

Adolescents With Disabilities: The Need for Occupational Social Skills Training

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In this article, occupational social skills are defined and their importance is highlighted. The lack of occupational social skills has been estimated to be responsible for almost 90% of job loss. Although a number of commercial social skills instructional programs are available, none address social skills as they relate to specific occupations. We offer 4 different ways to develop appropriate occupational social skills training.

Students with disabilities, particularly learning disabilities (LD), are widely regarded as having social skills difficulties (Bender & Wall, 1994; Fleischner, 1995; Gresham, 1998; Margalit, 1993; Merrell & Gimpel, 1998; Sasso, Peck, & Garrison-Harrell, 1998; Schumaker, 1992; Vaughn & Haager, 1994). It is estimated that 75% of students with LD exhibit social skills deficits (Kavale & Forness, 1996). The U.S. Department of Education (1996) reported that 29% of adolescents with disabilities required social skills instruction beyond high school.

Students with disabilities are more likely than peers without disabilities to drop out of school (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Follow-up data on high school graduates without disabilities indicate that only approximately 25% complete a 4-year degree. Another 25% complete associate degrees, with the remaining 50% entering the labor market soon after leaving high school (Brustein & Mahler, 1994). Wagner (1989) reported that only 16% of students with LD entered into any postsecondary training, of which approximately 11% entered specific occupational training.

Whether immediately after high school or after further training, most students with disabilities eventually will enter the workforce. Successful employment, however, remains a significant problem for individuals with LD (Gerber & Brown, 1997). What types of skills are required? The literature suggests that workers need academic skills (i.e., reading, writing, arithmetic), vocational skills related to specific occupations, and occupational social skills (L. K. Elksnin & Elksnin, 1996; Okolo & Sitlington, 1986).

A further compelling argument for teaching students occupational social skills is strong evidence that occupationally specific social skills may be even more important than academic or vocational skills. Several researchers report that most job loss is due to socially related problems (Bullis, Nishioka-Evans, Fredericks, & Davis, 1992; Butterworth & Strauch, 1994; Cartledge, 1989; Hagner, Rogan, & Murphy, 1992; Johnson & Johnson, 1990). Occupational social skills instruction is essential if students are to become successful in the workplace (Black, 1996; L. K. Elksnin, Elksnin, & Sabornie, 1994; N. Elksnin & Elksnin, 1991).

WHAT ARE OCCUPATIONAL SOCIAL SKILLS?

Gresham (1998) defined social skills as “socially acceptable learned behaviors enabling individuals to interact effectively with others and avoid or escape socially unacceptable behavior exhibited by others” (p. 20). Industry characterizes these skills as “soft skills” (Murnane, 1999; Murnane & Levy, 1996; Olson, 1997).

These skills can be grouped within six categories (L. K. Elksnin & Elksnin, 1998). *Interpersonal behaviors* include “friendship-making” skills, such as introducing yourself and joining in, offering to and asking for help, and giving and accepting compliments. *Peer-pleasing social skills* are those skills valued by students’ classmates. These skills are age dependent and may include asking for and receiving information, sharing, working cooperatively, and understanding others’ feelings. *Teacher-pleasing social skills* are behaviors associated with school success, such as listening to the teacher, following directions, and doing your best work. *Self-related behaviors* enable the student to assess a social situation, select the appropriate skill, and evaluate the skill’s effectiveness. Other self-related behaviors include controlling anger, understanding one’s emotions, and dealing with stress. *Assertiveness skills* enable students to express their needs without resorting to aggression. Finally, *communication skills* include conversational skills such as taking turns, listening attentively, and reacting to the speaker.

Occupational social skills are those social skills related to getting and keeping a job. Several attempts have been made to identify occupational social skills that generalize across occupations and vocational settings. Table 1 lists specific skills and the procedures used to identify them.

HOW OCCUPATIONAL SOCIAL SKILLS ARE TAUGHT

The following five-step model, based on the work of Hazel, Schumaker, Sherman, and Sheldon (1995), enables the instructor to effectively and efficiently teach occupational social skills:

1. Define or describe the skill.
2. Provide reasons for students to learn the skill.
3. Describe general situations in which the skill may be used.
4. Teach the skill using role-play situations.
5. Help students identify social rules.

TABLE 1
Occupational Social Skills Identified by Employment Experts

<i>Authors (Year)</i>	<i>Occupational Social Skills Identified</i>	<i>Information Source</i>
Bullis, Nishioka-Evans, Fredericks, & Davis (1992)	<p><i>Job-related social problem domains</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Accepting criticism or correction from a work supervisor. 2. Requesting help from a work supervisor. 3. Following instructions from a work supervisor. 4. Quitting a job. 5. Taking time off. 6. Social problems created by not working as fast as coworker. 7. Talking to a work supervisor about personal problems. 8. Social problems created by working with a coworker to complete a job. 9. Dealing with teasing or provocation from coworkers. 10. Managing personal concerns in the workplace. 11. Making friends with coworkers. 12. Talking with a coworker about his or her behavior. 13. Accepting criticism or correction from a coworker. 14. Job-related fighting. 15. Stealing and lying. 16. Job-related dating. 	Review of literature relating to students with behavior disorders (BD), adolescents with BD, and service providers
Elrod (1987)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Gets along with others. 2. Takes criticism constructively. 3. Follows directions. 4. Works as a member of a team. 5. Positive attitude. 6. Dependable. 7. Accepts responsibility. 8. Works independently. 9. Honesty. 10. Obeys safety rules. 	270 vocational educators

(Continued)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

<i>Authors (Year)</i>	<i>Occupational Social Skills Identified</i>	<i>Information Source</i>
Greenan (1983) Greenan & Smith (1981)	<p data-bbox="427 349 655 376"><i>Generalizable social skills</i></p> <p data-bbox="458 401 599 428"><i>Work behaviors</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="427 440 650 492">1. Work effectively under supervision. <li data-bbox="427 494 696 546">2. Work without need for close supervision. <li data-bbox="427 548 736 600">3. Work cooperatively as a member of a team. <li data-bbox="427 602 717 654">4. Get along and work effectively with people. <li data-bbox="427 656 720 683">5. Show up regularly and on time. <li data-bbox="427 685 731 712">6. Work effectively under pressure. <li data-bbox="427 714 723 767">7. See things from another's point of view. <li data-bbox="427 768 713 821">8. Engage appropriately in social interactions. <li data-bbox="427 823 740 900">9. Take responsibility for one's own judgments, decisions, and actions. <li data-bbox="427 902 740 954">10. Plan, carry out, and complete activities at one's own initiation. <p data-bbox="427 966 727 1018"><i>Instructor/supervisor conversation skills</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="427 1020 709 1072">11. Instruct or direct someone in performance of task. <li data-bbox="427 1074 650 1126">12. Follow instructions or directions. <li data-bbox="427 1128 723 1180">13. Demonstrate how to perform a task. <li data-bbox="427 1182 686 1234">14. Assign others to carry out specific tasks. <li data-bbox="427 1236 713 1288">15. Speak in a relaxed, confident manner. <li data-bbox="427 1290 655 1342">16. Compliment or provide constructive feedback. <li data-bbox="427 1344 736 1396">17. Handle criticism, disagreement, and disappointment. <li data-bbox="427 1398 642 1450">18. Initiate and maintain conversations. <li data-bbox="427 1452 700 1505">19. Initiate, maintain, and draw others into group conversations. <li data-bbox="427 1506 704 1534">20. Join in group conversations. 	Vocational educators in two states

(Continued)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

<i>Authors (Year)</i>	<i>Occupational Social Skills Identified</i>	<i>Information Source</i>
Mathews, Whang, & Fawcett (1980, 1981, 1982)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Getting a job lead from a friend. 2. Telephoning a potential employer to arrange a job interview (when there is a job opening) 3. Telephoning a potential employers to arrange a job interview (when there is not a job) 4. Participating in a job interview. 5. Accepting a suggestion from an employer. 6. Accepting criticism from an employer. 7. Providing constructive criticism to a coworker. 8. Explaining a problem to a supervisor. 9. Complimenting a coworker on a job done well. 10. Accepting a compliment from a coworker. 	Review of literature; survey of vocational counselors, university placement counselors, employers, and personnel managers
Minskoff (1994)	<p><i>Domains</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Verbal communication (13 skills). 2. Nonverbal communication (4 skills). 3. Social problem solving (6 skills). 4. Social awareness (2 skills). 5. Compliance (3 skills). 6. Cooperation (3 skills). 7. Civility (2 skills). 	100 educators from Virginia; validated by employers, job incumbents, and vocational teachers
Montague (1988)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ordering job responsibilities. 2. Understanding instructions. 3. Asking a question. 4. Asking for help. 5. Asking for assistance. 6. Offering assistance. 7. Giving instructions. 8. Convincing others. 	Review of literature, interviews with employees

(Continued)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

<i>Authors (Year)</i>	<i>Occupational Social Skills Identified</i>	<i>Information Source</i>
U.S. Department of Labor (1992)	9. Apologizing. 10. Accepting criticism. <i>Interpersonal competencies</i> 1. Participates as a member of a team. 2. Teaches others new skills. 3. Serves clients or customers. 4. Exercises leadership. 5. Negotiates. 6. Works with diversity.	National appointed panel (CEOs, presidents) in business, labor, and education

Note. From Teaching Occupational Social Skills (pp. 16–17), by N. Elksnin and L. K. Elksnin, 1998, Austin, TX: PRO-ED. Copyright © 1998 by PRO-ED. Reprinted with permission of publisher.

The Appendix illustrates each of these steps for the skill of asking a coworker or employer for help.

SELECTING AN INSTRUCTIONAL DIRECTION

There are four approaches to teaching occupational social skills: adopting or adapting commercial general social skills programs with vocational examples; adopting commercial social skills programs with an occupational focus; developing a program based on the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS; U.S. Department of Labor, 1991), competencies, or occupational standards; and developing a program based on ecological assessment of the student, occupation, or both.

General Social Skills Programs

During the last 2 decades, there has been a proliferation of social skills curricula designed for adolescents. Many of these programs were not designed specifically to teach students occupational social skills, but many of the target skills have been identified as essential skills by employment experts (see Table 1). Some of these general programs include occupationally relevant examples and role-playing scenarios. However, using the model illustrated in the Appendix, instructors and students can develop their own role-playing situations relevant to specific occupational settings. Social skills curricula appropriate for adolescents are listed in Table 2. For reviews of social skills curricula, see L. K. Elksnin and Elksnin (1995) and N. Elksnin and Elksnin (1998).

Occupational Social Skills Programs

Several curricula are designed specifically to teach occupationally relevant social skills. Skills were selected based on employer surveys and reviews of the relevant literature. These programs are included in Table 2.

SCANS and Occupational Standards

To understand the development of occupational skill standards, one should be familiar with the U.S. Department of Labor SCANS (U.S. Department of Labor, 1992). SCANS identified basic skills, thinking skills, and personal qualities required for successful job performance, along with workplace competencies. The SCANS basic skills included reading, writing, arithmetic and mathematics, listening, and speaking. Thinking skills included creative thinking, decision making, problem solving, seeing things in the mind's eye, knowing how to learn, and reasoning. Personal qualities were responsibility, self-esteem, sociability, self-management, and integrity or honesty. SCANS workplace competencies were organized within the categories of resources, information, systems, technology, and interpersonal skills. SCANS identified six essential interpersonal skills:

TABLE 2
Social Skills Curricula Designed for Adolescents

General Social Skills Programs

- ACCESS: Adolescent Curriculum for Communication and Effective Social Skills.* (1988). H. M. Walker, B. Todis, D. Holmes, & G. Horton. Austin, TX: PRO-ED.
- ASSET: A Social Skills Program for Adolescents.* (1995). J. S. Hazel, J. B. Schumaker, J. A. Sherman, & J. Sheldon. Champaign, IL: Research Press.
- The PREPARE Curriculum.* (1988). A. P. Goldstein. Champaign, IL: Research Press.
- Skillstreaming the Adolescent—Revised.* (1997). A. P. Goldstein & E. McGinnis. Champaign, IL: Research Press.
- Social Skills for Daily Living.* (1988). J. B. Schumaker, J. S. Hazel, & C. S. Pederson. Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Service.
- Social Skills in the Classroom.* (1992). T. M. Stephens. Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources.
- Stacking the Deck.* (1983). R. M. Foxx & M. J. McMorro. Champaign, IL: Research Press.
- Teaching Social Competence to Youth and Adults With Developmental Disabilities.* (1998). D. A. Jackson, N. F. Jackson, & M. L. Bennett. Austin, TX: PRO-ED.
- Waksman Social Skills Curriculum: An Assertive Behavior Program for Adolescents.* (1998). S. Waksman & D. D. Waksman. Austin, TX: PRO-ED.

Occupational Social Skills Programs

- Assessing and Teaching Job-Related Social Skills.* (1987). D. Baumgart & O. J. Anderson. Moscow: University of Idaho, Secondary Transition and Employment Project.
- Job-Related Social Skills.* (1991). M. Montague & K. A. Lund. Ann Arbor, MI: Exceptional Innovations.
- Social Skills on the Job.* (1989). Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Service.
- Workplace Social Skills/Technical-Related Academic Career Competencies.* (1994). E. H. Minskoff. Richmond: Virginia Department of Education and Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services.
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1. Participates as a member of a team: contributes to group effort.
2. Teaches others new skills.
3. Serves clients or customers (works to satisfy customer expectations).
4. Exercises leadership: communicates ideas to justify position, persuades and convinces others, and responsibly challenges existing procedures and policies.
5. Negotiates: works toward agreements involving exchange of resources and resolves divergent interests.
6. Works with diversity: works well with men and women from diverse backgrounds.

The SCANS model for delineating occupational standards, including occupational social skills, has been applied in a number of ways. For example, in 1998 the South Carolina Chamber of Commerce surveyed employers across the state. The survey instrument was developed by breaking the SCANS competencies into 37 components. The result was a ranking by employers of the “top skills and competencies” needed per region and industry. Various instructional texts, such as *The Mindful Worker* (Miles, 1994), have been developed based on SCANS.

Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994 (Pub. L. 103–227; U.S. Department of Education, 1994) established the National Skill Standards Board, which initiated pilot projects with 22 professional organizations (i.e., American Council on Hotel, Restaurant and Institutional Education; National Automotive Technicians Education Foundation; National Future Farmers of America Foundation; etc.) to develop skill standards for each occupation. For example, interpersonal skills as defined by the Grocers Research and Education Foundation (1994) include the following:

- Use courtesy.
- Show respect and empathy for others.
- Cooperate with others.
- Assist others.
- Work productively with others.
- Respond positively to criticism.
- Provide criticism constructively.
- Provide praise.
- Respond to praise.
- Accept and follow directions.
- Perform as a team member.
- Respect cultural diversity.
- Respect others in nontraditional jobs.
- Respect physically and mentally challenged individuals.

The National Skill Standards Board is in the process of collapsing the 22 pilot projects into 15 occupational clusters, for which standards will be developed.

Programs Developed Through Ecological Assessment

The ecological approach to assessment involves examining both the student and the environment (McLoughlin & Lewis, 1994). The goal is to identify social skills that are essential

for the occupational training or employment setting and determining if the student possesses these skills. The occupational training or employment setting can be assessed through observing the environment or by conducting interviews with occupational instructors, peers, employers, and coworkers. Students can be assessed with these same approaches, as well as through rating scales and role playing (L. K. Elksnin & Elksnin, 1997).

Observation. By observing the occupational training or employment setting, the evaluator can determine the types of social skills required in the environment. For example, when observing students in the distributive education program housed at a high school, an evaluator determined that offering and accepting constructive criticism were important skills. Observing coworkers in the break room at a discount retailer indicated that the ability to carry on a friendly conversation was an essential skill.

Observation of the student in the classroom or on the job enables teachers and related service providers to determine if students use appropriate social skills where and when they count. If one is interested in observing performance of a particular skill, the skill first must be defined in observable, measurable, and specific terms. L. K. Elksnin and Elksnin (1995) provided specific guidelines for defining the occupational social skill, selecting a recording system, converting raw data, and graphing and interpreting converted data.

Interviews. Although observation is the most direct assessment approach for determining essential occupational social skills, it is a time-consuming process. Interviews allow the evaluator to obtain information about a wide variety of social behaviors. Occupational educators and employers can be interviewed to identify social skills essential for program or job success as well as to determine the discrepancy between the requirements of the environment and the student's social competence. It is helpful if the interview is structured in advance by considering the following:

- Goal for the interview.
- Desired information.
- Questions to be asked.
- Ways in which the interviewee's perspectives may differ from the interviewer.
- Any potentially sensitive subjects.

Interviewing the student can provide information regarding the student's level of social awareness and social problem-solving abilities and can allow the interviewer to observe the student's social skills during the interview. It may be beneficial to interview students immediately after a social success or failure to enable them to analyze events surrounding the social outcome. Lavoie (1994) referred to this process as performing a social skill autopsy.

Rating scales. Rating scales involve having a rater make a qualitative judgment regarding the degree to which a behavior occurs. Raters may include parents, teachers,

employers, or students. Available instruments include rating scales and checklists for both general social skills and occupational social skills. Social skills rating scales address prosocial behaviors and may assess antisocial behaviors that interfere with social skills acquisition and performance (i.e., inattention, hyperactivity, withdrawal). The social skills included usually relate to school success and peer acceptance. Many of these skills also have been shown to relate to occupational success. Recently, several instruments have been developed that focus exclusively on social behaviors directly related to occupational success. Table 3 includes a list of social skills rating scales appropriate for use with adolescents and young adults.

Role play. Role play involves setting up a social situation by asking the student to perform a social skill after having analyzed each step of the skill. As the student performs the skill, the observer assesses whether each skill step was executed appropriately. It is also helpful to ask the student to verbalize cognitive skill steps. Role playing is useful because it allows the evaluator to control the simulated setting while the student enacts an actual behavior. Consider combining role playing with an interview to gain insight about the student's thoughts before, during, and after skill performance, as well as determining other situations in which the student may use the skill.

TABLE 3
Rating Scales

Social Skill Rating Scales

- Matson Evaluation of Social Skills With Youngsters (2nd ed.)*. (1994). J. L. Matson. Worthington, OH: International Diagnostic Systems.
- School Behavior Scales*. (1993). K. W. Merrell. Brandon, VT: Clinical Psychology Publishing.
- School Social Skills Rating Scale*. (1984). L. J. Brown, D. D. Black, & J. C. Downs. East Aurora, NY: Slosson Educational Publications.
- Social Behavior Assessment Inventory*. (1992). T. M. Stephens & K. D. Arnold. Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources.
- Social Skills Rating System—Secondary*. (1990). F. M. Gresham & S. N. Elliott. Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Service.
- Socially Appropriate and Inappropriate Development*. (1988). S. W. Armstrong, S. M. Mulkerne, & A. McPherson. Birmingham, AL: EBSCO Curriculum Materials.
- Waksman Social Skill Rating Scale*. (1985). S. A. Waksman. Portland, OR: ASIEP.
- Walker-McConnell Scale of Social Competence and School Adjustment—Adolescent*. (1995). H. M. Walker & S. R. McConnell. San Diego, CA: Singular.

Occupational Social Skills Rating Scales

- Community-Based Social Skill Performance Assessment Tool*. (1998). M. Bullis. Santa Barbara, CA: James Stanfield Company, Inc.
- Job-Related Social Skill Performance Assessment Tool*. (1998). M. Bullis, V. Nishioka, H. D. Fredericks, & C. Davis. Santa Barbara, CA: James Stanfield Company, Inc.
- Social Competence for Workers With Developmental Disabilities*. (1990). C. F. Calkins & H. M. Walker. Baltimore: Brookes.
- Test of Interpersonal Competence for Employment*. (1986). G. Foss, D. Cheney, M. Bullis. Santa Barbara, CA: James Stanfield Company, Inc.
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CONCLUSIONS

Occupational social skills are essential for students with disabilities to be successful in post-high school employment. Because much of the social skills curricula development has focused on general social skills, there is no definitive approach to occupational skills assessment or instruction. To meet the needs of students individually, one is encouraged to select one of the four instructional approaches that we reviewed herein.

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APPENDIX

Skill: Asking a Coworker or Employer for Help

Definition of Skill

Asking for help means that when you have a problem or questions about your work you approach your coworker or employer, wait for the appropriate time, and ask him or her to answer your questions or explain something to you.

Skill Steps

1. Decide if you need to ask for help.
2. Decide whom to ask.
3. Approach the person.
4. Wait quietly for the person to recognize; do not interrupt if the person is talking to someone or is busy.
5. When the person acknowledges you, tell him or her you need help.
6. Explain what your problem is or ask your question.
7. Listen carefully to the person.
8. Ask for additional information or help if needed and listen again.
9. Thank the person for helping.

“Body Basics” (Behaviors That Occur Throughout the Skill)

1. Stay close to the person.
2. Face the person and maintain eye contact.
3. Have a serious facial expression.
4. Have a relaxed but serious body posture.
5. Use a serious tone of voice.

Rationale Statements

Positive Statement

1. When you ask for help, you show your coworker or employer that you care about your work and that you want to do your best.

Negative Statements

1. If you do not ask for help when you need it, you might complete your work incorrectly.
2. If you do not ask for help when you need it, you might not be able to complete your work at all, and you might lose your job.

Situations in Which to Use the Skill

A good time to ask a coworker or employer for help is when

1. You do not understand something the person says, does, or writes.
2. You do not understand directions, written or oral.

Role-Playing Scenarios (Be Sure These Are Occupationally Relevant)

1. Your boss asks you to read the manual so you can fill the “Big Freeze” machine, and you do not understand the manual.
2. Your coworker asks you to fill in for him or her in the customer service department, something you have never done before.
3. The service order is to align the disk drive head of the computer, but you are not sure how to do it.

Role-Playing Instructional Sequence

1. Teacher role-plays, students critique.
2. Students role-play, students critique. (*Remember:* All students role-play every skill!)
3. Teacher gives role players feedback.

Social Rules (i.e., Generally Acceptable Social Behavior)

1. Ask for help immediately in an emergency.
2. Be sure you have tried to understand before asking for help.