

# A PEATC

Do You Know....



## Factsheet for Virginia's Parents Social Skills and Children with Disabilities

### What Are Social Skills and Why Are They Important?

Social skills are the skills we use to **relate, communicate, and interact** with each other. They include verbal and non-verbal communication, gestures, and body language. Social skills are important to success in life. Social skills provide the structure that **allows children and adults to know how to behave in social situations and how to communicate with others**. They are critical to helping children make friends, take turns, be considerate of others, understand and empathize with how others feel, and appropriately deal with conflict.

Children with and without disabilities may have challenges with social skills. But children with disabilities often face greater struggles in this area that can be lifelong if they are not addressed.

### What Do Social Skill Challenges Look Like?

It is important to note that **depending on the child's disability, not all these challenges can be "fixed."** It may be painful, for example for a child with autism to make eye contact, so it should not be forced. But **different strategies** can often be developed that can help the child to develop the skills needed in social situations. Challenges with social skills include but are not limited to:

- Difficulty making or maintaining eye contact
- Difficulty respecting others' personal space and/or belongings
- Difficulty with sharing or taking turns
- Prefers to play alone
- Does not respond to their name
- Struggles with peer and/or adult interactions
- Difficulty initiating play or conversation with others
- Difficulty transitioning between activities
- Difficulty showing empathy or patience
- Poor conflict resolution skills
- Difficulty asking for help when needed
- Difficulty picking up on social cues (e.g., someone no longer interested in conversing or playing).

### References/Resources

[Children with Disabilities and Social Skills: 3 Tips - Deron School](#)

[How to Help Your Special Needs Child Improve Social Skills \(specialresource.com\)](#)

[Social Skills - Kid Sense Child Development](#)

[Social Skills | Development for Kids | PBS KIDS for Parents](#)

[Social Stories | ECLKC \(hhs.gov\)](#)

[Supporting Social Play: Helping Children Learn Social Skills from Play \(thegeniusofplay.org\)](#)

[What Is A Social Story? - Carol Gray - Social Stories \(carolgraysocialstories.com\)](#)



#### Contact Us:

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## Improving Social Skills while Respecting the Child

Helping a child with a disability to improve their social skills will help them establish relationships and friendships with peers and participate more fully inside and outside of the classroom. They may be **less subject to bullying** behavior by peers and ultimately, better social skills will lead to the **ability to function better** in the workplace and in the general community when they are older.

**Strategies for improving social skills must be individualized** to the child's unique needs. As noted earlier, some things cannot and should not be forced. The child should be respected for who they are. **Often the child does not need to change, but the environment does.** For example, a child may do well with one or two people but not with large groups; they may never feel comfortable in large groups. Sometimes **work with a child's peers** is equally important to working with the child.

There are **helpful strategies** that can be implemented to help a child improve their social skills. Here are some examples:

- Help your child be **comfortable and relaxed** by placing them in low pressure situations (i.e., not a competitive sport unless they are ready for it).
- **Practice** turn-taking, joint attention and sharing with other children.
- Use **picture cards and role play** to help your child recognize emotions.
- Use **social stories** to teach specific skills or the child respond to a situation.
- Provide opportunities for your child to **interact with non-disabled peers**.
- Have your child **participate in a social skills group** or therapy (include **social skills goals** in their Individualized Education Program (IEP).
- Help your child **understand what to do when there is a disagreement**. Show them how to compromise; model for them and provide practice opportunities.
- Teach the child **appropriate ways to gain attention** (like tapping on the shoulder or saying, excuse me).
- Be sure your child is having fun; **don't put them in situations they aren't ready or prepared for**.

## Social Stories

Social stories are a great tool for helping children better understand and respond to situations appropriately.

A social story is a simple story that parents, teachers, or therapists can prepare. They are written for the individual child and their specific needs.

The child is the "star" of the story which provides specific steps on how to respond to a situation. Social stories should focus on what the child should do, not what they shouldn't.

For example, if Annie hits Jason during circle time, the story should not say, "I will not hit Jason during circle time." It might say, "I sit next to Jason during circle time and keep my hands in my lap." And then go on with other steps for circle time.

Social stories should be brief and can include pictures. It should be read to or with the child multiple times.

**PEATC's mission focuses on building positive futures for Virginia's children by working collaboratively with families, schools, and communities to improve opportunities for excellence in education and success in school and community life.**

**For more information about us, please contact:**

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