



## 10 SOCIAL AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS

**S**OME difficulties with social and communication skills accompany all forms of special learning needs.

- **Learning Disabilities** affect the ability to process both visual and auditory information, affecting academic learning in every aspect - as we have discussed. These problems do not stop at the classroom door. They extend to every aspect of life: understanding dinner table conversations, parent or partner instructions, the jokes and sarcastic innuendo on the playground, small talk at social events or in the office, a friend's upset over a missed phone call.
- Individuals with Central Auditory Processing Disorders (**CAPD**) and **ADHD** often miss major chunks of verbal communication and may hastily jump to conclusions without all the required information. Others may need to blurt out questions or information without regard for the normal flow of conversation, fearing they may forget what they need to say.
- Those with **Asperger's** interpret verbal information or social "signals" according to very different criteria than the norm and become easily overwhelmed with both auditory and visual stimuli. Or they may just be oblivious to these stimuli on various levels.

**As one of these people, you may be perceived as either detached and unfriendly, verbally aggressive, or just "weird" and unusual. When things**

**“go wrong”, some may think you are oppositional, arrogant, evasive, lying, cheating, or at the very least insensitive and uncaring.**

Constant misunderstandings lead to impatience... frustration... disappointment... disapproval... and ultimately anger and often outright rejection for both the affected individuals and those involved with them. As this tragic dynamic develops throughout childhood, it is easy to understand how teens and adults become discouraged and increasingly troubled if intervention is not provided. Even in schools with some academic accommodations for these students, few understand the scope of these issues or have resources to assist either the children or the families to cope. The medical profession is, for the most part, not on board in this regard either. In Chapter 7, we have explored the behaviour and mental health consequences of this lack of awareness and neglect.

The good news is that in some schools, a Child and Youth Worker may be available or even provide a brief social skills group for certain children. But as with all the other skills and strategies covered in this handbook, a one-time intervention is seldom successful. This is another complex and long-term focus that the family needs to embrace. More background is outlined on page 216.



Just by intuition, many concerned parents try to teach and manage this aspect of the child’s development with sometimes very positive results, actually. Who better to guide and model this crucial aspect for their special needs children?

## Parent Approaches

**As parents, your first task is to help your children to identify their own feelings and to attach language to these feelings.**

- Children with special learning needs will need more facial expression and “dramatization”, more physical hugging and touch, more role play and specific examples than other children to make the connections... unless your child with Asperger’s is clearly unable to manage the extra physical stimulation. Many individuals with Asperger’s also react strongly against the required verbal coaching and interventions needed for this work, so “teachable moments” rather than structured training sessions may be the most effective.
- Develop specific scenarios to relate the concepts concerning their own feelings to others as well, so that children can come to understand how the “world

of feelings” actually operates. Pictures, stick-people with comic book script bubbles, examples from videos and movies and from daily life will make the concepts more concrete.

**This is a long-term, ongoing process for parents, as we have said.**

Active listening (with persistent but gentle probing) is a skill that parents need to develop in order to get kids talking about what is happening and how they are feeling about it. Start with, “So you are saying that Cara told you to dump Jason’s knapsack?” Then ask specific questions: “What did she say then? What did you think of that? Why do you think she got mad at Jason? Were you mad too?”

- As each situation unfolds, use the opportunity for a *very short* mini-lesson on another aspect of social structures and “rules” in communication related to what you child is sharing with you.
- Try not to be judgemental, or preachy, or above all negative in any way if you want to encourage this ongoing dialogue.
- Tell your child you are so very interested in his or her ideas, feelings and perspectives. Let children know that you learn so much from what they tell you (which you make sure to do...).
- Then for each family activity, prepare the child ahead with a new skill to practise, a script.

Scripts are similar to the scripts in a play; sometimes a stage-plan in steps, most often including the actual words for the child to try: “When grandma comes to visit for supper, smile and give her a hug. Tell her how glad you are to see her and ask her about her trip to Ottawa last week.” Then you prepare grandma ahead to definitely respond to what has been rehearsed and when she arrives, gently assist your child to try the new script. Later at bedtime, briefly go over how you and your child felt it went, and share your pride and pleasure in how s/he tried this new plan.

Before the Miller’s would visit relatives, attend church, or go into a store, they needed to take extra time with their 8 year old daughter, Samantha. They would talk about what will be happening and would have to rehearse a possible script/ scenario for helping Samantha respond to others and to them. One parent’s attention was always partially focussed on how she was coping, being ready to gently nudge and coach as needed. When she began to talk back in a loud voice to a store clerk who asked her to stop touching all the items, her dad intervened to deflect disaster as he could foresee the escalating possibility of a full-blown meltdown underway. One parent needs to be ready at all times to exit with a child

who is not managing, to re-direct as outlined in Chapter 7, and to plan the re-entry when the child is calm enough.

This is indeed exhausting for parents, which is why we discussed long-term survival plans for you back in Chapter 3.

## Siblings

Getting along with siblings is a challenge for most kids in most families. Children with special learning needs will require a great deal *more support* for every step in this process, as for all the developmental pieces we have covered. Specific training, supervision, and affirmation will allow your child to learn the scripts and behaviours needed for keeping your family life relatively calm and positive.

**Knowing that these kids tire emotionally, become easily overwhelmed, and often require extra downtime, will assist you in structuring your days so that your expectations are reasonable, given all the other factors happening at a given time.**

The routines outlined in Chapters 3 and 7 will give this needed structure, with less opportunity for conflicts to develop. Very gentle forms of competition where each child has a chance to shine on a fairly equal basis can motivate some children to please and to achieve what you are asking. For other children, this causes undue anxiety and stress and must be avoided at all costs – each situation is unique and you simply try many options in order to find the right balance for your family. For siblings with wide age discrepancies, social skill development and parent expectations will vary more widely. In all families, however, the main values for parents to encourage are those of cooperation and helping each other.

- We have already discussed how you physically assist children with each task until they demonstrate the ability to do small pieces independently, proceeding to increasingly larger independent tasks.
- This can be transferred to siblings as well, where either sharing tasks or teaching them to work in parallel can result in jobs like cleaning up toys, or the kitchen, or doing laundry can be completed as a mutual activity, with your gentle supervision.
- As you undertake some of the specific social and communication skill development techniques outlined below, a motivated older sibling can be used as a practice person for some role-play rehearsal. Older siblings can assist (occasionally – should not be a regular expectation) with visiting friends and relatives, and be another listening ear for the child who feels rejected or bullied by others.

Children need to be accepted and loved as unique individuals by each parent.



As well as family time, each child needs one-on-one time with each parent separately where caring, trust, and a unique bond is developed over time.

Birth order, special interests, and each child's needs and accomplishments must be respected and cherished by parents as models for how you are teaching siblings to relate to each other. You firmly establish that certain lines are never crossed, even in anger. Words like “dummy”, “stupid”, “weirdo” etc. are simply unacceptable under any circumstance.

On the other hand, a certain amount of teasing, complaining, and rough-and-tumble are normal parts of life that your special needs child needs to learn how to handle in the safety of your family. For those looking for a clear and specific formula for ideal sibling relationships, you will be disappointed here. The differences in what would fall under the umbrella of “healthy family dynamics” are as broad as what would be considered “beautiful music” or “art”.

**But we know that a positive atmosphere (that includes love, mutual respect and sharing) is the solid basis of your family life and sets the stage for life-long connections between siblings.**

### Social Skills in Elementary School:

If your young child in Kindergarten or Grade 1 is experiencing clear social difficulties, it may be necessary to have the child attend for only brief periods to allow you and the teacher to establish the emotional safety levels and routines outlined in Chapter 7.



Unstructured settings like recess and school bus trips should not be attempted until you have the other areas firmly in hand.

You can provide early exposure to letters, numbers, nature, music and crafts in your home program or by selecting a very small day-care situation with a provider keen on these teaching activities, with your guidance.

- Then in the initial school activities, you establish with the teacher similar structure and scripts to what your child is learning at home, and possibly in the specialized day-care setting you may have found.
- A friendly and easy-going classroom peer “buddy” can be selected for certain activities, and rotated occasionally so that different pairings can be tried.

- Certain older students in grades 5 to 8 with special learning needs may need a break from their own classroom settings for French (if they are excused for a second language) or for a variety of other reasons. This student can be a wonderful buddy and informal “teacher assistant” to mentor and assist a younger child with special needs.



All through elementary school, a part of your after-school or pre-bedtime routine will be to go over the day and work on the social and communication skills issues that arose, provide a listening ear and support, and to do further teaching as described above for each issue or concept that arises.

As your child makes any level of connection with a schoolmate or neighbour child, you can connect briefly with those parents to discern whether this is a family with sensitivity and similar values where a friendship might be developed. If so, you initiate a very brief and very structured play invitation, with a fun parent-supervised activity - and food - so that both kids have a good time and it ends too soon with both hoping for more. You rehearse the plan and script with your child ahead and take time afterwards to talk about how it went. If a reciprocal visit is requested, coach the other parents on the need for a similar “format” to ensure initial success. Over time, the hope of course is to be able to pull back in tiny steps so that your child is better able to play with others in a more normal fashion.

**\* A note on birthday parties: with the extra hype and excitement, usual lack of structure, and ingestion of highly sugared foods, parties can be a virtual land mine of disaster for most younger children with special learning needs. A low-key family birthday celebration or inviting just one other child may be the best solution until more solid skills are established.**

- Extra-curricular activities where small groups are involved are other excellent ways for your child to practise social and communication skills and to possibly meet other potential friends.
- High-paced team sports are often overwhelming for these kids - but for others, a marvellous outlet. You will quickly know what is best for your child.
- In any case, connection with the coach or instructor is again crucial to ensure awareness and assistance for your child as needed.
- Where other children more naturally develop friendship connections in these activities, you may need to nurture and encourage these by connecting with the parents of a potential friend with an invitation to your place as described above.

## Making Friends

After an initial visit or two with another child has gone well, it is time to talk with your child about how to make a friend. That besides playing together, you need to be fun to be with – how do we do that?

- You smile, make eye contact, and give an occasional compliment: “I really like your shirt”; “Wow, you are pretty good at that game or at drawing, whatever...”
- You tell your visitor that you like having them over (or being at their house) and say “Thank-you” for food or a toy if they share something with you.
- You offer to share – more than you might normally do.

The next level is getting to know the other person better. **A-B-C!**

We do that by **Asking** a question, listening very carefully to the answer (**Being** a good listener), and then responding, showing that you **Care**: the **A-B-C** of making a closer friendship.

So you maybe say, “Why do you have so many toy dinosaurs?” Your friend says, “Because I started collecting them last year when we went to the museum”. You say, “Which one is your favourite?” or “Do they ever have battles?” and then usually it just goes back and forth from there.

When a child is visiting at your place, you can model (don’t dominate the situation so that your child becomes just a spectator...) or nudge to help this process along – be grateful for just tiny baby steps at the start, and maybe for quite a while.

- Topics of religion, death, relationships, and sex should be naturally woven into regular conversation at home so that by the teen years, it is easy to expand these into the realities of your child’s experiences.
- Sadly, these children with special needs are especially vulnerable to the inappropriate advances or outright abuse from older children or predatory adults, so you calmly but carefully prepare your child for this possibility and what to do, just in case....
- Discussion of drugs and alcohol should be gently introduced when you sense the right timing, usually somewhere between ages 10 to 12, but even earlier if you know that this information is needed.

**Fights:** “My child keeps getting into fights at school!” is a common lament of parents, but hopefully at this point you are moving into the analytical mode that we have been setting up thus far. Start to analyze the root causes of the fighting behaviour and decide upon possible steps for prevention.



For every upsetting behaviour, you have learned that there is an underlying reason. Your job is to make your intervention clearly related to the reason, without allowing your emotions to cloud that process, where possible:

- If your child is exhausted or over-stimulated, the details of the fight are actually irrelevant – you calmly remove him or her and provide the needed rest or downtime option.
- If you neglected (or the responsible adult neglected) to provide adequate structure, supervision, or support, that adult needs to calmly rectify the problem that was an adult responsibility. With no backlash for the child as a result of your oversight, or fatigue.
- If your child feels a situation is “unfair”, remember that the perception of a much younger child may be at play (reminder: subtract approximately 3 to 8 years from the chronological age, as we outlined in Chapter 7). If the information processing is distorted, you calmly restructure and redirect. If bullying is occurring, that is always an adult responsibility to stop – until older teens have learned more defensive skills.

Re-read Chapter 7 for more inspirational material on how to maintain this parental “calm”.

**And you can maybe see now why the earlier reference to a single “social skills group” did not hold much hope for the likelihood of sustained and long-term results. While some valuable concepts may be taught and briefly practised in these groups, it is the ongoing parent (and possible teacher) support and training that results in long-term progress.**

## Recess and Bus Problems



Unstructured settings will always be a much greater challenge for those with social skills and communication problems. The solution is annoyingly and yet elusively simple: provide solid structure and supervision and the problems disappear.



School bus drivers are mostly un-trained to deal with social and behavioural issues, especially when trying to operate a vehicle. They do not have a supervision assistant, and schools seem reluctant to suspend trouble-makers, even for a brief example-setting time. And one adult on a recess school yard of 50 to 500 children has little real impact. Parents also have very little influence in these situations, in many cases.

On a bus, your child can sit directly across from the driver, but if the children are out-of-control, that may have little effect. We have already discussed the buddy system, especially using older “body-guard” kids where required, and providing alternate transportation and recess options for children simply unable to cope.

**Chapter 9 discusses the issue of bullying: where you have a school with the political will to act. Otherwise, as parents you may need to put in protective measures of your own.**

## Teens

From David Cole’s Story:

11D had Mr. Sanford for Science. Out of the corner of his eye, David thought he could see Janet Marsland watching him. Impossible – must be the desert mirage of a man lost in the sand dunes of this intellectual wasteland. She was definitely in the “Don’t-even-think-about-it” category. At least David thought so. He reached around for a pencil out of his knapsack to check it out and she looked right at him - with a smile. David felt like most people were mocking him when they smiled, but this was different. Not mocking. Friendly. He gave her one of his wicked grins and decided Biology might hold some promise after all.

Copying notes from the board was becoming more and more difficult for him. He couldn’t remotely keep up and what he did copy was barely readable. David would sometimes pay people to photocopy their notes, and in Science Janet just gave him hers. At least she could keep him afloat in that class. David couldn’t quite understand what she saw in him, but he wasn’t about to argue. She began phoning him a lot and his status with Jake and Marty was definitely improved because of hanging out with Janet’s group. He liked the attention, even if these kids dabbled in the drug scene a little more than he preferred. As well, Janet liked to go out a lot and spend her parents’ money – money David couldn’t really match.

With puberty and greater peer pressure, poor social and communication skills place teens with special learning needs at an even greater disadvantage. The awareness or interest in what is currently in vogue may be sorely lacking. Or for some academically

discouraged teens, there may be an obsessive interest in fitting-in, but without the necessary skills to navigate the shark-infested waters or to make the right choices.

The Internet has become both a blessing and a curse for teens experiencing social interaction problems. Social media sites can assist this process, providing more processing time and alternate modes of communication. But further “real world” isolation is a danger. As well, communication errors and misunderstandings are even more likely and can be preserved or possibly shared with others online in ways never intended by the teen writer. Cyber bullying can be intense and traumatizing. Parental supervision and support with the Internet is absolutely required.

If you are fortunate enough to be embarking on this process with younger children, you will hopefully be better prepared for this stage than parents attempting to intervene at ground level with a troubled teen.

**Even if this is your present predicament, however, begin by taking the pressure off your teen to achieve academically until the program outlined in this handbook is up and running. That very awareness and drastic change may be enough to allow the beginnings of an ongoing routine and home communication to begin.**

- Find out yourself about current music, computer and electronic novelties, and fashion styles etc., and ask your teen to help you get in the loop.
- In Chapters 5 and 12 we discuss the importance of allowance and a budget system, so that whether you need to either encourage or restrict your teen in the process of keeping current, you have a powerful vehicle to help you.



Family meals are absolutely essential to develop daily communication about everyone’s day and each parent needs to book some short informal connecting time with their teen most every day .

A script for family meals can be established where each person has a short time to share one event from the day. The others listen and then each family member asks one question or gives one positive comment on what was said. As parents, you continue with the process described above, introducing more advanced strategies for making and keeping friends: asking for opinions and advice from a friend, asking how your friend feels about whatever may be happening, showing empathy, giving comfort, using humour.

Another technique to introduce is the concept of follow-up: when a friend shares something, you need to remember (and even write it down later) so you can ask the next day what happened, how something turned out. More intimate levels of sharing and offering to help others are more ways you can assist your teens to develop closer friendships.

The Rosen's set up a weekly family movie night with a film selected that tells a social story. This is another good way to share time together and discuss social and communication patterns. They would stop the film about half way through for a popcorn break and talk about the characters, how the plot is developing and where each family member thinks it will go. Then after the movie, they would allow the kids to stay up later, chatting more about how the characters interact and how each of them relate to the various characters or to other films, while burning candles, laughing and joking, and eating a little junk food, normally very restricted in their family. As teachers themselves, they knew these "literary criticism" skills will also be useful for high school English courses, beyond the added social and communication learning that was occurring for their son Joel, with Asperger's.

**NOTE:** Do not feel you need any special education or training to undertake this movie night idea. Just be sure to pick appropriate films with a good story and talk to your kids as you would with other friends afterwards, making it a relaxed and fun time for the family, rather than a mini school lesson.

**Teen years are also the stage to model a more personal level of sharing with your children. You can selectively decide what is relevant and helpful to share from your own past and your current relationships with co-workers and friends.**

This will greatly help teens to understand the more complex "rules" and patterns of communication from the most powerful role models they will ever have. One caution about personal boundaries, however: your job is not to be a peer-level friend with your child. Or to compete in any way with their emerging sense of personal attractiveness and youthful energy. Teens need us to maintain a clear adult and parent role, to be a listener, a guide, and the guardian of solid integrity and values in a very confusing and sometimes corrupt world.

For teens feeling desperate to fit in to a complex social system at school, you can create that soft place to land, **a place of non-judgemental safety** in your home. Not that you waver on own your personal values. When you are talking, your teen already knows clearly what these are, and more importantly, learns your values from *watching you!!*

**But it is crucial to bite your tongue and LISTEN.**

- Listen and ask gentle questions. Do not preach, criticize, or condemn.
- ASK what your teen(s) thinks, why they might choose various options, what they imagine the results of those choices might be.
- Allow for as much independent choice as possible, after the facts and factors have been discussed.
- Remind your teen(s) regularly how much you respect their judgement, their growing sense of responsibility and they will more likely want to make you proud.
- If and when they inevitably fall or make serious mistakes, just be there to listen, to process together, and to assist them to work their way out of whatever scrape or mess it may be.



Sometimes you will rescue, but more often you will stand by your teen to help and support the natural consequence. In my clinical experience, this is how social and communication skills are best taught.

You can read more books with more programs, but as with music, the different arrangement of notes on the staff are only the start. And social and communication skills are more like Jazz – improvisation is a life-long skill that you are establishing with your teen to develop for many years to come.

**For adults I have worked with who have largely overcome these challenges, almost all have had a significant mentor outside of the nuclear family during their teen years.**

If you can, facilitate (discreetly and unknown to your child) a promising connection with a caring teacher, tutor, coach, aunt or family friend who is interested in supporting your teen in this regard. Such a mentor is an invaluable resource. And sometimes a lighthouse in storms where your teen may be reluctant to share with you. In Chapter 3, we discussed how to engage with a university student tutor, who can often become a mentor and role model for social skills as well.

From David Cole's Story:

Uncle Nathan sprawled out over the couch in the ski lodge and stuck out a massive leg to trip David as he walked over to sit down. It was the second day of their

vacation and the slopes had been amazing. David loved these holiday trips with his aunt and uncle every few years. Even his sister Mandy was bearable when she was around her cousins for awhile. Uncle Nathan paid for everything – the lodge, the lifts, the food. His warmth and generosity filled any room he entered. David saw him as brilliant and wealthy and much more exciting than his own father. Uncle Nathan was in the world of business and travelled for his company to the States and Europe all the time.

“So, star, what’s all this about you on the honour roll – trying to outshine your little sister, already?”

David’s face turned a deep red; he didn’t know what to say. He could barely believe the huge jump in his grades himself, and was about to tell his uncle the whole thing was probably just some weird fluke.

“I wish someone had known about this LD and ADD business when I was in school,” continued Nathan as David just stood there frozen and hung his head. “Whatsa matter? LD – Learning Disabilities. ADD – Attention Deficit Disorder, right? You think I was born yesterday, punk?”

[“He knows? Who told him? What does he know; what does he think? Is he ashamed of me?”]

“That’s why I never finished high school, David. And I’ve always regretted it. But no one knew about these problems – your parents are as surprised about this now as you are. I wanted so much to go to Harvard, but there was no way back then. Guess I didn’t need Harvard to sell computers – ha! My staff sells them to Harvard, in fact. My secretary edits all my letters and I just learned how to work hard – and work smart. If some people know what I had to do to get by, they’d think I was a fraud. I used to think I was. I could never concentrate and study like everyone else. I’ve had to learn most everything from computers and videos, and watching experts operate. I sure don’t read much, even now. So I really hand it to you, kid. You’ve got a lot of guts, according to your Mom and Dad.”

## Adults

**Adult work on social skills is similar to that for teens, but if you are adding years with no diagnosis, no specific training or intervention during school years, patterns may become fairly firmly established by adulthood.**

**It takes both insight and humility for an adult with these challenges to accept the need for help and to believe in the possibility for change.**

There are very rarely groups for adults to work on these issues; more often a personal counsellor or coach with the support of the individual's partner or spouse, and maybe a close friend, are the best resources to set up and monitor a program. Books (and talking books) on communication and relationships can provide a basis for questions along with noting in a journal those times during the week when communication problems occur. Then your counsellor or coach can help to set up new response patterns to try.



Along with this detailed work, most adults continue to benefit from the input, the example, and the advice of a mentor. Watch for an older and more experienced role model in both work and social settings where you could possibly develop a closer connection and friendship.

In Chapters 13 and 14, we will explore further how social skills and communication issues affect adult relationships in the personal realm and also in the workplace.

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Notes: