

Social Skills and ADHD

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Social interaction patterns are often adversely affected behaviours associated with ADHD. For example, impulsivity makes it difficult for a child with ADHD to stop, think and then act. Impulsivity often results in off-putting behaviour. Children with ADHD may be rejected by their peers because of their active, demanding and intrusive behaviours, off-task, disruptive behaviour, non-compliance, achievement problems, learning disabilities, aggression and hyperactivity. Children with ADHD often misinterpret social situations. They have difficulty in reading the non-verbal cues and they fail to act as others expect. They are more likely to attribute negative intentions to others when this is not appropriate. They are also more likely to arouse negative feelings in others because of their social awkwardness.

Children with ADHD are also likely to miss inferred meanings, so they may not fully understand the meaning of what is said to them.

As a result of these difficulties, children with ADHD often have lower social status than their peers and are often rejected. Once they believe that they will certainly be rejected, they often set out to antagonize others to justify the rejection they are sure will occur. Another explanation may be that they may be trying to control the social situation to avoid rejection.

STRATEGIES

It is important to note that social skills are not innate – they are learned. As with other forms of learning, some children have more difficulty in learning social skills. However, if we regard defective social skills as the result of learning deficits, we can be positive in the handling of the current situation. Deficits in social skills are not evidence of a naughty child – rather social skill deficits indicate incomplete learning. The ideal treatment for such incomplete learning is sympathetic teaching.

As with any other teaching, reinforcement should be frequent and immediate. Such reinforcement does not have to be major. A significant adult noticing the child's attempts at behaving appropriately by providing explicit and frequent feedback is very effective.

Positive behaviours encouraged and reinforced. Positive reinforcers should be provided at a 2:1 ratio to negative reinforcers.

Response cost can be used to reduce negative behaviours. It is helpful to turn a blind eye to some misdemeanours so that the child always gets a partial reward.

Proximity control – Have the child sit close to the teacher. Private reminders can be provided by the teacher. These should not be punitive. A codeword may be used as a prompt.

Prevent negative behaviours before they occur.

Reframe a behaviour into a positive behaviour, e.g., child leaves social situation when he is becoming upset because that helps him to calm down, rather than just going off in a fit of temper. Reinforce the child's "good" intention.

Social skills should be taught and practiced in natural classroom settings. Useful techniques include role play, modeling, rehearsal, corrective feedback, and problem solving to encourage children to stop and think before they act. (A difficult task for ADHD children) It is necessary to teach the skills in natural settings and reinforce them in those same settings. Skills taught in isolation will not generalize to natural settings.

Target skills are reinforced by all adults in the classroom, in the playground, and at home. Unless these skills are reinforced, they will not be developed. Reinforcement must be specifically connected to the desired behaviour, e.g., "I like the way you did" rather than "You're a good boy."

It is necessary to focus on and reinforce skills involved in non-aggressive interactions and in increasing self-control. Adults should actively look for appropriate behaviours and reinforce them.

Teach the child how to deal with teasing. Teach children that teasing is a form of bullying.

Teach conflict resolution skills.

Teach skills for social entry, conversation, anger control, and conflict resolution.

Better results will occur if peers are included in the social training program. This avoids stigmatizing one child and gives all children a better understanding of social skills.

Generalisation and maintenance are problems in social skills instructions. Results may be slow, and require on-going prompting and reinforcement.

It is most important to regard the acquisition of social skills as the result of learning. If the child has not learnt the required social skill, that is a sign of a breakdown in the teaching-learning process. It is NOT a sign of a naughty child. The child has to learn the appropriate social skills.