Social Skills Training Groups
For Individuals with AS and HFA

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Training Specifics

- Sponsored by Autism Speaks
- Based on the successful programs and curriculum at Colorado State University and under the supervision of Dr. Lee A. Rosén – Professor of Psychology and Director of the Psychological Services Center
- The book, *Social Skills Groups for Children and Adolescents with Asperger’s Syndrome: A Step by Step Program*—published by one of Dr. Rosén’s students, and based on our program at CSU—will serve as a resource.
Training Leaders

- Elizabeth Christensen, M.S.
  - Advanced doctoral student in the Counseling Psychology Program at Colorado State University
  - Several years leading the adolescent social skills groups
  - Experienced in administration of diagnostic tools (ADOS-2, ADI-R) and assessment of Autism Spectrum Disorders in children, adolescents and adults.
Training Leaders

• Danielle Mohr, M.S.
  • Advanced doctoral student in the Counseling Psychology Program at Colorado State University
  • Several years leading the children’s social skills groups
  • Works individually with children with Autism Spectrum Disorders and their families
Agenda

- Autism Spectrum Disorders
- What Are Social Skills and How Do I Teach Them?
- Social Skills Groups *Logistics*
- Social Skills Groups *Curriculum*
  - Children’s – Child-focused Interactional
  - Adolescent – Community-based Experiential
  - Adult- Psychoeducational/Naturalistic
Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

- Developmental disorder characterized by:
  1. deficits in social communication and interaction
  2. presence of restricted/repetitive patterns of behaviors, interests or activities.
- Onset occurs during early childhood and is lifelong
- Symptoms limit and impair everyday functioning
Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

- Includes the current DSM-IV diagnostic categories of:
  - Autistic Disorder
  - Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified
  - Asperger’s Disorder
- In the DSM-V will utilize spectrum approach to enhance conceptualization and treatment planning
AUTISM TRIAD

COMMUNICATION IMPAIRMENT

REPETITIVE AND RESTRICTED INTERESTS

SOCIAL IMPAIRMENT

AUTISM DYAD
Social/Communication Impairments

- Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity
- Deficits in non-verbal communication used for social interaction
- Deficits in developing and maintaining relationships appropriate to developmental level (beyond those with caregivers)
Restricted/Repetitive Interests

- Stereotyped or repetitive speech, motor movements, or use of objects
- Excessive adherence to routines and resistance to change
- Restricted or obsessive interests
- Unusual interest in sensory aspects of environment
Autism as a Spectrum Disorder

• Factors that contribute to the spectrum nature of Autism:
  • Intellectual ability
  • Expressive Language ability
  • Level of support being received
  • Age
ASD Continuum

Level 1: Requires Support
• Mild Deficits
• Minimal Social Supports

Level 2: Requires Substantial Support
• Moderate Deficits
• Receiving Social Supports

Level 3: Requires Very Substantial Support
• Severe Deficits
• Receiving Social Supports
Questions?

Next up: What are social skills?
What do we mean by “social skills”?

- Social Skills are:
  - Rules for interaction
  - Behaviors that predict important social outcomes like love and happiness
  - A vehicle for cognitive and language skills
Doesn’t Everyone Know This Stuff?

- Most people tend to “pick up” social skills in the same way they pick up language skills: naturally and easily. These people generally have an implicit social “map.”
However...

- Individuals with HFA and AS usually don’t have an implicit social “map,” and are forced to guess at what the “map” looks like.
So we need to *make the implicit explicit*.

- If social expectations are clearly explained, modeled, practiced, and reinforced, the social “map” of a child with AS and HFA is likely to improve.
Research

- So how can we best teach social skills?
  - Group Setting—Research suggests that children in a psychoeducational skills-based *interactional* group show improvements in the specific areas targeted by that group.
  - In fact, social skills groups for school-aged children with ASD have demonstrated enough evidence to be considered “an established Empirically Based Treatment” (EBT) (Barry et al, 2003)
Why This Curriculum?

- Our curriculum includes several key factors found in the research to improve outcomes:
  - Parental involvement (Lim, Kattapuram & Lian, 2007)
  - Didactic format (Barry et al., 2003)
  - CBT techniques like homework (Gresham, 1981)
7-Step Model for teaching Social Skills

1. **Set Goal**- Choose and clearly define a manageable social skills goal.
2. **Teach**- Explain what behavior looks like and why behavior is important.
3. **Model**- Demonstrate the desired social behavior.
4. **Practice**- Role-play the desired behavior.
5. **Prompt**- Prompt for a natural display of desired behavior.
6. **Reinforce**- Reinforce group members after the demonstrate desired behavior.
7. **Generalize**- Encourage practice of the behavior outside the group.
Step 1: Set Goal: Choose and clearly define a *manageable goal*.

- What makes a goal manageable?
  - Goal behavior is appropriate for the individual's age and current level of functioning
  - It should be a *small* step up from individual’s current level of functioning
  - Have some way of measuring the behavior that will allow you to chart progress.
Step 2: **Teach:** Explain what behavior looks like and why behavior is important.

- Combine leader explanation with participation for group members
  - Can anyone tell me….?
- Break down the component parts of the targeted social skills
  - Ex. Conversation
    - What makes a conversation?
    - How do you start one?
    - How do you know when it’s finished?
- Discuss why social skill is important
  - Give examples to illustrate
Step 3: Model the desired behavior.

Modeling can take many forms. For example, if you want to teach the skills of giving compliments, you could…

- Act out a role-play with fellow group leader where you compliment their new outfit
- Point it out when peers compliment each other
- Provide anecdotes that illustrate the desired skill
Step 4: Practice the behavior.

- Practicing the behavior gives the individual a chance to:
  - Try the behavior in a pressure-free situation
  - Figure out exactly what the desired behavior looks like (and what will lead to reinforcement)
Step 5: **Prompt** for the behavior.

- Start with fairly intrusive, explicit prompts and work your way to less intrusive prompts.
- For example, giving the individual specific instructions to “find one thing to compliment your partner on.”
- Then as the individual’s greeting behavior improved, you might prompt with, “What should you do?” or even a gesture.
Step 6: Reinforce!

- Whenever they perform the goal behavior, reinforce it!
- Reinforcement generally leads to much stronger response patterns than punishment.
- Reinforcers should be fairly small, immediate, and most importantly, of value to the individual.
- Make sure the individual knows what she/he is being reinforced for. (i.e. “I’m loving your eye contact!”)
Ideas for Reinforcers

For folks who respond to social (non-tangible) reinforcement:

- Verbal praise ("I like the way you waited for your turn!" "You did a great job of introducing yourself just then!")
- Hug
- High-five
Ideas for Reinforcers

For others who respond to more tangible rewards:

- Tokens that can be “spent” on rewards later (like TV time, video game time, desired toys, etc.)
- Small piece of candy or a favorite food (e.g., skittles, animal crackers)
- Stickers
- Small toys
- Trading cards
- Monetary incentives
- Activities
Step 7: Generalize: Encourage Practice Outside of Group.

- For children:
  - Provide parents with targeted feedback concerning their child’s progress
  - Provide parents with written instruction on how they can practice the skills learned at home with their child.
    - E.g., “Practice commenting: have your child look around the room and comment on what he/she sees. Reinforce comments liberally.”
  - Assign manageable and appropriate homework assignments to the child and have the parent supervise and sign off on their completion.
  - Reinforce targeted behaviors!!
Step 7: **Generalize:** Encourage Practice Outside of Group. (Cont’d)

- **For Adolescents and Adults:**
  - Provide “achievement” assignments that generalize to both school and home settings
    - Use Monetary Incentives
    - Get parents onboard
Questions?

Next up: Logistics associated with starting a social skills group
Group Logistics

- **Start-Up**
  - How to recruit participants?
  - Where should group be held?

- **Group Specifics**
  - How many participants?
  - How much should group cost?
  - Eligibility criteria

- **Who should run group?**
  - Teachers
  - Therapists

- **Confidentiality**
Recruiting Participants

- Mailing list – build it up and make connections
  - Previous Clients
  - Community Mental Health Centers/Support Groups/Schools
  - Connections to private practitioners in the area
Location of Group

- Child and Adult Interactional groups
  - Classrooms/therapy rooms of adequate size
  - Chairs arranged in a circle
    - For Child group- provide waiting area for parents

- Experiential groups
  - Group is held in various places throughout the community
    - Identifiable meeting location for each group
    - Parents drive teen to location of activity
    - Build relationships with organizations/sites for activities
    - Liability Release for off site activities
How Many Participants

- Ideal group size ranges from 5-9 for all groups
- Want a fairly low Leader/Helper to Participant ratio for all groups
  - E.g., 2 : 1 or 3:1
Forms

- All Groups:
  - Referral form
    - Allergies to food
    - Parent goals for group
    - Important Information for Group Leaders
  - Parent-Child Demographic Form
  - Parent/Guardian Consent Form
- Adolescent/Experiential Groups
  - Parent Permission/Liability Form
  - Consent for Video/Audio recording
  - Parent and self-report BASC’s
Cost of Group

• Set a specific price
• Keep in mind your expenses:
  • Snacks
  • Juice
  • Games
  • Activities
  • Printing
  • Reinforcements: (Prizes/Monetary Incentives)
  • Therapists
• Scholarships
Eligibility Criteria

- Adequate amount of verbal ability
- Social skills deficits
- Appropriate age/developmental level
  - Age cutoffs
    - Children’s 5-12
    - Adolescent 12-18
    - Adult 18 - ?
- Gender
- Diagnostic Considerations
- Functional/Adaptive skill level
Getting Ready for Group

- Pick dates, times and location for your group
  - How many sessions/topics?
  - How many days a week?
  - How long?
- Mail an interest letter out with set deadline to respond
  - Includes dates/times and price
- For Child and Adult Groups: Contact those who respond by the deadline to set up an initial screen
  - 20 minutes long
  - Assess for eligibility criteria
  - What do they want to get out of group?
Post-Group

• Post-group letter
  • Summarize group
  • Discuss positive progress observed in group member
  • Areas for growth

• Feedback Questionnaire
  • What went well/not so well?
  • Did you notice improvement in any targeted social skills?
  • Suggestions for program enhancement
Questions?

Next up: Curriculum for the Children’s Social Skills Group
Social Skills in Children

- Research tells us that social skills are important for functioning in a variety of settings (Campbell, Hansen and Nangle, 2010)
- When children do not have adequate social skills, it puts them at risk for:
  - isolation from peers and family
  - emotional and behavioral problems
  - academic underachievement (Klin et al., 2000)
Social Skills Groups for Children

• Children involved in interactional social skills groups demonstrate improvements in:
  • Greetings and conversation skills (Barry et al., 2003)
  • Eye contact (Castorina and Negri, 2011)
  • Identification of feelings (Castorina and Negri, 2011)
Children’s Social Skills Group Curriculum

- 1 hr. sessions
  - 10 minutes of unstructured play
  - 5 minutes of review of the previous lesson
  - 35 minutes addressing the main topic
    - Group discussion
    - Activity
    - Role plays
  - 10 minutes for snack/unstructured play
Children’s Social Skills Group Curriculum

What to do When:

- During Unstructured Play Time
  - Provide feedback
  - Model appropriate behavior
- During Group Discussion
  - Manage behaviors
- During Snack
  - Teach parents the lesson and provide them with a handout for how to work with the kids at home
Children’s Social Skills Group Curriculum

- 8 different topics covered
  - Group Rules/Introductions
  - Conversations
  - Friendship Skills and Blockers
  - Identifying/Expressing Emotions
  - Coping with Anger and Anxiety
  - Peer Conflict
  - Sportmanship
  - Manners
- * Parent suggested topics
Children’s Social Skills Group Curriculum

- **Group Rules**
  - Set clear boundaries and expectations

- **Introductions**
  - Formal vs. Informal
  - What should your face look like?
    - Eye contact
    - Smile
  - Personal space/appropriate touch
  - Reciprocity
Children’s Social Skills Group Curriculum

- Conversations
  - “Give and take”
  - Appropriate topics
  - Keeping the conversation going
  - Facial expressions
  - How do you know when someone is bored?
  - Practice!
Children’s Social Skills Group Curriculum

• Friendship
  • What are friends?
  • Why is it important to have friends?
• Friendship Skills and Blockers
  • Friendship skills are things that help us make friends while friendship blockers are things that stop us from making friends
  • Brainstorm ideas and role play scenarios
Children’s Social Skills Curriculum

- Identifying/Expressing Emotions
  - What are some feelings you might have had today?
  - Why is it important for us to have feelings?
  - Why might it be important for us to know how others are feeling?
  - How can we know what others are feeling?
    - Be a detective and search for 4 clues:
      - Body language
      - Facial Expressions
      - Words
      - Tone of Voice
Children’s Social Skills Curriculum

- Coping with Anger and Anxiety
  - Anger
    - What is anger? What does it feel like in your body? What situations make you angry? What do you do?
  - Anxiety
    - What is anxiety? What does it feel like in your body? What situations make you anxious? What do you do?

- Coping Steps
  - Stop
  - Take a deep breath
  - Think
  - Make a plan
Children’s Social Skills Group Curriculum

- Peer Conflict
  - What does conflict mean?
  - Is it okay to have conflict with friends?
  - What are bullies? What types of things do bullies do?
  - How should we handle peer conflict?
    - Compromise
    - Tell an adult
  - Role-plays
Children’s Social Skills Group Curriculum

- **Sportsmanship**
  - Importance of being a good sport
  - What are some examples of being a good sport?
  - What are some examples of being a poor sport?
  - How to join a game that has already started
- **Flexibility**
  - What should we do when we win?
  - What should we do when we lose?
Children’s Social Skills Group Curriculum

• Pizza Party/Manners
  • What manners do we need while eating?
  • What kinds of things should we talk about during the meal?
  • How should we behave during the meal?
  • How do we say goodbye?
Questions?

Next up: Curriculum for Adolescent Experiential Social Skills Group
Adolescent Social Skills Group

- Due to increased complexity of social communication that accompanies aging, social deficits become more prominent in adolescence (Tantam, 2003; Klin & Volkmar, 2003).

- Adolescents with ASD report higher levels of loneliness and lower peer relationship quality than same aged peers (Capps et al., 1996; Bauminger & Kasari, 2000).

- Bullying dramatically increases in adolescence (Tse et al., 2007).
Research

- Adolescents involved in experiential training groups demonstrate:
  - Reduction in school-related “problem behaviors” (Graham & Elliot, 1990)
  - Enhanced knowledge of social skills
  - Increased frequency of get-togethers with friends
  - Improved global social skill- as rated by blind researchers (Barry et al., 2003)
  - Increased perception of peer social support (Tse et al., 2007)
Overview

- 8-week session
  - 2 hours per session
  - Meet at prearranged “sites” for activities

Activities
- Pottery, mini-golf, bowling, nature walk, downtown scavenger hunt, shopping at the mall, game night, corn maze/pumpkin picking, public art project, dinner at restaurant
- Include directions and maps of locations in parent packet
Child Interactional vs. “Experiential” groups

- Experiential vs. non-experiential
  - “Natural setting”
  - Provides adolescents with realistic yet structured behavioral rehearsal opportunity for newly learned skills
  - Parents used as “agents of intervention”
    - Repetition and rehearsal further promoted by assigning parent supervised homework assignments (Barry et. al, 2003)
- Critical for leaders to elicit community/organizational support
Achievements

• Assignments with measureable outcomes help generalize skills learned in group to home and school settings
• Consist of 2 levels of achievement:
  • Basic achievement – rewarded with $2 reinforcer
  • “Above and Beyond” - rewarded with $5 reinforcer
• Build on skills that have been previously taught and encourage group interaction
  • Examples:
    • Watch TV with parent and point out emotions
    • Compliment someone at school
    • Call up group member and ask them questions about themselves
    • Call up group member and have an unscripted conversation
    • Invite group members over your house to socialize

• Parents sign off on completion of the assignment
Structure

- Review last week’s lesson/discuss achievement
  - Reinforcement- monetary incentives awarded
- Didactic component
  - Prompted discussion
  - Leaders model behavior
- Practice-
  - Role-Plays
- Activity
  - Review rules applicable to venue/activity
  - Watch for demonstrations of goal behavior and reinforce
- Snack/Discussion
- “Achievement” assignment
- Parental Feedback Session-Parent Handout
  - Generalize behavior outside group- discuss ways to practice/prompt/reinforce at home
First Group Meeting

- “Trial run”
  - Introductions (leaders/parents)
  - Separate parents from group members
  - One leader stays with parents- paperwork/answers ?’s
First Group Meeting cont’d

- Other leader runs icebreaker activities with group members
  - Normalize anxiety
  - Brief Explanation of Group
    - Discuss activities
    - How group is different then “real life?”
    - Discuss need for privacy
  - Group Guidelines
    - Everybody contributes rule
    - Compile list
    - Everybody signs
  - Icebreakers- “everybody who”
    - Find common interests
  - Individual goals
Content

• Emphasize the following domains
  • Conversation (e.g., Corn Maze)
  • Friendship-making and maintaining
  • Conflict Management
  • Flexibility (e.g., Pottery/Public Art Project)
  • Sportsmanship- (e.g., Mini Golf/Bowling/Park Games)
  • Politeness- (e.g., Mall)
Additional Adolescent Relevant Topics

- Assertiveness
- Bullying
- Electronic Communication
- Self-Presentation/ Non-verbal communication
- Dating
Assertiveness

• Discussion:
  • What does it mean to be assertive?
    • Why should we care?
  • Times when it would be important to be assertive?
  • Give some examples of times when you’ve been assertive-
    • What was the result?
    • What should we do if assertiveness doesn’t work?

• Role-plays
Self Presentation

- Discussion:
  - Importance of presenting yourself well
    - What can you do to present yourself well to others?
    - What are some good self-presentation skills you have noticed in other group members?
    - What are some things you feel you need to work on in your self-presentation? (Leaders give examples first)
  - Activity- picture presentation, “tell me what you can tell about this person by looking at him/her”
  - “Silent Movie” Role Plays
Future Directions/Saying Goodbye

- Appreciation Sheets
  - What kinds of things did people write on your sheet?
  - How did it feel to get that feedback?

- Future Directions
  - Goal Discussion
    - What have you learned from group?
    - Progress on goals
      - How will you continue working on the goal?

- Saying Goodbye
  - What will it be like to say goodbye tonight?
  - Telephone/Email Address Exchange
Politeness/ Gift Giving (Mall)

- Discussion:
  - Why do we care about being polite?
  - Identify components of being polite:
    - Please, Thank you, offering help, making compliments
    - Considerate of others feelings
    - Considerate of others personal space
    - Apologizing when we make mistakes
  - What are “white lies?”
    - Is it possible to tell the truth without hurting someone’s feelings?
- Practice: Role-plays
- Mall Activity
  - Take turns recording each person’s favorite things (themes/candy)
  - Assign pairs
  - Assist members in selecting thoughtful gift
  - Members exchange gifts and practice polite responses
Teamwork

- Discussion:
  - What are advantages of working as part of a group
  - Can anyone think of a task they’ve had that was too difficult to accomplish alone?
  - Have you ever been part of a team that worked well together?
    - What is needed for team to work effectively?
      - Spend time together
      - Goal agreement
      - Trust
      - Encouragement
      - Mutual problem solving
      - Clear communication
      - Compromise
      - Respect
  - Team building games
Conversation

- Discussion:
  - How do you start a conversation?
  - Keep it going?
  - How do you know when it’s over?
  - How do you join a conversation?
  - Silence- what does it mean?
  - Ending conversations
- Practice: Conversation joining game
- Corn Maze Activity
Maintaining Friendships

- Discussion:
  - Friendships- What’s the point? How do you know if someone’s your friend
  - Maintain Friendships- What kinds of behaviors help maintain friendships?
    - Friendship Blockers
  - “Social Glue”- What kinds of behaviors help people make a lot of friends?
    - Communication strategies- conversation, invitation (in-person, phone, email, text)
- Practice- Phone call/Text messaging role plays
Questions?

Next up: Curriculum for Adult Social Skills Group
Social Skills in Adulthood

- Adults with AS and HFA experience:
  - Employment difficulties (Barhill, 2007)
  - Higher rates of depression and anxiety (Howlin et al. 1999)
  - Lack of community involvement
  - Lack of close and meaningful friendships (Baxter, 1997)
  - Increased victimization (Shtayermman, 2007)
Adult Social Skills Groups

- Research has shown that social skills groups are generally effective in improving skills of individuals with ASD/HFA
  - Extant research conducted with mostly children
  - More research needed on adult social skills groups
    (Reichow & Volkmar, 2010)
Objectives

- Create a safe environment for honest feedback
- Increase confidence and self-efficacy
- Insight into one’s own social skills deficits
- More capable of navigating social situations
- Gain support for challenges related to ASD
Structure

- **Didactic**: Instruction on strategies and techniques
- **Practice**: Opportunity to put skills into use and receive feedback about their skills
- **Process**: Sharing reactions and impact of group member’s behavior
- **Support**: Providing emotional support from leaders and members
Adult Social Skills Curriculum

- Conversation
- Nonverbal communication
- Group interaction
- Managing overwhelming emotions
- Professional interaction
- Developing and maintaining friendships
- Relationships and dating
- Joking and sarcasm
Introduction

- Name Learning and Goal Setting
  - Members and leaders say one thing about selves for each M&M chosen
- Rules
  - Attendance, feedback, mutual respect, confidentiality, participation
- Sharing of long-term and short-term goals
- Normalizing and psychoeducation about anxiety
- Get to know each other activity
  - Split into pairs and have group members introduce their partner to the group
Conversation

- Getting to Know New People
  - How do you talk to someone you don’t already know?
  - Safe topics, gray topics, and taboo topics
  - Practice getting to know new people using questions in pairs
  - Leaders provide feedback and process the experience
- Starting Conversations with People You Know
- Active Listening
  - Show a good listening position, reflect back what you’ve heard, empathize, avoid offering solutions, validate their feelings
  - Role play demonstrating reflection and empathy in a situation that is not highly emotional
Nonverbal Behavior

- Welcoming vs. Unwelcoming Cues
  - Ask group members to provide examples of each category of nonverbal behavior and demonstrate welcoming/unwelcoming behaviors.

- Interest vs. Boredom
  - How to show interest/attentiveness

- Repair Strategies (Used when either person is bored)
  - Change the subject
  - Ask them a question about themselves
  - Follow your curiosity
  - Role-play situations in which group members might not have understood what another person said and vice versa
Joking and Sarcasm

- Formal joking vs. sarcasm- how do you know the difference?
- How do you know when someone is telling a joke?
- When is it appropriate/not appropriate to joke with others?
- Teasing as Joking-How do you know?
- Have members generate their own questions (i.e., How was work today?) and respond with sarcasm
Dating and Relationships

- What is a date? (How is a date different than hanging out?)
- Asking Someone Out (How do you know when you should ask someone out?)
- Dos and Don'ts on a Date
  - E.g., Don’t talk only about yourself, Do ask the person questions about themselves
- Dealing with feelings of rejection
- Online Dating and profile creation
  - What is “safe” to put on a profile?
  - What is in the “gray”?
Pizza Party

- Typically occurs around the 6th group session, after group members have learned some social skills and are in the position to practice them in a simulated ‘party’ environment.
- Other adults (ideally individuals aware of the social deficits associated with ASD) are recruited to participate in the pizza party.
- Group members set social skills goals for themselves before the party begins (i.e., I would like to introduce myself to someone new) and challenge themselves to try out new behaviors at the party.
- Group leaders process the experience and provide constructive feedback on group members’ social skills.
Questions?