

Skills for Independent Living: Parents Help Build Social Skills

Many youth with disabilities have difficulty understanding social situations or navigating interpersonal events such as speaking in front of a class or doing job interviews. They may benefit from building and practicing social skills. These skills allow a person to interact appropriately with other people and handle difficult situations. It is important that youth have the opportunity to identify and practice these skills because they can significantly impact employment, relationships, and how well they are connected in the community as adults. Families, educators, and youth themselves can use the tools found in this handout to improve social skills, feel more comfortable interacting with peers and other people, and meet their social obligations.

The following are explanations of seven tools parents can use to help their youth practice and improve social skills.

Tool 1: Use Social Skills Stories to Build Skills in Understanding Situations

Social skills stories help people understand events and expectations. The stories are crafted to clearly identify the topic and who is involved, and where and when the situation occurs. Other details of the stories describe what is happening; explain how it happens and why; and clarify the reasons behind what people think, say, or do in a given situation. Repeated readings of social skills stories will reinforce the lessons and help your youth put new skills into practice. You will be able to celebrate what your son or daughter has learned and is able to apply to new social situations.

You can write your own social stories or read books that contain them. They may be read out loud or acted out through role playing. Your son or daughter's teacher should also be able to help you develop appropriate social skills stories and reinforce the social skills to be learned in school.

Social Skills Story Examples

Story 1: It's OK to Look at Girls

"There are lots of girls at school. Sometimes I see girls in my classroom. Sometimes I see girls in the hallways. Sometimes I see girls at pep rallies. Sometimes I see girls at recess. It's OK to look at girls. When I look at a girl for a long time, she may get mad, sad, or uncomfortable. When I look at a girl, I will count slowly to two, and then I will try to look at something else. I should try to look at something else until I slowly count to 10. Then I can look at the girl again if I want to."

Social skills stories, such as this one, should be followed up with questions to make sure the key points are understood. **For example, you could ask:**

1. Is it OK to look at girls?
2. How long should you look at a girl?
3. Why is it not OK to stare too long?
4. When you look away, what should you count to?

Story 2: Body Space

“Sometimes I stand too close to people. I am almost touching them. This bothers people. I can stand near people. I need to leave a little space between us. I will try not to stand too close to people. If I am closer than one foot, I will move back and make more space between us.”

You can use pictures to illustrate the concepts of “too close” and “a little space.”

Questions to ask:

1. How close is too close?
2. How close should you stand for people to be comfortable?
3. Why does standing too close make some people uncomfortable?

Tool 2: Define Boundaries with a Five-point Scale

With most behaviors there is usually a range – from “mild” to “extreme” or “acceptable” to “unacceptable.” By using a five-point scale, you can help your son or daughter understand that there are different degrees of behavior, different boundaries, and there are unintended consequences of going too far. The five-point scale is easily adapted for most issues.

You could help your youth rate their anger levels or the appropriateness of behavior using this scale. You might introduce the scale by discussing how angry your son or daughter becomes when something doesn’t go well in school and how a five-point scale would show different degrees of anger (a rating of 5 indicating extreme anger, a rating of 1 indicating no anger). Your son or daughter’s teacher can help you develop five-point scales, adapted to the child’s behavioral needs, and suggest topics to use as learning tools at home and in school.

Five-Point Scale Examples

Example 1:

A student who always uses a loud voice could be taught that her loudest voice is a “5,” being very quiet is a “1,” and that using a “2 or 3” level voice is the most appropriate voice for the classroom.

Example 2:

Your son may typically use an angry face when asked to tidy up his room. When asked a second time to perform this chore, his anger often escalates to throwing dirty clothes in a corner or tossing all papers, including homework, in the wastebasket. Your son could be taught that throwing things in his room is a “5” and immediately picking up items and putting them where they belong is a “1.” You might explain the value of a 2, 3, and 4. Demonstrate what you mean by a “2” or “3,” picking up some items of clothing and then going back and picking up more things to complete the task. Since this is a learning situation, do not expect your son to demonstrate perfection at first. Initially, consider your child’s behavior to be acceptable in the “3” range and then raise your expectations over time.

Numerical scales such as the five-point scale have been used by researchers to capture degrees of satisfaction with a service, the implementation of a policy, the quality of a product, the likeliness of success, or how you might feel on a given day, for example. Assigning numbers to performance allows you to see the improvement in your youth’s skills.

Sample Five-Point Scale



The above Five-Point Scale is adapted from PACER Center’s handbook, The Journey to Adulthood: What Parents Need to Know (Sexuality), page 6.

Tool 3: Teach Social Boundaries with a Circle Chart

Learning about personal space and appropriate hugging or touching is an essential social skill for everyone, but it is difficult to put into words. For young adults with disabilities, a tool called a Boundaries Circle Chart* can make these concepts easier to understand. The chart on page 4 is a series of circles that can help your youth understand how to safely and appropriately interact with different people, such as family members, caregivers, friends, and strangers.

The small circle in the center of the chart represents your son or daughter, alone and in private. The next ring represents immediate family members and others that your child has a close, loving relationship with. Successive rings represent the people who have less personal relationships with your son or daughter.

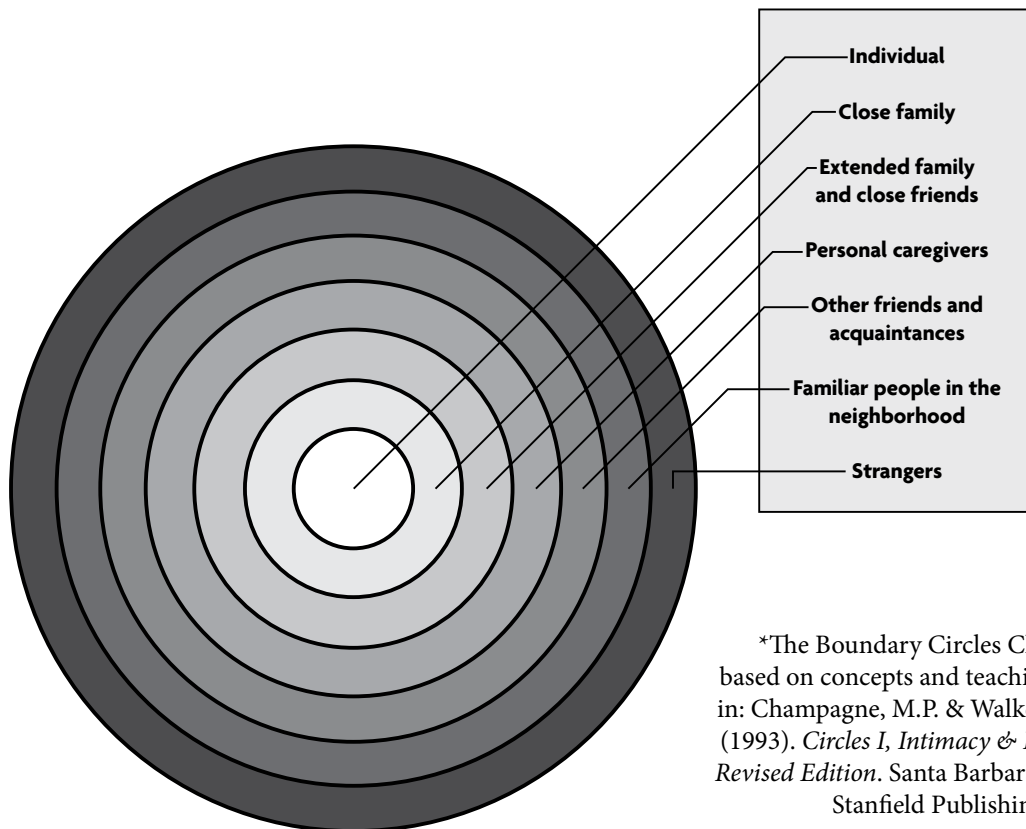
Circle Chart Example:

As you identify the people in each circle, discuss what actions and greetings are appropriate. Who is it ok to hug or touch and who can hug or touch your child? Who do you greet with a handshake? This is a good time to review appropriate touch and the public and private parts of the body. These boundaries are defined by your family and cultural values, as well as the laws where you live.

If your youth has a personal care attendant (PCA), you may want to add a ring just for PCAs or home-care nurses. Be sure to talk about what tasks are appropriate for caregivers to do and what your child should do if he or she has concerns or is uncomfortable with the caregiver’s role.

Circle Chart

This chart contains some suggested examples of groups your son or daughter may interact with. You can draw an empty chart and then fill it in with the groups that apply for your child.



*The Boundary Circles Chart above is based on concepts and teaching materials in: Champagne, M.P. & Walker-Hirsch, L. (1993). *Circles I, Intimacy & Relationships Revised Edition*. Santa Barbara, CA: James Stanfield Publishing Company.

Tool 4: Practice Role Playing

Role playing gives your child an opportunity to practice what he or she would say and do in various situations. Role playing helps your son or daughter think about, anticipate, and develop an alternate plan for when something unexpected occurs.

You can use role-playing to suggest alternative behaviors for use in difficult situations. If you are concerned about how your child might behave when he or she doesn't get picked for a team in gym class, for example, suggest role-playing to help plan what to do in this situation.

Role playing can be a spontaneous way of making the most of teachable moments as they arise. You can create as many scenarios as you need to help reinforce new behaviors.

Role Playing Examples

Example 1:

Your daughter stops at a convenience store to buy some cosmetics on her way to school. She spends a long time carefully selecting a color of lipstick, eye shadow, and liquid makeup. She takes her selections to the checkout counter where there is a long line and, after waiting for some time, presents her items at the register. When the clerk rings up her purchases, the total is \$12.24 but your daughter realizes that she only has a \$10 bill. What should she do? (She could tell the clerk she doesn't have enough money for all of the items. She could ask how much the total would be if she buys two items instead of three. Another idea would be to prepare ahead of time by visiting the store's website or adding up the three items using the calculator on her cellphone to learn the total cost.)

Example 2:

Your son who has a part-time job has difficulty waking up in the morning and making it to work on time. His supervisor has talked to him several times about the importance of being on time. One morning your son wakes up and doesn't feel well, but he knows he is expected to be at work in an hour. (He should call his supervisor and tell her that he isn't feeling well and is not able to work today. Your son needs to know the company's policy about sick leave and proper notification.)

Example 3:

Your son likes to play computer games. He has a friend online who he plays games with but knows only through the Internet. The friend asks your son to meet him at a nearby mall. What should he do? (It is important to emphasize to your son to never agree to meet alone with a stranger even if you have known them online for some time. An alternative might be to ask a parent or older sibling to go with him to the mall.)

Tool 5: Create Opportunities to Practice Skills

Whether someone is learning to dance, play music, or develop a social skill, practice is the key to improvement. By creating real-life opportunities for your youth to interact with peers and people in the community, you open the door to social success. The more opportunities your son or daughter has to practice new social skills, the more polished he or she will become.

Skills Practice Example:

Teach your son or daughter how to greet someone or start a social conversation. For example, conversation starters could include asking about family pets, favorite books, movies, or television shows; telling a joke; or asking what someone did last weekend. Include your youth in social events where he or she can meet people and practice new social skills.

Tool 6: Explore a Social Skills Training Program

Social skills training programs offer participants a structured opportunity to learn and practice new skills, such as healthy dating and relationships or ensuring personal safety. In these programs, a social skills instructor introduces a new skill, the ways it is used, and models it for the student. The youth then models it back, practices the skill at home, at school, and in the community, and receives feedback from the teacher or facilitator on how it went. Social skills training may be offered at a school, local center for independent living, disability organization, or self-advocacy group.

Social Skills Training Example:

Your son or daughter could participate in a bullying prevention class at your local center for independent living. The instructor might talk about what behaviors could make a person vulnerable to being bullied, ways to avoid bullying situations, and how to respond effectively to bullying. This would provide your youth with opportunities to practice and strengthen the skills needed to handle bullying behavior.

Tool 7: Help Your Young Adult Try Social Skills Groups

Social skills groups provide an opportunity for youth to explore and use social skills with their peers. The group may be facilitated by a professional, or it may simply be a group of people who get together socially. Encourage your youth to join extracurricular or friendship groups at school, attend park and recreation programs, and explore local educational activities.

Social Skills Group Example:

Your son or daughter could sign up for a social group at a local center for independent living or disability organization where young people may discuss specific issues such as dating, or just talk about the things they are interested in. Some community centers also offer supervised pizza or movie nights that provide opportunities to practice social skills and develop a sense of community.

Conclusion

Adolescence can be a difficult time for all youth, especially those with disabilities. By using the tools and strategies in this handout to help build social skills, you are taking an important step toward helping your son or daughter stay safe and become a socially proficient, healthy adult. A sample Parent Action Plan follows to help you begin the journey.

Parent Social Skills Action Plan

Parents' Goals and Concerns

Social Skills Goal:

Social skill(s) my youth needs to work on with me:

Which of the tools below might help my son or daughter learn social skills? (one or more)

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Social skills stories | <input type="checkbox"/> Practice |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Boundaries circle chart | <input type="checkbox"/> Social skills training |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Role playing | <input type="checkbox"/> Social groups |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Five-Point scale | Notes: |

Some areas to consider when using social skills tools.

- Understanding appropriate behavior
- Knowing alternative behavior in a social situation
- Saying “no”
- Recognizing unsafe situations
- Knowing who he or she can tell about inappropriate talk or behavior
- Knowing what to say

I will talk with my youth's Individualized Education Program (IEP) manager about adding social skills as IEP objectives.

Other:

Who would I be comfortable with asking for assistance or ideas?

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Family network (family, friends, elders) | <input type="checkbox"/> Doctor |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Parent center | <input type="checkbox"/> Disability organization |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Center for independent living | <input type="checkbox"/> Community health center |
| <input type="checkbox"/> School professionals | <input type="checkbox"/> Other |