
This article is the first installment in a series of articles about nurturing social skills and facilitating friendships. Part 2 will appear in the next issue of reSources.

Making the Case for Social Skills

By Maurice Belote, CDBS Project Coordinator

“Every intention, every achievement has come out of dissatisfaction, not serenity. No one ever said, ‘Things are perfect. Let’s invent fire.’” –Fran Lebowitz

The field of visual impairment and blindness has for decades recognized the importance of social skills and the need to include social skills instruction in the expanded core curriculum. We know that good social skills are a major contributor to educational and post-school success. Therefore, in addition to stressing other important areas of the curriculum (e.g., concept development, problem solving skills, communication and language development, daily living skills, orientation and mobility, recreation and leisure, etc.), we need to ensure that the teaching of social skills is integrated into all of these curricular areas.

It now seems that the mainstream culture has focused more attention on the importance of social skills. Private sector employers are starting to stress the importance of so-called “soft skills”, which refer to attributes such as personal qualities, habits, attitudes and manners. These employers are now suggesting that these soft skills are as important, if not more important, than what they call hard skills. Those of us who work in special education have been saying this for a long time, particularly as it relates to transition-age students who are nearing the end of their educational careers. Think about your own experiences in a current or former workplace. People will tolerate a remarkable level of incompetence if the individual is pleasant to be around. That is to say the person exchanges polite greetings, brings delicious home baked goodies to the office, forwards (or doesn’t forward) amusing online videos, helps organize parties, etc.

Many years ago, I heard the gifted speaker Norman Kunc present at a conference, and what he said has remained with me. He said that competence and deviance have an inverse relationship like an old fashioned scale. In our society, the more competence you have, the more deviant you’re allowed to be, but you are expected to be less deviant if you have fewer skills. Consider the brilliant thinker who has made significant contributions to solving world problems. If this same person happens to have strange habits, or smell bad, or not establish eye contact while talking, we tend to look past these idiosyncrasies because of the contributions this person makes. But if a person has fewer skills—at least from the perspective of the majority culture—then it is probably important that *that* person does not have too many strange habits, smell bad, etc.

I recently had the opportunity to speak to a group of educators and families about social skills. I asked them to brainstorm a list of social norms that they believe are commonly accepted among most people today. Here are some of the norms they identified:

- Passing people to the right side in crowded situations.
- Saying “excuse me” if you block someone’s line of sight when they’re looking at something.
- Letting people off of things before you get on (this applies to many things, such as elevators, busses, subway trains, etc.)
- Shaking the hands of people who extend their hands out in greeting.
- Looking at the person you are talking to and maintaining eye contact.
- Staying on topic when conversing with another person.
- Reciprocating greetings such as hello or good morning.
- Maintaining adequate distance when communicating with someone.
- Standing in orderly lines and not taking “cuts”.
- Talking in environments that are supposed to be quiet, or talking too loud for the situation.
- Removing hats and caps indoors.
- Turn-taking during conversations to reduce the chance of interruptions.

Of course, social norms evolve over time, and who knows which social norms will become less important or even irrelevant over the next few years. There is a well-known photograph that features the 2005 women’s lacrosse team from a large midwestern university that visited the White House and met with President Bush. In this photo, a number of women are wearing flip flop-style sandals. The newspaper *USA Today* ran a headline that read, “Are social norms steadily unraveling?” The photo prompted a national debate about manners and how social norms valued by younger people may be very different from those of their parents’ or grandparents’ generations. Perhaps someday the idea that there is something wrong with wearing flip flops to a White House reception will seem as outdated as the way I reacted when my grandmother insisted in the 1960s on wearing a hat and white gloves to travel on a train or go shopping in downtown department stores.

Social norms can also vary depending on the age of the children or young adults. Same-age peers are a fantastic resource for determining social norms for specific ages. They are also a great resource when considering issues related to age-appropriateness. Although they may have a hard time putting their feelings into words, they know when something doesn’t feel quite right (e.g., a high school classroom decorated with preschool posters and equipped with learning activities and materials for much younger children). Children are always glad to give their opinions of what is considered “cool” for a specific age group.

Some social norms are remarkably subtle and/or have no rational explanation for why they are expected, but we follow them just the same. We may not even be aware that we know these customs, but we know it feels strange when they’re not observed. Consider the strange rule of one “good morning” to a specific person each day. Imagine that you arrive to work in the morning and encounter someone for the first time that day, and you say good morning to this

person. For some reason, it would be strange to say good morning to that same person when you encounter them again the next time that morning. If you communicated the same greeting three or four times in a morning, it would be downright strange. We are expected to communicate something different for each subsequent interaction (e.g., “Wow, it’s really wet outside”, “Gotta take a break”, or whatever small talk we come up with). Another example of a subtle social norm is the rule that we do not face people in elevators or while waiting in lines such as at the supermarket. When entering an elevator, it is customary to make a °180 turn and face the door. It would seem strange to wait until you reached your floor to do this because you would be face-to-face with your fellow passengers. A similar rule applies to waiting in lines; it is customary to face the direction the line is moving, so that you are not face-to-face with the person who is behind you in line. To face the person behind you line could be interpreted as just strange, or worse it could be viewed as threatening.

One element that doesn’t seem to change over time is the importance of making a good first impression. Most commercially available social skills programs devote a significant amount of time to the idea that first impressions really do matter. These curricula suggest that we must consider the importance of factors such as age-appropriate clothing, cleanliness, and interpersonal skills. Of course, what is appropriate is a matter of judgment. Tom Miller of Perkins School for the Blind has written: “Appropriate/inappropriate is used to refer not to whether a situation is right or wrong, but to whether or not the behavior matches the situation.” What would be appropriate for a Girl Scout camping trip might be very different from what would be appropriate for a middle school dance or a field trip to a local museum.

Along with variables that we can control, such as our dress and level of cleanliness in terms of appearance, there are other factors related to deaf-blindness that might prompt questions of those we first meet. People may not have had experiences related to a unique communication mode, or method of travel, or manner of speech. Many adults with vision impairments or deaf-blindness recommend that children and youth encourage other people to ask them questions about their disabilities in order to dispel myths and ultimately make people more comfortable with individuals with sensory differences. We do ability awareness activities with children of all ages not so much to simulate what it is like to experience vision and hearing problems, but as an opening for frank and honest discussions about individual perceptions of disability and to dispel myths and misunderstandings.

It seems that the value of healthy self-esteem is also being recognized more and more. In California, the concept of self-esteem took a beating when in 1986, John Vasconcellos, then a member of the California State Assembly, authored Assembly Bill 3659, which created the California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility. The task force soon became the punch line of eye-rolling jokes on late-night talk shows and in the Doonesbury comic strip. Then came self-esteem guru Stuart Smalley, the Saturday Night Live character developed by now U.S. Senator Al Franken, who would say while looking in his mirror, “I’m good enough, I’m smart enough, and doggone it, people like me.” But jokes aside, self-esteem is important in how we treat ourselves and how others perceive us, and the California Task Force is now seen as a model in our response to societal problems that are impacted by the fact that some children and youth have very low opinions of themselves. The New York Times

recently reported a new area of research called self-compassion, which asks the question: do you treat yourself as well as you treat others? Research suggests that people who are compassionate to others are surprisingly hard on themselves, and that self-compassion is a factor in motivating people to take care of themselves in more positive ways.

One of the challenges of social skills instruction is that it is one of the most difficult domains to teach. The reasons why it is so difficult are numerous complex. One of the primary reasons is that individuals with typical vision and hearing probably acquired most of their social skills through incidental learning and not through direct teaching. That is to say that we observe what happens around us, and then we use this information to guide us in our own lives. For example, as a young boy I observe my classmate help a teacher pick up an armful of objects she has dropped in a busy hallway. I see and hear how grateful the teacher is to have the child's help, and how the powerful impact this positive reinforcement has on my classmate. I use this information to consider doing the same thing the next time I am in a similar situation. I use this example because it leads into another reason why social skills are difficult to teach—there are so many variables that can impact the ways that other people respond to our attempts to follow social norms. When teaching arithmetic, I can guarantee that the answer to the equation $2 + 2$ will always be 4, whether I am doing a math worksheet or counting beans. The trial and error method of learning social skills, however, isn't nearly as predictable. For example, I can say smile and say good morning to a stranger I pass on the sidewalk in my neighborhood. The response I receive from this stranger might be a reciprocated smile and good morning back, or it might be casual indifference, or could even be downright hostility. I consider all the factors that may have impacted the response to my greeting, and then decide whether or not I will use this information to change my behavior the next time. How social norms are interpreted and responded to is not precise, and requires the ability to interpret subtle cues and make inferences from information that may not be entirely clear.

Part 2 of this series on social skills will focus on facilitating friendships for children and youth who are deaf-blind, including tips on making and keeping a circle of friends and recognizing how social identity and networks evolve as individuals age.