Social skills for adolescents and adults with ASD: Finding relevant targets for instruction, using instructional strategies that work, and balancing self-determination with skill-building

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With thanks
- To OAR
- To my mentors, colleagues, supervisees, and students
- To the people with autism I have been honored to work with

State of intervention
- Social deficits remain the most resistant to intervention efforts
- Social skill difficulties include problems with responsiveness and initiations
- Deficits also include problems in the functional availability of social responses
- Social skill deficits are a real world issue for adults with ASD
Goals for today

- Define meaningful outcomes for social skills instruction for adults
- Discuss meaningful and functional teaching strategies
- Discuss how to
  - Foster engagement
  - Foster connection
  - Reduce vulnerability

Topics for discussion

- How are we defining and teaching social skills for adults?
- How do we build social "comprehension" or more elaborate social responses?
- How do we identify core social skills for adults with ASD?
- How are future environments influencing our instruction?
- How are we planning for these meaningful outcomes?

ABA: A Definition

“Applied Behavior Analysis is the science in which tactics derived from the principles of behavior are applied systematically to improve socially significant behavior and experimentation is used to identify the variables responsible for behavior change.”

Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007
Critical elements of the definition

- Improve socially significant behavior
  - What does this mean?
- Identify variables responsible for behavior change
  - Why is this challenging in the teaching of social skills? How can this be done?

Why is it harder to teach these skills?
Diagnostic criteria review

- Impairment in social communication
  - Multiple nonverbal behaviors
  - Peer relationships
  - Sharing enjoyment
  - Social/emotional reciprocity
  - Conversation
  - Reciprocal play/activities

Why else is it harder to teach these skills?

- Multi-element skills
- Involve social judgment as well as skill mastery
  - Judgment is made more difficult by the myriad possibilities that exist in natural interactions
Lifelong Perspective

• Shattuck, et al. (2012) conducted a comprehensive literature review on individuals with ASD 18 and older (published between 2000 and 2010.)
• Evidence base about services for adults with an ASD is underdeveloped and can be considered a field of inquiry that is relatively uninformed.

National Autism Indicators Report: Transition into Young Adulthood 2015

• Transition Planning
  • 58% of youth with autism had a transition plan in place by the federally required age (according to special education teachers)

• Services
  • Approximately 26% of young adults on the autism spectrum received no services after high school

• Adult Outcomes and Disconnection
  • Over one-third of young adults were disconnected during their early 20s, meaning they never got a job or continued education after high school

Sobering news

It is clear that "young adults with autism have a difficult time following high school for almost any outcome you choose – working, continuing school, living independently, socializing and participating in the community, and staying healthy and safe. To complicate matters, many of these youth begin their journey into adulthood by stepping off a services cliff. Access to needed supports and services drops off dramatically after high school – with too many having no help at all." Roux, et al, 2015, p. 8
And more...

• “Residentially, the outcome literature on group care is scant, and current knowledge about its effect on targeted outcomes is mostly based on studies with small non-representative samples, and weak study designs, lacking control groups and standardized measures.”
  (James, 2011. p. 308)

Data...

• Health, Mental health and Health Care
  • 60% of youth had at least two health or mental health conditions in addition to ASD

• Postsecondary Education
  • 36% of young adults on the autism spectrum never attended post secondary education

• Employment
  • 58% of young adults on the spectrum worked for pay outside the home between high school and their early 20s – a rate far lower than young adults with other types of disabilities

More data....

• Living Arrangements
  • One in five young adults on the autism spectrum ever lived independently (away from parent without supervision) between high school and their early 20s

• Social and Community Participation
  • Approximately one in four young adults with autism were ENTIRELY socially isolated.

• Safety and Risk
  • Nearly ½ of the youth on the spectrum were victims of bullying during high school
  • Over 25% engaged in some type of wandering behavior
  • Low rates of criminal justice involvement reported
Post High School Adjustment

- Most students with communication challenges have difficulty post high school, regardless of where they go (especially if the difficulties are severe)
- Most have not been adequately prepared for post high school life
  - Over 50% did not have adequate transition planning
- Most individuals with severe challenges in communication also have additional challenges
  - Mental Health (60% have at least one other diagnosis)
  - Social skill deficits
  - Social isolation (25%)
  - History of bullying (50%)

College issues- Academic

- Difficulty with common expected actions
  - Taking notes
  - Quality of notes
- Difficulty with multi-step projects
- Time management/planning
- Difficulty conveying need for assistance
- Conveying content knowledge
  - Poor test performance
  - Recall vs recognition
  - Generative writing challenges

College Issues- Communication

- Difficulty answering questions
  - Can not quickly articulate
  - May be assisted by warning about being approached
  - May be diminished if topical questions are posted online before class
- Difficulty with presentations
  - Anxiety may be disabling
  - Could it be done recorded and presented on video?
  - Might there be adjustments in roles within a group?
More on communication challenges

• May not have the language available when needed
  • Anxiety directly impedes communication
• May present in unintentionally aggressive manner
  • Emotion regulation issues may co-occur
  • Finding the words can be stressful
  • Perseveration on message is common

Social issues

• ISOLATION
  • Misinterpretation by others
  • Difficulty keeping up with the group
  • Anxiety/self-consciousness about public speaking or group work

Poll #1

• Of the individuals that you are familiar with, which of these social issues are most common or concerning?
  • A. Social isolation and loneliness
  • B. Being potentially victimized
  • C. Having behavior create brushes with the law
  • D. Severe depression/suicidality
WHAT DO THESE DATA MEAN....

- Outcomes are sobering and indicate poor outcomes
- Outcomes include social isolation, lack of engagement, and vulnerability
- We must do better in earlier years

QUESTIONS TO ASK

- Where is this individual going to be in five years?
- What are the obstacles to independence?
- What can be taught and what can be adapted?
- What are this person’s social survival needs?

How should we be selecting and teaching?

- WHAT TARGETS?
- What is the VISION?
- Are we seeing through a lens of functionality?
- Are we thinking about social skills enough?
What are social/survival skills?

• Ensure behaviors do not frighten
• Ensure behaviors do not offend
• Ensure behaviors do not make others wary
• Make sure they are responsive
• Make sure they have positive interactions
• Make sure they will be accepted

Red flag skills

• Appropriate Proximity
• Approaches in the normative range
• Inhibition of unusual social overt and verbal behaviors
  • Social initiation to strangers
  • Staring
  • Odd topics
  • Fixations
• Capacity to accept both verbal and nonverbal cues

Functionality in this context

• FOCUS ON SKILLS THAT MATTER
• MAKE SURE LEARNER DOES NOT HAVE RED FLAG ISSUES
Is it a functional skill?

1. If the learner can’t do it, will someone else have to?
2. Is the skill age-appropriate for the learner?
3. Is the skill needed immediately?
4. Will it continue to be needed in the future?
5. Is the skill needed frequently?
6. Will the skill be needed in multiple environments?
7. Can it be maintained by naturally occurring events?
8. Will the skill enhance the learner’s quality of life?

Based on Brown, et al. (1980)

How are we determining skills to be worked on?

• Is it the “next item on the list?”
• Are you doing it because it is in the IHP?
• Are you following a curricular sequence?

HOW SHOULD WE BE DETERMINING GOALS?

• Individual assessment
  • Preferences
  • Skills
  • Next environments
  • Family input
  • Vision
What are other elements of functionality?

- How are we teaching?
- Where are we teaching?
- What materials are we using?
- How are we evaluating progress?

Where are we teaching?

- In the segregated vocational setting (classroom)? At home? In the community?
- Where are we teaching the skill?
  - In the CONTEXT in which we wish to see it demonstrated
    - Requesting
    - Safety skills
    - Laundry skills
    - Cleaning tables
    - Greetings
    - Purchasing

How are we evaluating progress?

- Acquisition criterion only?
- What about maintenance?
- What about generalization?
- Spontaneous display?
- What about in the absence of or with faded adult supervision?
- What about with natural contingencies of reinforcement?
What kind of data?
Data on Independence
Data on Interference/Disruption
Data that influences employment success
Social Validity Data

Independence/Prompting
These data can be compared to the assistance provided to a typical learner in that environment
- how discrepant?
These data can guide decisions about supports and about the fading of supports
These data can be a powerful measure of change

DATA
Collect data
• Generalization of skills
• Social behaviors (initiations, responses)
• Behavioral data/Disruption
• Engagement/Connection
• Conversation
• Independence (prompts)
• Other qualitative elements (speed, thoroughness)
What can data help with?

- Making adjustments in instruction
  - Add reinforcement
  - Change prompts
  - Change goal
- Decide about supports based on data
  - Need for intervention?
  - Need for additional supports?
  - Systematic fading plans

Very closely related: How do we ensure that the skills are generalizable?

- Teaching in natural contexts
- Assessing for generalization
  - Analogs
  - Natural environment probes
- Teaching smartly
  - Using multiple exemplars
  - Training loosely

Qualitative aspects of social behaviors

- Clarity
- Appropriateness
  - Think red flags
- Independence
  - Think proximity reduction
- Endurance
  - Think competitive employment
- Latency
  - Think social norms
How do we address these issues?

- Clarity and Appropriateness
  - Use shaping
  - Use differential reinforcement
  - Specifically teach discrimination of appropriate and inappropriate

- Independence
  - Guard against prompt dependency
  - Program for generalization
  - Use proximity fades systematically
  - Transfer to self-monitoring for social responses and initiations

And that responses are readily available........

- Increasing the likelihood that learners will have skills when they need them

INCREASE REAL EMPLOYMENT

- Reduce barriers
- Community relationships
- VIDEO RESUMES

INCREASE REAL EMPLOYMENT

- Reduce barriers
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- VIDEO RESUMES
**Poll # 2**

- What are the biggest barriers to employment?
  - A. Inability to showcase strengths
  - B. Bias against hiring people with disabilities
  - C. Social behaviors that make people uncomfortable
  - D. Behavioral escalations

**How are problems in fluency manifested in learners with autism?**

- Effortful, laborious motor responses
- Long durations of responses
- Long latencies to respond

**What is the social significance of dysfluency?**

- Missed social opportunities
- Missed opportunities to participate in groups
WAYS TO ATTEND TO FLUENCY

• Being a fluency builder vs. blocker
• Attend to latency, shape it
• Attend to duration, build systematically
• Check peers for norms and for real-world aims

Characteristics of Fluent Behavior

• Automatic
• Low response effort
• Flowing
• Functional
• Expert

What other elements of social skill training are commonly discussed as clinical challenges?

• Following social rules
• Emitting complex social responses
Are these important?

- Related to success
- Related to avoidance of negative outcomes
- Related to quality of life

Understanding social rules and what is expected .......

- What do people use to teach these skills?
  - Rule cards
  - Behavioral rehearsal
  - Feedback on performance
  - Combination approaches (Teaching Interaction, Cool vs Not Cool)
  - Role plays
  - Video instruction
  - Social Stories

Social stories: Appeal

- Clinical popularity
  - Ease of implementation
    - Touted as applicable to a wide range of behavior
- Clinical guidelines
  - If used (but why??), should be used in combination with direct behavior change procedures
  - Does it add ANYTHING???
  - HOW ARE WE EVALUATING IMPACT????
Interesting research questions

• Component analyses
• Additive effect?
• Compare it to other effective procedures- BST, Scripts, Video Modeling, Teaching Interaction
• Test whether it serves a function for caregivers

Are these behavior analytic?

• 7 Dimensions
• Applied
• Behavioral
• Analytic
• Technological
• Effective
• Conceptually Systematic
• Generality

What would we use?

• Role plays and Behavioral Rehearsal
• Behavior Skills Training
• Scripts
• Teaching Interaction
• Cool vs. Not Cool
• Video Modeling
• EMBEDDED TEACHING
• NATURAL ENVIRONMENT
How do we get to more meaningful outcomes?

• TEACH IN CONTEXT OF RED FLAG PREVENTION
• CHANGE OUR INSTRUCTIONAL ENVIRONMENTS
• COMMUNITY BASED INSTRUCTION
  • Increase real employment
    • How to secure jobs
      • Employment barriers
    • Showcasing strengths
    • How to provide on-site assistance/support
  • Remote supervision through technology
• CREATIVE models of residential support
  • Shared living experiences
    • Working with government to help support such models

What else falls under social skills?

• Understanding idioms and slang expressions
• Telling and understanding jokes
• Understanding nonverbal communication
• Perspective taking skills
• Problem solving skills

Are these important skills?

• MAYBE, for survival and acceptability
• REDUCE LIKELIHOOD OF OFFENDING OTHERS
• REDUCE LIKELIHOOD OF BEING ACCUSED OF INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR
• REDUCE LIKELIHOOD OF IMPULSIVE RESPONSE THAT LEADS TO TROUBLE
What about other issues?

• Sexual Behavior
  • Ensuring safe behavior as a pursuer
  • Ensuring not victimized
• Bullying
  • What is the correct response to teach?
  • What is the correct behavior to emit?
• What about mental health challenges?
  • Detection
  • Treatment
  • Prevention of violence

What are some ways to address these concerns?

• Teach the individual to report behavior that is novel or unclear
• Do discrimination training for acceptable and unacceptable behaviors
• Present social rules and teach to the nuances
• Teach behavior regulation strategies
• Ensure consultative support

Partnering with other professionals

• Evaluation of comorbidity
• Risk assessment
• Sexual behavior issues or sexual trauma issues
• Educating first responders
Dignity (from Reid, Rosswurm, & Rotholz, 2017)

- “the quality or state of being worthy, honored, or esteemed”
  (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 1971)
- “the idea that a being has an innate right to be valued, respected, and to receive ethical treatment”

Speaking to Adults with Disabilities

- Table 1 Speaking About Adults With Disabilities in Ways That Reflect Dignity in Specific Situations
  - Recommendations
    - Refrain from speaking about a person with a disability in the immediate presence of the individual without involving the person in the communication; attempt to speak about the person to another individual in a separate location or at least in a manner that is not likely to be apparent to the person who is the focus of the conversation.
    - Refer to the person, not a behavioral characteristic.
    - Avoid the potentially pejorative term low functioning; consider people-first language, such as someone with “more significant” or “more severe” disabilities.
    - Respect the adult status of the person.

Behaving toward Adults with Disabilities

- Table 2 Behaving in Ways That Reflect Dignity
  - Recommendations
    - When escorting or traveling with an adult with a disability, walk side by side with the person, not in front of the person.
    - Whenever possible, push a wheelchair from the side instead of from behind.
    - If it is necessary to physically prompt movement, do so from the side by guiding the elbow or with a hand lightly on the lower back in contrast to pulling or tugging the person.
    - If you are traveling with a group of adults with disabilities in a van or similar vehicle, sit with the people with disabilities in contrast to segregating them in the back of the vehicle from support persons who sit in the front.
More on behavior

- Sit with a group of individuals in public places (e.g., restaurants) in contrast to support persons sitting at one location and the people with disabilities being segregated at another sitting location.

- Refrain from eating or drinking in the presence of individuals with disabilities when they do not have opportunities to eat or drink; either restrict eating and drinking to situations in which the people with disabilities are not present or ensure that everyone present has immediate opportunities to eat or drink.

- Support a dignified appearance: When an individual’s grooming or attire may place the individual in an undignified or otherwise negative light, take immediate action to remedy his or her appearance.

Final quote

- “In short, treat others as you desire to be treated. This principle of human reciprocity is well accepted across numerous cultures ("Golden Rule," n.d.). Relatedly, when considering how to speak or behave in regard to an adult with IDD, behavior analysts can decide if they would want their son or daughter, mom or dad, grandmother or grandfather, or any other loved one treated in a certain way. If not, then behavior analysts should generally refrain from treating people with IDD in that manner.”

How common is it to see behaviors promoting dignity?

- A. Very common
- B. There is some room for improvement
- C. Common issues of violating dignity in these ways
QUALITY OF LIFE AND HAPPINESS

• What do we know about these elements of programming?
• Are we assessing them as outcomes?

What are components?

• DIMENSIONS
  • physical health
  • psychological state
  • level of independence
  • social relationships
  • personal beliefs
  • relationship to the environment

Happiness- operationally defined

• Happiness = Private Event
  • Self-Report
  • Indices
  • Overt behaviors
  • Observable

• Green, Gardner, & Reid, 1997; Green & Reid, 1996; Green & Reid, 1999; Green & Reid, 2005; Parsons, Reid, and Lattimore, 2012
Evaluate happiness

- Evaluate activities designed to promote happiness
- Identify unhappiness during events
  - Alter events?
  - Prevent distress?
- Evaluate behavior reduction interventions
- Resolve controversies within team
- Assess effects of teaching strategies

Our goal............

- Our goal in targeting skills should be to create changes that
  - Are socially significant
  - Are meaningful
  - Occur in natural environments
  - Occur in generalized contexts
  - Occur spontaneously
  - Lead to a better quality of life

Another index of change: Social validity

- Are the changes making a meaningful difference in this child’s life and in the lives of those he or she encounters?
  - More rewarding interactions
  - Fewer negative interactions
  - More independence
  - Fewer assists from adults
  - Positive reactions from other community members
  - Increased openness and real community integration
  - Happiness
  - Choice
Thank you
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