

# Tips for Encouraging Positive Interactions Between Students With Behavioural Disorders and Peers



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Positive social interactions among students are key to cognitive, social, and language development (Bruce & Hansson, 2010). While social development has been found to be a positive predictor of school adjustment, success in school, and later success in life (Steadly, Schwartz, Levin, & Luke, 2011), it is imperative that all students are equipped with adequate social skills. Most students naturally develop appropriate behaviours for positive social interactions with peers. Unfortunately, students with behavioural disorders often fail to naturally acquire such abilities and often struggle to develop and maintain positive peer relationships (Robinson, 2007).

Students with behavioural disorders typically exhibit problems with their social behaviour, often manifested as less mature or inappropriate social skills (Fussell, Macias, & Saylor, 2005). Such behaviour often contributes to difficulty establishing positive social relationships. Additionally, students with behavioural disorders often exhibit higher rates of aggressive and disruptive behaviours than their peers (Farmer, Van Acker, Pearl, & Rodkin, 1999), often when they encounter social challenges within the school environment. Further, because of such social inadequacies, students with behavioural disorders often find themselves socially isolated by their peers. Consequently, educators face the daunting task of providing adequate instruction and opportunities to encourage positive social interactions (Robinson, 2007).

## **Tips for Enhancing Positive Student Interactions**

The following tips are offered in an effort to provide teachers with suggestions on how they might contribute to the improvement of the social interactions among students with behavioural disorders and their peers:

- **Focus on teaching and modeling social and emotional learning strategies that encourage reflection and self-awareness.** Encourage students to consider how individual actions and words have consequences. Through various modeling opportunities, assist in developing students' ability to take different perspectives and viewpoints. Teach students to think through situations and/or challenges by rehearsing various outcomes (Quinn et al., 2000).
- **Teach problem-solving and conflict resolution skills.** Many students with behavioural disorders have deficits in executive functioning skills and require step-by-step instruction in problem-solving activities. Teachers should take the role of a "coach" and assist students in a problem-solving process. Teach students to identify the problem and brainstorm various solutions, and identify the solution he will use (Steadly, Schwartz, Levin, & Luke, 2011).

- **Create opportunities to practice effective social skills both individually and in groups.** Model effective social skills in the classroom through praise, positive reinforcement, and correction and redirection of inappropriate behaviours. Provide role-play scenarios that build social skills (Quinn et al., 2000).
- **Adjust instructional strategies to address social skills deficits.** Teachers should provide structure and organization within the classroom. The arrangement of the physical environment should be effective. Clearly stated instructional objectives and behavioural expectations should be provided throughout lessons and social interactions. Providing simulated “real-life” challenges that students might encounter at school, home, and in the community is essential to placing social skills in practical contexts (Steadly, Schwartz, Levin, & Luke, 2011).
- **Tailor social skill interventions to individual student needs.** Utilize various data collection strategies to collect behavioural information (e, g., screeners, observations of student in various settings, parent information, diagnostic information, student interviews, etc.) and use the results when deciding which interventions to use. Investigate strategies designed to meet particular social skills deficits and ensure the intervention is implemented with fidelity (e.g., the frequency, duration, and intensity of the intervention delivery meets set criteria) (Steadly, Schwartz, Levin, & Luke, 2011).
- **Practice Communication Skills.** Model and provide opportunities to practice effective communication skills. Teach students how to listen to others and waiting to talk, taking turns in a conversation, suggesting an idea, providing praise to others, saying thank-you, and apologizing. Communication skills can be taught through role play, games, and practice.
- **Utilize collaborative learning environments.** Incorporate collaborative learning activities within the curriculum to encourage social interaction. Utilizing collaborative groups will allow students to practice and observe appropriate social interactions with peer.
- **Get parents involved!** Obtain parental input regarding the student’s social interactions. Converse and collaborate with parents to develop a plan that can be used at home and in school.
- **Be Creative!!** Utilize various forms of media when teaching social skills. Allow students to read books about various conflict situations and verbally discuss solutions. Employ “*I Love Lucy*” or other media clips and instruct students to view and critique the social interactions among the characters. Verbally discuss the characters’ interactions and discuss better behaviour choices.

## Conclusion

Student academic and ultimately life success is directly tied to social interactions with peers (Steadly, Schwartz, Levin, & Luke, 2011). While students with behavioural disorders often lack the skills to interact with peers in a positive manner, it is imperative they are taught. Teachers and parents should work together in guiding students towards positive interactions.

## About the Author

Tammy L. Stephens, Ph.D., is a former assessment consultant for Pearson. Prior to working at Pearson, Dr. Stephens worked as a special education teacher (working with students with emotional/behavioural disorders), an educational diagnostician, and an assistant professor at Texas Woman’s University. Dr. Stephens has presented on issues related to assessment and intervention at the local, state, national, and international levels. She is also published in several books and educational journals.

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