Practical Strategies for Including
Peer Supports in Social
Communication Interventions
with children with Autism
Spectrum Disorders

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The Merry-Go-Round of Social Skills

- Weak social skills
- Not as readily included in social interactions
- Possible negative experience for child and peers
- Few opportunities to practice social skills
- Little improvement in the area of social skills
- Weak social skills...

Consequences of Poor Social Skills

- Poor Academic Performance
- Peer Failure
- Rejection
- Isolation
- Anxiety
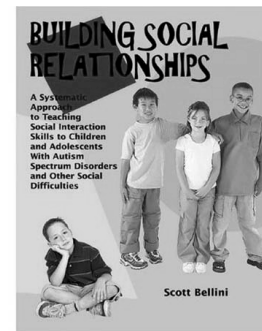- Depression
- Substance Abuse
- Suicidal Ideation

Bellini,2007

Scott Bellini

- Assistant Director of the Indiana Resource Center for Autism

- Licensed psychologist who operates a clinic for social program for children with ASD

- Faculty member of the Indiana University

BUILDING SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

A Systematic Approach to Teaching Social Interaction Skills to Children and Adolescents With Autism Spectrum Disorders and Other Social Difficulties

Scott Bellini

Recent Research

- 70% of adults with ASD are unemployed
- Current social skills programs are ineffective because:
1. Insufficient dosage
2. Contrived and decontextualised settings
3. Failure to match skill deficit with type of intervention strategy
4. Failure to assess social skills prior to intervention
5. Use of ambiguous intervention objectives
6. Lack of systematic programming
7. Poorly implemented interventions

Bellini, Peters, Benner & Hopf (2007); Gresham, Sugai & Horner (2001); Quinn, Kavale, Mathur, Rutherford & Forness (1999)
Taken from presentation by Scott Bellini, PhD (2007)

What does this research mean to us

- 30 hours over 10 weeks is not enough time
- We need to spend time assessing first
- Every environment is an opportunity (regular classroom, living room better than resource room or clinic for generalisation and maintenance)
- Practice without instruction is going to be useless
- Encouragement won't ensure success
- "Precision in teaching to target precise skills"

Key Components of Social Skill Programming

- Occur in the child's natural setting (classroom, living room) and involve peers (multiple settings, multiple people)
- Direct instruction followed by practice
- Be individualized
- Address either a skill acquisition deficit and/or a performance deficit
- Dosage of at least 3 hours per week
- Teach and reinforce social skills as frequently as possible throughout the day
- Develop a LARGE intervention tool chest

(Bellini, 2006)

"Can't do or won't do?"

- Skill Acquisition Deficit
  - Absence of skill or behaviour
  - Goal: Teach new skill or develop recently acquired skills
- Performance Deficit
  - Skill or behaviour that is present, but not demonstrated or performed
  - Goal: Enhance performance of existing skills

How to Include Peers

- Integrated Play Groups – Peer Mediated Instruction
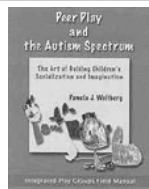- Social Skills Groups
- Play Dates

How to Include Peers

- Regardless of age, peers need information to enable understanding and acceptance
- Information alone is not enough
- Peers need strategies to support a child
- In British Columbia….
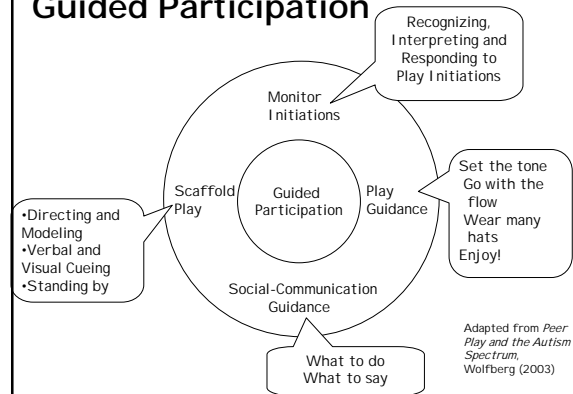
Friend2Friend Society: "demistify, not identify"

www.friend2friend.org

Integrated Play Groups

www.wolfberg.com

Pamela Wolfberg

- Training specific peer supports for a specific student with ASD
- Skill acquisition developed in peers with associated positive results for the child with ASD
- Interactions in and outside of intervention environment are more successful

Guided Participation

Adapted from *Peer Play and the Autism Spectrum*, Wolfberg (2003)

What to Do

👀	Look
	Stand Close
	Tap Shoulder
	Take Hand
	Point
	Give
	Take turns

Post visuals in play area

Social Skills Groups

- Chosen group of students with ASD
- Compatible students rather than similar needs
- Plan for generalisation and maintenance – this means that typical peers need to be involved for practice of skill after direct instruction

Why Social Skills Groups?

Direct, individualized teaching of a skill in a meaningful group setting

Skill Acquisition:
- practice in thoughts, feelings, interests activities
- Role play
- Video feedback
- Social rules/social problem solving
- Prompting strategies
- Interaction/ conversation planning
- Social Thinking – Michelle Garcia Winner

Skill Performance:
- Reinforcement
- Games
- Practice in natural settings (outside of the group)
- Video feedback

Core Skills to address in Social Skills Groups
Hoag, 1996

1. Greetings & getting to know someone
2. Emotions
3. Facial expressions
4. Emotions
5. Tone of Voice
6. Initiating Conversations
7. Maintaining conversations

Play Dates

- Organised (pre-planned) activity with a peer
- Based on mutually reinforcing activity
- Relies on adult facilitation of co-operative arrangements – each child has a responsibility in activity to ensure participation
- Not about typical peer interacting with adult or "helping" child with ASD but peer and child interacting with each other
- PROXIMITY, RECIPROCITY, MAXIMUM PARTICIPATION

Vismara et al (1996)

Strategies for Successful Play Dates

- Should be brief
- Peers should be compatible
- Avoid down time for both children
- Activity based (decorating sundaes, drive for a slurpy, board games, blowing bubbles)
- Increase social demand: Decrease cognitive demand
- Prime (practice) social behaviours
- Create "friend file" for following play dates
- Evaluate – subsequent play dates will be easier

Promote Generalization

- Practice in different settings
- Prime, prompt and coach
- Self-report
- Discuss performance
- Monitor the behavior
- Recognize and reinforce

Core components

- Early intervention
- Home and school collaboration
- Peer sensitivity training
- Constant guidance and feedback
- Adult mediated not adult directed
- Reinforcement for peers and child

References

1. Bellini, S; Peters, J.K; Benner, L; Hopf, A. (2007). A Meta-Analysis of School Based Social Skills Interventions for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders. *Remedial & Special Education, 28, (3), May/June 2007, 153-162.*
2. McCracken, H. & Wolfberg, P. (2006). *Autism Awareness Programs: Demystify, Not Identify.* Autism-Asperger Digest, September.
3. Vismara, L; Gengoux, G; Boettcher, M; Koegel, R & Kern-Koegel, L. (1996). *Facilitating play dates for children with ASD & typically developing peers in natural settings: a training manual.* University of California, Santa Barbara.
4. Wolfberg, P.J. (2003). *Peer Play & the Autism Spectrum: The Art of Guiding Children's Socialisation & Imagination.* Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing.
5. Wolfberg, P.J. (1999). *Play & Imagination in Children with Autism.* Columbia University: New York Teachers College Press.