

CHAPTER 18

TEACHING SOCIAL SKILLS

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Developing appropriate social skills is paramount for individuals on the spectrum. There is a comfort level that individuals need to feel in order to be able to process and understand what is happening socially. They need to be at that level of comfort to be receptive to learning in a social setting. The benefit of working in a group is that it allows the participants to practice and learn in a real social setting, one in which they can experience that level of comfort.

SOCIAL GROUPS

When I am forming a social group, I like to meet each child individually to make sure that he will benefit from the group setting and to determine which group would be the best fit. I explain how the group runs, the schedule, and some of my expectations. With the younger children, I may need to teach some prerequisite skills individually prior to their participation in the group. With older children (ages 9 and up), more than likely they have been a part of a group in the school setting, so they understand the process.

I tell them that my expectation is that they will sit in a chair (unless they need a break), they will listen to me and follow my directions, and they will respect others in the group. Respecting others in the group may be something that needs some explanation. If so, I explain that, to begin with, only one person talks at a time, and that we take turns talking in group. I begin by teaching children and adolescents to sit and listen to what others are saying in group.

We often play games to see who can remember what others have said during the group. We start by having each child check in, discussing what he has been doing the last couple of weeks, and sharing if he has anything interesting coming up in the near future. I then try to teach the children to ask questions related to what each person said during her turn to check in. This is a process, and it can take time to develop. Eventually, the kids do learn to take turns and listen to each other.

In the group setting, the members determine the rate of progress for the entire group. We take steps in a progression. Once they are comfortable listening and asking pertinent questions, the children practice engaging in small talk with each other. When they can perform these activities, many children begin to describe difficult situations they have encountered since their last visit. It is very powerful when we begin role-playing these situations within the group. Then I can teach in the moment, with situations that mean something to the children in the group.

Typically, in my practice, groups are together for 12 to 18 months. It takes time for the individuals in these groups to get comfortable, learn the skills I am teaching, and establish meaningful friendships. Many of my group members will tell me that their only friends are in their group. Over the years, I have actually held a number of birthday parties in my groups. We share cake, ice cream, and gift bags in my office during group because the kids I see are not usually invited to parties and are not comfortable with inviting kids from their class to a party (because, all too often, when they do invite peers to an event, those kids don't show up).