



What to Look For in an Effective Social Skills Group

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Social skills training groups vary tremendously in their ability to help children not only learn but also transfer skills from a group to a home and school environment. For many children, learning new social skills is like learning a foreign language. Similarly to acquiring a new language, it's important that the kids are immersed in the thinking and culture of interpersonal skill building. In addition, the skills need to be practiced inside and outside of group in order for new friendship skills to take hold.

There are a few key elements that the research on social skills training reveals as critical for real and sustained friendship building to take place:

(1) Real Change Requires Real Time.

For many, learning social skills does not come naturally. Like learning a new language, acquiring social skills takes time and practice in order to sustain long-term, systemic change. In the Stepping Stones groups, I notice a self-esteem boost in the first couple of months of group, but the lasting skill changes don't begin to take hold until the sixth month of weekly intensive groups.

(2) Parent Involvement is Critical.

Repetition and rehearsal are key factors in transferring learned skills to a child's natural environment. In the Stepping Stones parent groups, parents are taught the same skills that the kids are working on so that learning and practice continues at home. When parents participate in this way, they help deepen a child's understanding and help move learned skills into the child's "muscle memory" (where behaviors become more natural and automatic). Children acquire the necessary skills exponentially more quickly and deeply when parents and clinicians are all on the same page.

(3) Social Skills Must Be Practiced in Between Sessions.

A cognitive-behavioral therapeutic model like Stepping Stones stresses the need for homework in order to reinforce skills learned during group. This way, children are encouraged to practice the skills acquired in a variety of social settings outside of group, which "cements" these social skills for life.

(4) Focus on Specific Skills.

A well-structured, comprehensive social skills group must cover several common areas of weakness in children who struggle with making and maintaining friends:

- Reading social cues accurately
- Active listening
- Making a good first impression
- Developing good eye contact
- Improving communication and conversation skills
- Facilitating social entry
- Coping effectively with teasing and bullying
- Enhancing self-esteem
- Managing stress
- Developing anger control

(5) Groups Need to Be Carefully Formed.

It can be challenging to group children together appropriately for maximum benefit. In Step relies on a series of criteria when forming a social skills group. Some of the factors include the children's age, gender, social and emotional development, treatment goal objectives, among others.

(6) Licensed Clinicians are a Must.

It is crucial to have a group run by a licensed clinician who has had the proper training to help actualize goals set for your child. At In Step, most children's groups are run by two therapists. Two heads are better than one!

There are realistic benefits to many therapy groups. Groups instill hope in children who otherwise might feel alone. They offer a feeling of acceptance that may not be found in other social settings. However, in order to be truly "friendship changing," it's important that a social skills group has the critical elements I've outlined above.