

Social Skills and LDs: A Snapshot

About Social Skills

Learning disabilities can affect any area of a person's life, including how well we learn the social skills that allow us to live with other people: how to make friends, how to interact with peers, how to deal with authority figures, how to fit in. Since our social lives are so central to human lives, deficits in social skills can be as or more debilitating than academic difficulties.

What Sort of LD is That?

Social skills can be impacted by a number of different types of LDs.

- People with nonverbal LDs struggle with the unspoken elements of communication and interaction, and so, for example, may not learn social norms and expectations, like how close to stand to others when talking, or how to join in a game, or how to begin dating. As we learn a language, we also learn the non-verbal conventions of that language—the meaning of a shrug, a pout, or a smile. Speech often includes not only a face-to-face meeting, but also a meeting of the minds. "Conversation," Steven Pinker notes, "requires cooperation. (<http://www.criticalreading.com/nonverbal.htm>)
- People with language related LDs may miss out on the verbal interactions of social life: conversations, jokes, small talk, etc. For example, people with auditory processing deficits may not be able to follow the fast paced dialogue in a movie.
- People with ADHD may have negative social interactions, accidentally, through interruptions, impulsivity, habitual lateness, disorganization, etc. They may be very difficult in a group because they keep interrupting or don't wait for their turn.

In addition to the LD related aspects of social skills, people who experience ongoing academic or work-related failures can suffer damage to their self-esteem, as well as become socially isolated, further reducing their opportunity to learn and practice social interactions.

What Helps?

There are ways to help – and they may vary significantly depending on the reason for the deficit.

For a person who struggles with the nonverbal elements of social life, it could help greatly for a parent, teacher or other ally to orally describe the non-verbal aspects and elements of the social situation (e.g. to translate). "He looks angry – his eyebrows are tight and he is frowning – and I think this is because the other boy took his sandwich." Putting the often abstract aspects

of our communication into works helps with understanding, and if this is done while the situation is still happening, it can also help demonstrate the connection between verbal and nonverbal communication.

For a person who is missing out for reasons to do with language the strategy will be different. If conversation is too fast to process, a friend or advocate may explain privately what has transpired; or the person with the LD may request the explanation, or decide to spend time in smaller groups where the conversation is easier to follow. Learning to ask for rephrasing of complicated language can be a useful self-advocacy skill for those with language LDs.

As complex and diverse as LDs are, there are some key strategies that work well for all. People who feel anxious or isolated need to be included – through simple kindness and courtesy. Acceptance of difference, patience, respectful assistance, and encouragement can make a world of difference for anyone trying to practice new skills. Risk taking requires safety and support.

Social Skills Classes?

It is a long-standing question in the field of LDs: can social skills be deliberately taught in a classroom or group setting, in the same way that mathematics can? Research has supported different points of view at different times, but it is widely accepted that social skills teaching is best done in context, as immediately as possible: if a teacher or parent can help a student analyse situations as they arise, and make suggestions or refinements to social behaviour that can be used right away, the potential for learning is best.

Whether this learning happens in the course of a social-skills group or class – or somewhere else, it is clear that respectful teaching of social skills can be useful, although how formalized that teaching needs to be is less clear.

More information on this and related topics can be found online at www.LDAO.ca. This snapshot was created in Summer 2007. Please share freely, but do not reproduce for purposes of resale.