



This guide was produced by Tennessee Behavior Supports Project at Vanderbilt University – one of three projects across the state funded by the Tennessee Department of Education to provide training and technical assistance to schools as they address the behavioral needs of students. This brief was authored by Jennifer L. Johnson, Lauren Magill, Brooke Shuster, and Erik W. Carter.

What are Social Skills?



ocial skills are rules of interaction necessary for both personal and professional relationships. According to the National Association of School Psychologists¹, these skills can be divided into 4 main categories:

1. *Survival skills* – Skills like following directions, obeying rules, and listening help maintain order and enable students to thrive in school environments.
2. *Interpersonal skills* – Skills like sharing, taking turns, and showing empathy foster healthy relationships and

collaborative learning among students.

3. *Problem-solving skills* – Skills like making decisions, asking for help, and taking on responsibility promote personal success and independence.
4. *Conflict resolution skills* – Skills like asserting oneself, apologizing, and coping help students navigate difficulties found in interpersonal conflict and resolve issues of internal conflict.

Effectiveness of Social Skills Instruction

Social skills act as an “academic enabler,”² and mastering social skills corresponds to a student’s later academic, social, and work success and

Examples of Specific Social Skills:

- Apologizing
- Asking for clarification
- Asking permission
- Assertion
- Cooperation
- Coping skills
- Decision making
- Empathy
- Following directions
- Giving feedback
- Ignoring distractions
- Requesting help
- Responsibility
- Self-control
- Self-monitoring
- Sharing
- Taking turns
- Team work
- Thoughtful listening

Social Skills curricula can be implemented within any multi-tiered system of supports. The goal of multi-tiered system of supports is to proactively meet the behavioral and social needs and strengths of individual students in a unified framework based on the school’s values and community. An example of multi-tiered system of supports being implemented in many schools in Tennessee is Response to Instruction and Intervention for Behavior (RTI²-B).



achievement.³ Furthermore, students with strong social skills experience less peer isolation and rejection and have a higher probability of graduating from high school.⁴ Because of these potential benefits in the area of learning, relationships, and career success, social skills instruction—as part of a well-rounded school curriculum—should be a priority for educators.

Formats for Social Skills Instruction:

Individual skill development

- Small group
- Whole class instruction
- School-wide implementation

This brief focuses on school-wide implementation of social skills instruction. By effecting change at a school-wide level, results can be experienced throughout the school. Consistency within an entire school creates a support network for both teachers and students, and it reinforces the skills being taught.

Helpful Tip: Students have different needs and learn at varying speeds. These various formats offer a structure for differentiation of instruction. For example, consider a majority of students at a certain grade level having difficulty grasping one particular social skill. Those students could begin whole-class instruction in order to fill in the gaps between them and the other grade levels. Small groups can be used for instances in which only a few students from various classes need extra support for reinforcing a particular social skill.



Steps to Implementation (School-Wide):

1. Assessing needs.

Identifying which social skills a school finds important to students' success helps maintain consistency in behavioral expectations. Educators should parallel these expectations of students with the social skills being taught, thereby increasing the likelihood that students will receive positive acknowledgement for demonstrating the social skills most valued by teachers.⁵ In addition to identifying skills for success, it is also valuable to determine which areas your students need the most student improvement. This will prioritize skill selection and can aid in selecting or designing a curriculum. Tools such as the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS)⁶ and Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS)⁷ can be used to evaluate which skills are deemed most essential by faculty/staff and need the most improvement among students. In this way, decisions of which skills to focus on are determined by both perceived (reported by teachers) and assessed (identified using a formal assessment tool) needs of the students. Once

the overall school-wide needs are identified, teachers can mold their instruction to support the school-wide social learning goals.

2. Selecting a curriculum.

Websites from organizations such as What Works Clearinghouse⁸ and National Association of School Psychologists⁹ can provide helpful information about best practices in social skills instruction. (See the chart on the next page for examples of overall social skills programs.)

3. Prepping for implementation.

When implementing a school-wide social curriculum, ensure all staff are familiar with the curriculum. Teachers responsible for implementing should understand the procedures and responsibilities for social skills instruction beginning. When possible, set aside a specific time each day or week for social skills instruction at the school. It is best to begin a program at the beginning of the school year, when teachers have had summer months for training on and familiarization with the materials. This will smooth the implementation process and minimize stress for everyone.



Examples of evidence-based social skills programs

Resource	Web Address	Description
Positive Action (Character Education)* (Carol Gerber Allred)	www.positiveaction.net	Promotes intrinsic motivation for learning and acting in a constructive manner
Too Good For Violence (TGFV) (Character Education) * (Mendez Foundation)	www.toogoodprograms.org	Promotes self-awareness and personal choice of reactions to and judgments of others
Social Skills Training (Early Childhood Education for Children with Disabilities) Intervention Report*	ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/interventionreport.aspx?sid=578	General guidelines as opposed to a specific curriculum; can be used to target specific skills
Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS) (Gresham & Elliott)	www.pearsonclinical.com/therapy/relatedinfo/ssis-overview.html	Evaluates social skills, academic competence, and problem behaviors
“Stop and Think” Social Skills Program (Knoff): Part of Project ACHIEVE (Knoff and Batsche)	www.projectachieve.info	Supports prosocial behaviors and positive school climates; helps reduce necessity of disciplinary actions
Primary Mental Health Project (Cowen et al.)	Php.scripts.psu.edu/dept/prevention/PMHP.htm	Provide focus on grades K-3; eases learning by minimizing social and emotional difficulties; increases frustration tolerance
The EQUIP Program (Gibbs, Potter, & Goldstein)	www.researchpress.com	Includes three-part intervention for adolescents with behavioral disorders; trainings in anger management, moral thinking and decision-making, and prosocial behaviors
The PREPARE Curriculum (Goldstein)	www.researchpress.com	Aims to reduce stress, aggression, and prejudice; designed for middle and high school students
The ACCEPTS Program (Walker et al.)	www.proedinc.com	Comprehensive social skills instruction for middle and high schoolers

*Reviewed in What Works Clearance House



4. Kicking off the curriculum.

Beginning a new curriculum as a school can create cohesion between classes and foster cooperation between faculty and staff. If the entire school is introduced to a new program together, it is more likely to maintain consistency in implementation. Finding a way to create excitement around the new curriculum in the beginning can provide momentum to carry it through the end of the school year. Events such as pep rallies or a school fair can be used for this purpose. At a pep rally, a school could hold a drawing for various prizes to show the students what types of rewards they could earn. There could be skit performed by students or faculty, demonstrating the new skills to be practiced over the school year. A school fair could be used to raise money for prizes and as a reward for students having learned a particular set of social skills.

5. Providing Instruction.

Many curricula are structured to teach one new skill per week or per month. The rate of introduction of each topic can depend on the amount of materials to cover as well as the age and needs of students. A common strategy is teaching approximately one social skill per month, reserving 30 minutes to an hour for instruction of each skill.¹⁰

Learning social skills should be a fun, interactive experience for students. Role-playing scenarios in which new skills are used makes the skills more accessible to students and can help them become comfortable with using the skills across school settings. Breaking into pairs can offer every student the chance to practice the skill being taught.

Integrating social skills into existing lesson plans can be a time-effective way to help students generalize these skills to various settings and to receive regular acknowledgement of the desired skillset. For example, when teaching about women's suffrage, one can highlight the idea that women were called upon to use skills of *assertion*, and then discuss what assertion might look like, and how the students might use assertion in their lives. Similarly, if teaching about the United States government, one could include skills of *decision-making* and *responsibility* in a discussion about the office of the President.

Leading by example is essential. Intentionally demonstrating the social skill being taught at various opportunities throughout the day and then naming that skill immediately afterwards will help students identify the skills in different settings and generalize application to their own lives. When students are caught performing an appropriate social skill, reward them immediately after

using behavior-specific praise with school-wide tickets or the acknowledgement system that is used by the school.

6. Following up and acknowledging students.

Instruction alone may not be enough for students to apply these skills throughout their school day. Provide regular opportunities to practice each of the skills and reward students when those skills are appropriately demonstrated. Acknowledgement of social skills should be specific and should immediately follow their occurrence. For example, when a student offers to share a pair of scissors with a peer who does not have any, a teacher might respond with, "That is great sharing! You are really helping out your friend."

7. Assessing progress.

Reflect regularly on the success of the social skills instruction at your school. This will also help identify any new areas of focus for the following year or specific areas that might need to be revisited. For example, imagine the school-wide scores for problem-solving skills showed immense improvement, with the exception of first grade. One could then lessen the emphasis on problem-solving skills on a school-wide basis in order to allow for focus on a new set of skills. However, the first graders could increase the emphasis or change the approach used for teaching problem solving skills. This way, the grade level still needing instruction receives it, and the other grades who have mastered those skills can move on to new ones. In this way, your curriculum can grow and adjust with your students, making best use of both their time and teachers' efforts.



Implementation Example

Hallusion Elementary School in Fauxtion, Connecticut had a problem. Some teachers would say they had quite a few problems, while others blamed their troubles on a specific issue. The school administration took a survey of the teachers and compiled a list of all the possible problems that were causing disruption at their school. The list read:

- Pushing and shoving in the lunch line
- Students won't share class materials
- Crowding in the restrooms
- Swarming the door to go to recess
- Children don't have manners
- Kids are impatient
- Talking out in class

A team of teachers and administrators discussed the reported issues and finally boiled them down to a main theme: Students were not taking turns. Certainly, if the students learned how to take turns, there would be less shoving in the lunch line or speaking out of turn. Surely they would begin to share class materials and wait patiently for their time to use the class computer. "But how will we teach so many kids this skill?" they wondered.

The team began researching available curricula and programs that offered instruction in social skills. They finally identified one that fit their needs and school climate. The teachers began learning the curriculum and prepping materials for the remainder of the spring semester. They held practice workshops, trainings, and regular meetings to make sure they were all teaching the same thing.

Finally, fall arrived and it was time to kick-off the new school year. On the first day back, the school held a pep rally to celebrate their new goals as a school. The students were given an overview of turn-taking, and told to expect to learn about it during the school year. They highlighted their acknowledgement plan and showed the kids potential prizes, all while playing high energy music and showing fun clips with the projector. They even did a drawing for a music player! The kids were so excited to start earning rewards.

When they returned to their classrooms, teachers began with their first lesson on taking turns. But even after their social skills "lesson time" was complete, the teachers found that those lessons carried over into every subject. There were continuous opportunities to remind the students about turn-taking, and to give examples from their academic curriculum. Teachers consistently rewarded students for taking turns, and soon the behavior was translated into many of the school's settings. The cafeteria was calmer, the restrooms were less crowded, and everyone in each room was able to utilize the class materials and resources. At the end of the first semester, teachers were asked if they saw any improvement in behavior. Most of the teachers said they did. Some said they saw not only behavior improvement, but academic improvement as well! Some of those teachers had even recorded the number of behavior issues each day, and were able to graph those numbers. The school was able to demonstrate with data that their program was a success.



Summary

If you are willing to work at social skills, social skills will work for you. Instruction of these skills can lessen the frequency of behavioral issues and improve academic and social performance.

In order to begin a successful program, a school should:

1. Identify need
2. Select a curriculum
3. Prep for implementation
4. Celebrate the program's kick-off
5. Provide instruction
6. Acknowledge students
7. Assess progress

Keep in mind that a new curriculum does not have to mean more work. These programs are designed to be implemented into existing lesson plans and to complement existing school goals. Remember, this is an investment in the student's present AND future success. Teachers are in the ideal position to cultivate greatness of character in their students, and that is a long-term contribution to society. Teachers change the world one student at a time.

Helpful Resources

Lane, K. L., Menzies, H. M., Bruhn, A., & Crnobori, M. (2011). *Managing challenging behaviors in schools: Research-based strategies that work*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Lane, K. L., Kalberg, J.R., & Menzies, H. M. (2009). *Developing schoolwide programs to prevent and manage problem behaviors: A step-by-step approach*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

National Association of School Psychologists. *Social Skills: Promoting Positive Behavior, Academic Success, and School Safety*. (2002, January 1). www.nasponline.org/resources/factsheets/socialskills_fs.aspx

What Works Clearinghouse. ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc

Endnotes

¹National Association of School Psychologists. (2002). *Social Skills: Promoting Positive Behavior, Academic Success, and School Safety*. www.nasponline.org/resources/factsheets/socialskills_fs.aspx

²DiPerna, J. *Academic Enablers: Assessment and Intervention Considerations*. (2008). Pearson Education. <http://images.pearsonclinical.com/images/assets/ACES/AcademicEnablers.pdf>

³Cook, C., Gresham, F., Kern, L., Barreras, R., Thornton, S., & Crews, S. (2008). Social skills training for secondary students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders: A review and analysis of the meta-analytic literature. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 16: 131-144.

⁴Moffitt, T., Caspi, A., Harrington, H., & Milne, B. (2002). Males on the life-course-persistent and adolescence-limited antisocial pathways: follow-up at age 26 years. *Development and Psychopathology*, 14(1), 179-207.

⁵Lane, K. L., Kalberg, J. R., & Menzies, H. M. (2009). *Developing schoolwide programs to prevent and manage problem behaviors: A step-by-step approach*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

⁶Gresham, F., & Elliott, S. (1990). *Social skills rating system (SSRS)*. Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Service.

⁷Elliott, S. N., & Gresham, F. M. (2007). *SSIS classwide intervention program*. Bloomington, MN: Pearson Assessments.

⁸What Works Clearinghouse. ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc

⁹National Association of School Psychologists. (2002).

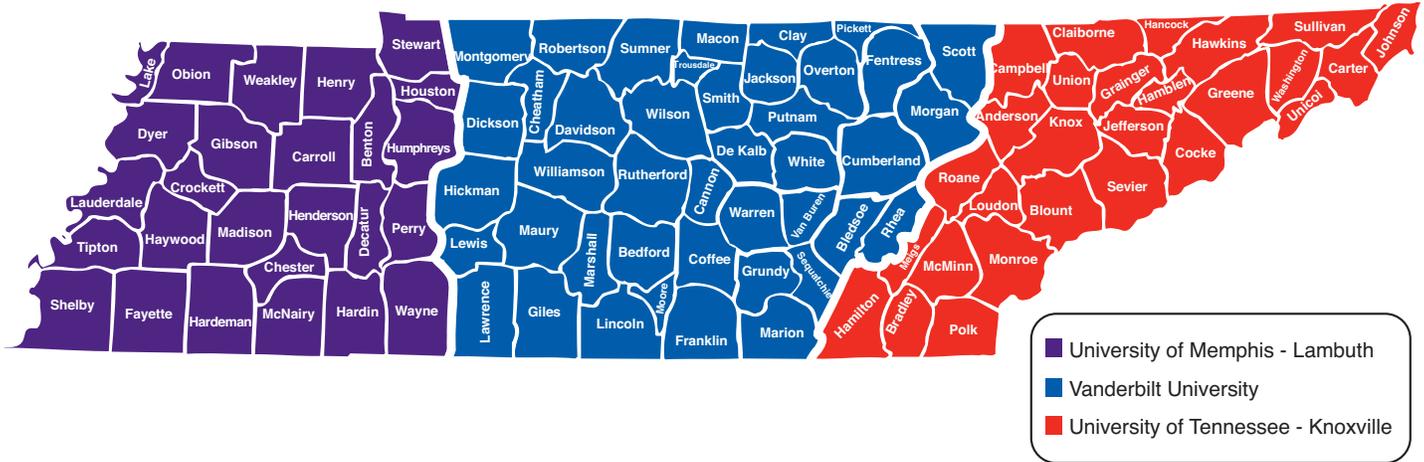
¹⁰Lane, K. L., Kalberg, J. R., & Menzies, H. M. (2009).

¹¹Shuster, B.C., Magill, L., Cabeza, B., Jenkins, A., & Carter, E.W. (2014). *Lessons from the field: Planning effective school-wide ticket and reinforcement systems*. Nashville, TN: Project Support and Include, Vanderbilt University. Available at: <http://vkc.mc.vanderbilt.edu/ci3t/resources>

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Tennessee Behavior Supports Project by Region: 2016-2020



The Tennessee Behavior Supports Project (TBSP) is funded by the Tennessee Department of Education and consists of three regional support contracts: University of Memphis – Lambuth Campus, Vanderbilt University, and University of Tennessee – Knoxville. TBSP is responsible for providing training and technical assistance to schools as they address the behavioral needs of students through Response to Instruction and Intervention for Behavior (RTI²-B). To locate the project assigned to your region, see below.



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