

**Social skills programming for individuals on the Autism Spectrum: Training School Social
Workers
HAVE DREAMS, Illinois**

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

We provided comprehensive, practice driven, experiential autism training to 100 school social workers who work with individuals across the autism spectrum.

We know that autism occurs across a large range of language skills, cognitive abilities and all across the lifespan. Social problems associated with ASD are some of the most pervasive characteristics of the disorder. Even those individuals that have high IQ's and substantial language skills struggle with a range of interpersonal skills well into adulthood. While typically developing children pick up play and social skills with natural ease, children with autism need to be taught skills in very specific settings to be able to adapt to a social world. We also know that those skills then need to be practiced in a wide variety of settings to be generalized into different areas of life.

This training is multi-modal in that it includes lectures, real life examples and solutions, video demonstration, handouts, problem solving and opportunities to create social activities. The training focused on how to provide social developmental skills interventions within school settings. The participants will learn how to apply interventions across the range of skill sets seen within the school age range (more concrete learners through to high functioning learners).

PROJECT STEPS

We developed a series of PowerPoint lectures covering topics such as Autism Spectrum Characteristics, Learning Style, Social and Play Development, Structured approaches to learning, visual supports for social skills, visual supports for social communication etc.

To support these lectures we have a wide range of real life photo examples to show social skills activities in practice. In addition, we developed and recorded a large number of real life video's. The video's demonstrate a range of play and social skill activities being practiced with individuals across the spectrum.

We highlighted young, or more concrete learners, all the way through to older and more abstract learners. The lectures, photo's and video's include examples of one:one teaching, practice with other children, as well as group activities.

We developed a series of structured activities relating to social skills and social communication skills. These activities were broken into component parts such that training participants could make them on the day of training under direct supervision.

The training day consisted of:

Morning: lectures regarding autism, structured teaching and social skills. A make and take social skill activity.

Afternoon: Lecture regarding social communication followed by a make and take social communication activity.

Trainings were hosted by 3 separate school districts and 1 Spec Ed Co-operative.

They were targeted to reach many low income families and multiracial communities. Data provided by host school districts:

The range of low income/poverty students ranged from 41%-89.5%

The range of Hispanic school district participation ranged from 27%-95.8%

The range of Black school district participation ranged from 2%-38%

PROJECT OUTCOMES

Effectiveness of training

Objective

This study investigated the preliminary effectiveness of the training model to increase social workers competence in social skills programming. The study addressed (i) competence of social skills programming gained across the training period (ii) the implementation of specific social strategies following training.

Methods

(i) Participating social workers who attended the training workshop completed a structured questionnaire pre and post training.

The questionnaire was developed and piloted by the lead trainers to assess key aspects of social communication and social skills interventions. Each of three sections described a student with skills sets at the concrete level (early learner); intermediate level; abstract level (advanced learner). Participants answered four questions in each section regarding that child. The final questionnaire had 12 questions, with a maximum total score of 72.

(ii) 10-14 days following training, participants were contacted by email and asked to return a survey of social skills strategies they implemented in their schools.

Results

i) T-test revealed that there was a significant ($p < .01$) increase in competence scores pre and post training at each level of social development (concrete, intermediate, abstract).

ii) A response rate of 60% was achieved for the follow up survey.

Follow up questions indicated that some aspect of the structured teaching training was implemented into practice by 90% of responders.

Satisfaction with training:

Overall, how would you rate this Autism Spectrum Workshop	Useless	Below average	Average	Good	Excellent
	0	1	2	3	4
RESPONSE				15%	85%

Do you feel more prepared to address the needs of individuals on the Autism Spectrum having attended this workshop?

RESPONSE	NO 1% (n=1)	YES 99%
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CONCLUSIONS

By attending the training, participants increased their confidence in their ability to teach social behavior, at any level of social ability, to individuals with ASD. Furthermore, once they returned to their home schools they implemented a multitude of social interaction and social communication techniques. Satisfaction of training was very high.

These results indicate the effectiveness of our training program.

Comments from participants:

From the follow up survey by email:

“The training was extremely informative, and I learned more (in 1 day) about Autism and how to work with children who are on the spectrum than I have in years! “

“The training was excellent and so specific to what social workers are asked to do with children on the spectrum. The information was very useful and highly relevant to what I do each day and I found it invaluable since I have very little experience working with younger children with autism (I had more experience working with older students diagnosed with Aspergers). I would find follow up consultation and/or training to be very helpful.”

“Thank you for an amazing day! The information you provided was useful, practical and easy to understand and apply to my work. You also injected much inspiration into my practice - I went back to my classrooms with a renewed sense of enthusiasm! Thanks again!”

“Hands on make and take was great, especially since we could choose an activity that was most helpful for us. OUTSTANDING training that I think would be great on an ongoing basis (try something’s, come back together to hear what works/what needs improvements/share ideas/refresher on what we didn't use after first training). I wish I had it a long time ago!!”

This was, by far, the best training I have gone to in years. I would appreciate further trainings from this team! It was excellent!

“I found the training very helpful and thought provoking.”

“Wonderful training”

From the end of training day comments:

“Best workshop I’ve ever attended. Finally I’ve received concrete strategies and supports to use with my students.

Speakers were engaging and provided concrete and useful examples and strategies.

Would attend more workshops in the future by them”

“ This training was extremely detailed and covered very important ground within a short period of time. There were many video examples which brought the curriculum to life – the activities were awesome. I am very excited to bring this information back to the classroom and start using it with my students! THANK YOU!”

“Practical idea’s to use in practice! Awesome.

For some reason – rarely happens in other training sessions (re:other topics).

Motivating – helpful presenters, super interesting and knowledgeable”

“Excellent! Loved that we left with our materials”

“Awesome training! I loved how hands on and realistic the presentation was and I definitely have a better grasp of how to work with...students with ASD.”

“I would like to have more trainings like this as well as more consultation”

“Great training! So helpful!!”

“Loved the visuals and hands on structured activities for us!!! ☺

“Great information!”

“GREAT, HELPFUL- WONDERFUL.

THANK YOU !!

MORE MORE MORE!!”

“Loved the make and take. THANK YOU!”

“Great presentation and activities”

“It was great! I really liked that they gave us specific interventions to use with the kids. I will use everything I learned!”

“The presentation was fun and made me think. Thank you.”

“...I am excited to implement some of the activities at school”

“I really liked the activities presented for social communication. It was great to make the activities”

“I am excited to try my activities with different groups of students I work with. The information on visual supports was very helpful!”

“Making the visuals is extremely helpful! Also, the video clips were relevant and extremely helpful to the workshop. Thank you!”

“Excellent workshop. I like walking away with tools (activities) I can use immediately. Love you guys!”

“It was very helpful as I am new to autism..”

“This was an excellent presentation.....”

“This was an excellent training. The examples provided and the video’s helped us understand how it works in action. It is clear that you are dedicated to increasing knowledge of best practices for students with autism, given that you provide/share materials for us”

“The training showed me a lot of different ways to engage students with autism. It was great and loved how we get to make our own activities! Job well done!”

“Enjoyed the workshop since it incorporated general information and practical idea’s”

“ADD MORE! [workshops] I left with so much information from the workshop today! 😊 “

“I learned a lot of new information and skills”

“ This workshop was extremely helpful. The presenters were both very engaging and knowledgeable about the topic. They gave many useful idea’s to use with the students. I also really enjoyed that we were given activities to make and that are ready to use”

“Wonderful videos and visual supports. Hands on activities were very helpful as well. Gentleman very knowledgeable.

“Excellent! You really know your stuff! Great idea’s! Love all the visuals and being able to make some things to take!! 😊 “

“Loved the practicality of the activities, ability to make them and take home to practice and use. Loved the video’s with real life application. Great presentation!!”

“The best part are the take away activities. I can start tomorrow!”

“This would be helpful for all our special education teachers. Thanks!”

“ I work with students that are diagnosed with autism daily. Your presentation and training are fantastic...”

This was really informative and I liked the examples you showed and the opportunity to make activities we can use with our students”

“Great workshop enjoyed the examples and video’s. Would like more workshops like this”

“Great hand on approaches, modeling and examples of different levels of structured activities”

“Wonderful training! I really enjoyed!! ☺ “

“Thanks for the info. And for the materials!”

“This workshop was fantastic. I loved all the video examples and visuals”

“LOVED the training....Great presentation. Enjoyed how you both presented as well!”

“Excellent presentation. Full of base knowledge AND practical applications. Thank you for all the video’s and the opportunities to create the activities. I’ve always seen these types of items but had no idea how, or opportunity, to make them”

Comments forwarded from Special Education Directors *(used with permission)*

“Hi [special ed director]

I just wanted to drop a quick note and thank you for letting me attend yesterday's Autism Speaks seminar with [person1] and [person 2]. It was one of the best presentations I've seen! Rather than spend the majority of time reviewing the hows and whys of autism (which we did cover, of course), Chris and Jeff dug into tangible activities and interventions for working with children along the spectrum. It is so helpful to leave these types of presentations armed with a toolbox!

We are already hoping to incorporate some of the suggestions into our sessions with children. Thank you again for the opportunity;” *{social worker River Forrest}*

“Hi [special ed director]

I just wanted to take the time to personally thank you for today's Autism Workshop. I really found it to be one of the most valuable workshops I have experienced in years. This is due to the fact that the presenters shared "doable"(if that's a real word) interventions that I will be able to implement immediately. The fact that they actually gave us time to create activities while we were in session was fantastic.

Again, thanks for considering our needs which will greatly positively impact some of the students we serve.” *{social worker Oak Park}*

Dissemination of results

We submitted the preliminary results to the International Meeting for Autism Research (IMFAR, 2012) for consideration.

We are in preparation to present to the Midwest Autism Consortium (MAC) at the University of Illinois, Chicago, which is part of the Autism Centre of Excellence directed by Professor Ed Cook.

We plan to write up the training and outcome of training to a peer reviewed journal.

Submitted to Autism Speaks as the Final report for the community service grant awarded March 23rd 2011.

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Christopher Flint, Autism Consultant
Jeff Salt, Clinical Psychologist

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www.HaveDreams.org