

3. Grouping Students

Individual Social Skills Training Versus Group Training

Educators may feel pressured by caseload numbers, time constraints, IEP goals, colleagues, or parents to put a student who is not really ready into a social skills group setting. However, determining whether an individual student needs social skills training is not the same as determining whether that student will benefit from social skills training *in a group*. Before placing any student in a social skills group the first thing to consider is whether the student has the social skills to be an active and valuable participant in a group (with others.)

Educators must assess individually whether a student is ready for group participation. Some students are simply not ready to learn social skills in a group setting. Some research suggests some students may do best learning in a one-to-one setting, with one adult and no peers. However, in the real world, educators are pressured by numbers and are simply unable to do one-to-one teaching with all students.



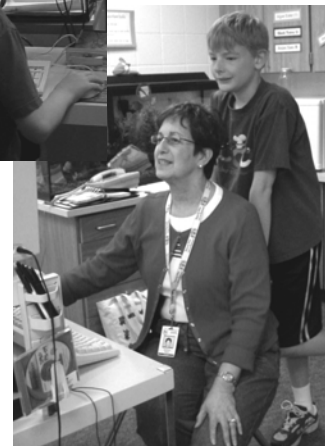
Group Setting

For example, in the photos shown, the facilitator had a group of students working together on a lesson in one area of the room, while another student, who needed more individualized skill building, worked on a computer social skills game. By planning the activities to include individual work time, the teacher was able to teach, monitor and give feedback with both the individual and group lessons.

Concurrent scheduling of group and individual lesson activities in the same room can be a great solution to meet the diverse needs of students.



Concurrent Scheduling



One-to-one Setting

How Do You Know If the Students are Ready for a Group?

For a student to be successful in a group, the student should have at least beginning skills in being able to:

- 1) Focus his/her attention
- 2) Wait to take a turn
- 3) Raise his/her hand to comment
- 4) Follow group directions

If the social skills group leader is unfamiliar with a student who has been referred for participation, s/he should observe the student in group settings and/or survey teachers and parents who are more familiar with the child's capabilities. Sometimes it may only be apparent that a student lacks necessary skills after the group has started. Changes in group membership are sometimes necessary, but should be avoided when possible. Careful consideration of a student's skills before group placement is encouraged.

Section 9 includes an example of teaching social skills one-to-one.

Grouping Based on Grade Level / Ages of Students

Since Autism Spectrum Disorders is a low incidence disability, grouping based on one grade level or age is often only practical if students without AS/HFA are included. Even in schools that have a few students with AS/HFA at the same grade level, the facilitator may choose to involve students without AS/HFA in order to provide models for goal behaviors within the group. Additionally, using "natural groups" like grade level peers or classroom peers, has the advantage of promoting generalization of skills beyond the social skills training sessions to the general school environment.

An alternative to consider is cross-grade level grouping. For example, a group might be composed of 1st grade through 3rd grade students and another group could have older students in 4th grade through 6th grade. Such groupings will tend to make both the group's developmental levels and social environment expectations more homogeneous. If you only have one 1st grade student and one 6th grade student, you might be more successful teaching them social skills one-to-one and having them participate in a grade level friendship group with general education peers. (See Section 10 for details on friendship groups, play dates, and lunch buddies.)

Grouping Based on Social Skill Needs

Students with AS/HFA are not the only students with social skills deficits. Facilitators might consider forming a group that is based on areas of need, independent of educational classification or diagnosis.

Putting a student with AS/HFA with a student who has acting-out, aggressive behavior problems is not a good mix. Students with AS/HFA can be quite vulnerable to the aggression and oppositionality of others. They are often “easy targets” and putting them in a group with students who are acting out aggressively or oppositionally can be an unfortunate “set up” for all involved. Also, AS/HFA students may emulate acting out behavior and not understand the impact of their misbehavior. That being said, not all students who meet criteria for special education under the area of Emotional Behavior Disorder (EBD) are oppositional or defiant. Some students with EBD would be excellent social skills group mates, for example students with anxiety or depression. Other groupings may include students who are naturally shy or withdrawn, or students who have organizational, focus, and/or impulsivity challenges related to Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

Grouping Based on Cognitive or Language Skill Levels

Communication is a keystone of social skills training. The cognitive and language skill levels of the participants determine which content, pacing, and processes in communication will be most productive in social skills training. One strategy may be to include students with similar cognitive and language skills. For example, grouping students with below average cognitive skills in one group and grouping students with high average to superior intelligence in another.

Similarly, level of language comprehension & expression can be an effective grouping strategy. However, social skills group facilitators should carefully consider the *quantitative* aspects of expressive language. It can be a challenge to facilitate a group where no one is comfortable talking or everyone wants to talk all the time or where one “talker” dominates quieter members of the group.