Teachers' Corner

Supporting Social Interactions for a Student with Autism

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For individuals with autism, social communication is an area of need and is included in the most recent diagnostic criteria (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Even for children who have learned age-appropriate language structures, challenges in social communication and interactions with peers can persist (Koegel, Vernon, Koegel, Koegel, & Paullin, 2012). This can present heightened problems for school-age children as they try to create and maintain relationships (Plavnick & Dueñas, 2018).

Two common interventions—social stories and video modeling—can be effective in increasing social communication for some students with autism (Kagohara et al., 2013) and are similar because both use visual representation of a social situation. A *social story* is a short story that is individualized and written from the perspective of the child. The story shows the desired behaviors that the child needs to either adjust or follow with a script, and it can include visual supports. The *video model* tool allows the child to learn a desired behavior by watching a video and mimicking the behavior shown.

While many educators use social stories in the classroom, the evidence base has shown mixed results (Kokina & Kern, 2010; Malmberg, Charlop, & Gershfeld, 2015). Social stories work best when used as part of a group with other strategies (e.g., with systematic procedures such as prompting) to reduce problem behavior and have often worked better in general education settings (Kokina & Kern, 2010; Malmberg et al., 2015). Video modeling has been proven to support a variety of skills (e.g., joint attention, play, self-help, academic instruction, and communication) with quick acquisition of skills (Malmberg et al., 2015).

This inquiry set out to find the best way to meet the student's needs and determine whether social stories or video modeling was effective to teach conversational skills. An eighth-grade student with autism participated. The student needed development of conversational skills in multiple contexts with different individuals. This priority stemmed from his experiences in job sampling. One social story and two video models were created to teach the Social Thinking Model (Winner & Crooke, 2009) across three settings to distinguish how to have conversations with different individuals. The settings included speech, the classroom, and the general education setting with peers. This model emphasizes social communication skills such as initiation, listening, inferential language, understanding perspectives, and following the larger picture (Winner & Crooke, 2009). First, the teacher used the rubric to see what skills the student had at baseline (see Table 1). In the next phases, the teacher implemented the social story (see Figure 1) and the video model separately, each across multiple sessions. Intervention instruction occurred daily.

Prior to trying either the social stories or video model, the student showed consistently low scores in each conversational area. Following the video modeling, increases in conversational skills were seen with both the teacher and a peer. The social story phase and the speech setting had more variable results. Overall, the video modeling worked best for this student and allowed him to generalize the newly developed skills across situations and settings. The video model resulted in conversation that included more topics of interest and enhanced the overall discussion. This appeared to happen more often when the teacher was in the classroom and within the general education setting with the peer. It seemed that the structure of the setting affected the opportunity for, and the depth of, conversation. For example, the speech setting was more structured, possibly with less opportunity for casual social conversation, while the general education setting showed the greatest gains. Overall, with the use of the video model, the student showed increased social communication skills across settings.

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Table 1. Social Thinking Rubric

	1	2	3	4
Knowledge of what's expected Uses knowledge of what is expected in the situation; knows the age of his or her communication partner and the experiences of his or her communication partner	Does not participate in target behavior	Uses model of what to say to participate in the conversation	Needs verbal prompting, choice cue	Responds on his or her own – Independent
Probes for more information Asks for more information after initial question and waits for the answer; asks questions relevant to the current situation	Does not participate in target behavior	Uses model of what to say to prolong conversation	Needs verbal prompting, choice cue	Responds on his or her own – Independent
Aware of situation • Aware of what people may be thinking, feeling, and what else may be going on around them—taking in surroundings; seeing what others are doing and talking about and reacting appropriately; • takes turns speaking, does not dominate the conversation; • recognizes that partner needs opportunities to speak	Does not participate in target behavior	Uses model of what to say to maintain conversation	Needs verbal prompting, choice cue	Responds on his or her own – Independent
Establishes physical presence Initiates the conversation to show people he or she is interested in communicating with them	Does not participate in target behavior	Uses model of what to say to initiate conversation	Needs verbal prompting, choice cue	Responds on his or her own – Independent

Talking Rule #5 – Give Friends Personal Space
When I talk to my friends, I need to give them one arm distance of space. This is called personal space. Personal space means that I am close enough that they can hear me, and I give them space to move or feel comfortable. It helps when I use the one arm distance. I can make sure that I am not too close and not too far, and this will get easier. I can stand an arm's distance, and my friends will enjoy talking to me.

Figure 1. Social story.