** such as 'If you're happy and you know it' to help teach a child about different emotions.
- **Masks:** Make masks together to help improve eye contact.
- **Turn taking:** Play turn taking games (e.g. board games) to encourage a child to say whose turn it is in the game (e.g. "My turn", "Your turn").
- **Games:** Play board games with the child. Make sure the child is not always the 'winner' so that they learn about 'losing' in a game and are able to cope better when this happens with their peers.
- **Bean bag conversation:** Throw a bean bag around a circle and each child takes a turn to contribute to the conversation. Think of different ways to contribute to the conversation (e.g. ask a question, comment on what has been said, add something related to the topic).
- **Watch and comment:** Role play different situations and comment about

appropriate and inappropriate attempts of communication (e.g. standing too close or too far from another person, not using appropriate eye contact, interrupting a conversation).

Why should I seek therapy if I notice difficulties with social skills in my child?

Therapeutic intervention to help a child with social skills difficulties is important to:

- Help a child to engage appropriately with others during play, conversation and in interactions.
- Help a child to develop friendships at school and when accessing out of school activities (e.g. playing sport, attending a group such as Scouts).
- Help a child maintain friendships with peers.
- Help a child to behave appropriately during interactions with familiar people (e.g. parents, siblings, teachers, family friends) and unfamiliar individuals (e.g. adults and children they may need to engage with during excursions and when visiting places, such as the park or swimming pool).
- Assist a child in developing their awareness of social norms and to master specific social skills (e.g. taking turns in a conversation, using appropriate eye contact, verbal reasoning, understanding figurative language).
- Develop appropriate social stories to help teach the child about how to respond in specific social situations.
- Some children require explicit teaching about how to interact and communicate with others as these skills do not come naturally to them.

If left untreated what can difficulties with social skills lead to?

When children have difficulties with social skills, they might also have difficulties with:

- Making new friends.
- Maintaining friendships with peers.

- Communicating effectively with unfamiliar individuals during situations including asking for assistance in a shop, asking for directions if they are lost and negotiating with someone with whom they have had a disagreement.
- Reading/understanding social situations.
- Understanding jokes and figurative language during interactions with others, and when watching television shows and movies and reading books.
- Coping with failure.

What type of therapy is recommended for social skill difficulties?

If your child has difficulties with social skills, it is recommended they consult a Speech Therapist.

If there are multiple areas of concern (i.e. beyond just social skills) both Occupational Therapy and Speech Therapy may well be recommended to address the functional areas of concern. This is the benefit of choosing Kid Sense provides both Occupational Therapy and Speech Therapy.

Contact us today to make an initial enquiry or book an assessment for your child
on 1800 KID SENSE (1800 543 736)

