SkillTime

Brought to you by
Parent Help Line
at St. John's Children's Hospital
Springfield, Illinois

An Easy-to-Read Booklet on Teaching Pro-Social Skills

Adults Can Teach Skills for Success - *You Just Have to Do It*

Every child needs pro-social skills – *people skills*. Skills help him succeed in school and later in a job. Pro-social skills help a child interact with others in a positive way.

The majority of high school graduates lack adequate social or soft skills vital for entry-level jobs. Teachers note the lack of pro-social skills in students of every age.

All kids need to feel loved and valued. However, negative or anti-social behaviors cause the opposite effect. A child who "acts out" puts himself at risk for:

- Losing friends.
- Being punished at home and at school.
- Losing control.
- Developing emotional problems that may last a lifetime.
- Feeling isolated and sad.
- Failing school.
- Harming himself or others.

Many parents call the Parent Help Line to discuss their children's negative behavior. Often, parents have ignored this negative behavior – hoping it would go away. Instead, they have watched the behavior worsen. Now, they want help.

In his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Successful Families*, Stephen Covey reminds parents to **"begin with the end in mind."** Ask yourself, **"How do I want my child to behave – now and as an adult?"** Then, decide what you can teach him to meet this vision.

Anyone can teach social skills and change bad behaviors. It is not difficult. In fact, the principles are quite simple. You just have to ***do it.***

This booklet gives some reasons, steps, activities, and tips for teaching pro-social skills. Use other resources like Ellen McGinnis and Arnold Goldstein's *Skillstreaming* books. Search the internet for skill rehearsals.

Kids want good feelings and friendships – the results of pro-social skills. Start teaching today.

Teach Social Skills

Social skills predict a child's success – in school and life.

As with all skills, someone must teach the child pro-social skills. Schools teach math, science and language – hard skills. Kids, however, should learn positive social skills ***in the home***. Anyone who cares for or works with a child **should** teach social skills.

Students who fail to relate to peers and adapt to school routines have problems. It affects their ability to think and learn. They cannot reach their full potential. Studies show that *kids with poor social skills become adults with high-risk problems*. A preschooler's social skills can actually predict grade school academic success.

Social skills help kids deal with day-to-day events and problems. When a child mishandles a problem, he could make it worse - for him or others. If an adult always handles the child's problems, he robs him of a chance to feel good about his problem-solving skills.

Children have a basic need to connect to others – parents, peers, and teachers. This is the need to *belong. Positive social skills help kids make and keep friends*. Friends provide support during stressful times. Supportive peers help a child to be resilient.

Everyone needs positive social skills. According to evidence-based research, social skills benefit kids who are:

- **Developing normally.** All kids deal with new situations. Unsure how to handle a situation, a child may choose a positive or negative behavior.
- **Shy and aggressive.** In the past, experts would tell parents of shy or aggressive children that, "they will grow out of it." Yet many kids' negative traits get worse, not better.
- **Learning disabled, mentally ill or special needs.** Most often, these kids lack needed social skills to interact with peers. It is this lack of social skills that often prevents mainstreaming.
- **Bullies, targets and bystanders** – Pro-social skill practice gives kids the words, gestures, and self-esteem to stop bullying behavior.

Children who are rejected for 2-3 years by the time they enter the 2nd grade have a 50% chance of showing antisocial behavior. In contrast, only 9% of kids who have friends develop antisocial behaviors. *A child needs friendships to develop good mental health.*

Set the Stage for Learning Social Skills

What Sets the Stage for Learning Social Skills?

Building a parent-child bond is the basis for teaching pro-social skills. Parents start building this bond at birth by meeting a child's physical and emotional needs. Kids of all ages need food, sleep, safety, attention, and loving care. This care earns a child's love and trust. As a result, a child wants to please a parent or caregiver.

Often, bad behavior is an attempt to get basic needs met. Other times, it is repeating what he has seen and heard. It can also be a *lack of a social skill*.

Children do not just acquire social skills as they develop. They learn them through:

- **Watching and listening.** *Children do and say what they see and hear.*
- **Chance teaching.** Adults use "teachable moments" to develop skills.
- **Experiences with social rules and peer responses.** Both good and bad memories help your child develop pro-social skills.
- **Discipline.** Firm, fair and consistent rules and consequences teach.
- **Pro-social skill lessons.** Teach and practice new skills.

Watching and Listening

Adults **model** behavior. Do the words and actions your child hears and sees convey love and respect? Do they teach him how he should act?

When you notice a problem behavior in your child, ask yourself "does he see this behavior at home? School? Daycare?" If yes, change your behavior. *Model the correct behavior.* Work on it until it becomes a habit.

Chance Teaching

Use daily activities and events - *teachable moments* - to teach. During play, TV and storytime, teach your child.

- Observe her with other children. Later, talk about actions and words that make friends and hurt people.
- Praise his positive behavior.
- Redirect her as you see bad behavior about to start.
- Ignore negative behavior if he and others are safe. Noting bad behavior rewards the child with attention.
- Teach through ***small talk*** instead of lectures. Make your point by discussing sports, a book, TV show, or a current event. Keep it light and friendly - a short 5-minute lesson.

Experiences with Social Rules and Peer Responses

- Find a play group for your toddler.
- Enroll your child in a pre-school program.
- Invite your child's friends to play or "hang-out" in your home.

Kids learn what pleases and hurts others through play.

Discipline with Love

Discipline is from the Latin word disciple – to teach and train.

Kids need *firm, fair and consistent discipline.* Your discipline should always be a **teaching** moment.

Think about your style of parenting. Are you strict or permissive? Do you provide limits? What happens if your child breaks rules? Is your discipline fair? Is your discipline consistent?

Discipline starts when your child becomes mobile – crawling and walking. Establish rules. Expect the child to follow them. Update rules as your child grows and develops.

The Parent Help Line suggests parents and teachers use the *Parenting with Love and Logic* books, CDs and videos by Faye and Cline. They discuss a discipline that trains and teaches – not punishes - the child.

In *Parenting with Love and Logic*:

- Outcomes of an action *do the teaching.* If a student fails a test, the grade and week off the basketball team teaches him to study harder the next time.
- Empathy, feeling bad for the child's hurt, lets the child know you love her.

A *teaching* discipline avoids yelling and anger. Yelling scares kids. It shuts down their ability to think and problem-solve a situation. **Without thinking and problem-solving, a child cannot learn from his mistake.**

When your child makes a mistake, support him as he learns from the mistake. Let him know that you believe he can do better next time.

Common Discipline Mistakes	Discipline Actions That Teach
• Correct a child in public.	• Discuss the issue with him in private.
• Attack the person instead of the behavior.	• Remember, the child is good; the behavior is bad.
• Bribe a child or make threats.	• Teach a skill instead — how she *should* act.
• Say "People won't like you."	• Tell him what behavior people like.
• Discuss a child's weaknesses.	• Discuss her strengths.
• Exclude a child.	• Let him learn by doing.
• React personally, feeling hurt or attacked.	• Show empathy — Say you are sorry the child hurts.
• Withhold love and affection.	• Tell your child you love him and know he can do better.
• Give in one time - punish another.	• Be consistent.
• Discuss past mistakes.	• Focus on the present behavior.

Practice Empathy

Children who recognize their own feelings and the feelings of others are more likely to live content lives.

Empathy training helps a child learn to identify feelings – hers and others. Parents can help their child develop empathy. Teach them to:

- Make eye contact. *Tell your child to look at the other person's face when talking.*
- Notice and read social cues. *Ask your child, "What do the person's face, hand gestures and body language say?"*
- Name emotions. *Ask your child, "Is the person happy, sad, mad or scared? How does the person feel?"*
- Teach him to calm himself and control his impulses. *Be gentle and loving. Let your soothing words be an example of self-talk.*
- Use words to respond to another person. *Teach him to talk to others — "How are you?" "I am fine." "Thank you."*

Before a child can practice any formal skill-building lessons, he needs to master these abilities.

How can an adult teach a child empathy?

Teach by example.

- Discuss social cues and emotions every day.
- Remind your child to make eye contact when talking to someone.
- Put words to feelings and emotions. *"How do you know Bear is sad in this story?"*

Teaching empathy takes patience and daily practice.

Use and Teach *I* Statements.

Tell your child how you ***feel*** by using "I" messages. Instead of yelling, "I've had it. You are grounded," tell him how you *feel*. For example, "***I*** was worried when ***I*** could not find you. Please tell me where you are going, so ***I*** won't worry."

Help your child use ***I*** statements. Ask how he feels and thinks. Urge him to tell others how he feels using an ***I*** message. Say, "I feel mad when you ..." Instead of hitting in anger, tell him to use words to express his feelings.

Teach your child this H.E.A.R.S tool:

H. **H**old the correct position – stand up tall. Respect personal space. This says I am listening.

E. **E**ye contact. Look the other person in the eye when you talk or listen. This is not a stare. A blink or quick look away is normal.

A. **A**ssess the other person's feelings. Are they happy? Sad? Angry?

R. **R**espond to the other person's feelings with your face. This non-verbal message shows if you are *scared, angry, happy or sad*.

S. **S**ay the person's feelings in your own words. "You must be sad…..".

Remind your child to use H.E.A.R.S.

Use Skill-Building to Stop Bad Behavior

Stress often leads to mishandling a child's bad behavior.

People feel stress when they are unable to manage demands in their life. Chronic stress impairs the body's natural response to stress – to react and recover. Parents who deal with chronic stress often feel a loss of control. It can impair the way they react to their child.

Do you give up and ignore bad behavior? Do you yell or take away a privilege? If yes, do you also realize these actions do not change the behavior? They do not teach the child how to do it better the next time.

Instead, **model the skill** – how you want your child to act. How do you do this?

Informal Skill-Building

1. Everytime your child exhibits bad behavior, discuss it with him without judgment. *You hit Sally.*
2. Ask your child if he can tell you how he feels. If he cannot, give him the words (mad, sad, hurt...) that might explain how he feels. *You are mad because Sally took your truck.*
3. Validate his feeling. *I would be mad too.*
4. State the rule. *No hitting.*
5. Ask him how Sally felt when she got hit. This teaches empathy.
6. Ask him what else he could have done to get his truck back. You may have to suggest he say:

   I am not finished playing.
   I feel mad when you take my truck.
   Can we play with the truck together? or
   You can have it when I am done playing.

Using these six steps every time your child exhibits bad behavior improves out-of-control behavior.

Formal Skill-Building

Each week set aside time to formally teach pro-social skills. Give skill-building equal time with sports, dance, music and art activities.

- Choose a skill to address a problem behavior or prepare a child for an upcoming event. *John got in trouble in school for breaking the rule of raising his hand to answer a question.*
- **Teach and model the skill** - the behavior you want your child to have. Keep it simple. Do not assume your child knows what to do.

Basic Skill Step Rehearsal

1. Think before you speak or act. (Put a finger to your head to show you are thinking.)
2. Assess the other person's feelings.
3. Think of what you can do or say. Choose the best response.
4. Respond. Use an "I" statement. Express your feelings – with your face and gestures.

McGinnis and Goldstein offer over 50 skill steps. You can also write your own.

Role Play Pro-Social Skills

How to Take Turns Skill Steps

The teacher asks the question, and John knows the answer.

1. Think about the class rule for answering questions. To remind the child to think, have him place a finger on his head.
2. Raise his hand.
3. Wait for the teacher to call on him. While waiting, use self-talk – "Everyone wants a turn to answer a question. It may not be my turn."
4. Answer the question if the teacher calls his name.
5. If not called on, put his hand down. Try again for the next question.

Role-Playing Ideas

- You are new at school and know no one.
- A student trips over your foot that is sticking out in the aisle.
- You want to go to a friend's house to play.
- Your aunt gives you a birthday present.
- A boy says mean and hurtful things to you.
- Your young child always interrupts you while you are on the phone.
- Your child's friend used her newest toy and broke it.
- You are afraid to sing or play an instrument in front of other people.
- You are upset because your sister gets to stay up, and you have to go to bed.
- You have to speak in front of teachers and students for Show-and-Tell.

Role-play the skill steps the child needs to practice.

Be sure to use the H.E.A.R.S. tool (page 5). As you practice:

1. Select the problem and skill.
2. Assign roles. At first, you play the role of your child. Your child can play the other role.
3. Think of several responses that could work. Let your child choose the one that he wants to try.
4. Role-play the skill steps.
5. Give feedback.

   How to Give Feedback
   Offer feedback in private. You want to teach - not embarrass. Review the skill steps and H.E.A.R.S. Then, he can again role-play the skill.

   If dealing with several children, have two or more do the role play. The rest observe and give feedback on eye contact, body language, tone of voice, hand gestures and choice of words.
6. *Optional* –Make your own skill-building manual. Write down the steps your child chooses to use for a specific skill. These will change as your child gets older.

Monitoring Progress

Skill Charts – These charts contain some of the skills a child needs to master. Teach one skill each week. Practice until it becomes a habit. Once it is a habit, place a check in the box, and start a new skill.

- ☐ Listening
- ☐ Taking turns.
- ☐ Asking for help.
- ☐ Introducing yourself.
- ☐ Saying thank you.
- ☐ Starting a conversation.
- ☐ Asking a question.
- ☐ Giving and following instructions.
- ☐ Cooperating.
- ☐ Sharing.
- ☐ Dealing with conflict.
- ☐ Understanding others' feelings.
- ☐ Dealing with peer pressure.
- ☐ Dealing with fear.
- ☐ Asking permission.
- ☐ Being a good sport.
- ☐ Avoiding trouble with others.
- ☐ Using self-control.
- ☐ Dealing with failure.
- ☐ Setting a goal.
- ☐ Making decisions.
- ☐ Dealing with an accusation.
- ☐ Giving a compliment.
- ☐ Apologizing
- ☐ Dealing with anger – yours and others.
- ☐ Expressing affection.
- ☐ Dealing with embarrassment.
- ☐ Being patient.

At the end of each skill building session, review several skills that the child has already mastered. This keeps these skills fresh. Throughout the week, when you notice bad behavior, ask your child to review his social skill steps for a better choice of behavior.

Examples of Skills that Solve Problem Behaviors

Problem Behaviors	Skills to Learn
Screaming when he cannot find his favorite toy.	Ask for help.
Demanding – "give me".	Use please and thankyou.
"That's mine".	Share.
Whining – "I want a cookie before dinner".	Accept *no* as an answer.
Hurting someone.	Say I am sorry.

Credits and Resources: *The PREPARE Curriculum* (Goldstein), *Parenting with Love and Logic* (Faye and Cline), *Skillstreaming* (McGinnis and Goldstein), *7 Habits of Highly Successful Families* (Covey), *The Forgotten HALF Revisited* (S. Halberin)

Parent Help Line

Call Parent Help Line at 217-544-5808 or 1-888-727-5889 from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. 7 days a week for questions and concerns about bullying.

Children's St. John's Hospital

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