



## **Teaching Social Skills Outdoors**

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Our six week outdoor summer Stepping Stones groups are in full swing!

These groups are designed to proactively teach social skills that elementary school age children need in order to make and keep friends. Through a combination of actual skill building and the use of kinetic psychotherapy (KPT) techniques, and skills are learned and practiced. Built upon a two-pronged approach, the group combines formal and informal skill development exercises.

### **S.O.A.R**

The less formal aspect of the program is specifically designed to teach social skills in the outdoor setting. We use techniques from the aforementioned specialized form of therapy called *kinetic psychotherapy (KPT)*. Using the KPT method, we play what may appear to be ordinary children's games, such as Freeze Tag or Capture the Flag. With familiar games integrated with KPT techniques, the opportunity is created to observe and work with our groups in a whole new way focusing on the goal of building friendships. We, as the therapists, act as social "coaches" and are able to stop action at any given point during the play to look more closely at the group dynamic. The children are taught at the onset that we call for "group huddles" throughout the group session, with the intention of attending more closely to the group members' interactions

### **Using the "Group Huddle"**

The "group huddle" takes some getting used to by the children; they may react with some resistance to the interruption of the play. Typically, however, once the children catch on, they understand it is beneficial to look more closely at themselves and their relationships within the group. This "here and now" approach views the interaction through a magnifying glass at the moment it happens, rather than examining the behavior after-the-fact, when interventions have lost their immediacy and relevance. This phenomenon of working "in the moment" is one of the great benefits of group work in general. In KPT, the addition of movement, structure, and game rules offer a rich environment for social learning and exploration to take place.

**S.O.A.R.** is one of our favorite KPT approaches. **S.O.A.R.** includes the following:

**S** - Stop action

**O** - Observe aloud

**A** - Ask for feedback

**R** - Reinforce the skill

Using this approach, we highlight unique social interactions (both negative and positive) between our group members.

### **Tackling Negative Situations**

As an example, two boys may have a disagreement in group and begin to react in a way that is damaging to social relationships. When this occurs, we freeze the interaction while the group members use S.O.A.R.

Let's take a look at how this might play out.

**S - (Stop action)** the altercation is frozen.

*"Okay, guys, freeze!"*

**O - (Observe aloud)** we ask the group members what they see happening between the boys. In this way, the group defines the problem between the boys and allows group members the necessary distance from the conflict.

*"What do you see going on here between Doug and Brian?"*

**A - (Ask for feedback)** we ask the group for ideas to solve the problem.

*"Both Doug and Brian want the ball right now. What do you think they could do to solve this problem?"*

**R-(Reinforce the skill)** we highlight the skills the group demonstrates, such as positive conflict resolution, appropriate problem-solving, and anger management skills.

*"Those were all great ideas. I think we have all learned something today. By thinking positively and being open to several possible solutions, Brian and Doug were able to reach a solution without damaging their friendship."*

By using the **KPT S.O.A.R.** approach in this situation, the two boys are able to get "unstuck." Although the boys involved in the disagreement may initially be reluctant to accept suggestions from their peer group, with the support of the group they are usually able to achieve compromise and move forward.

## **Reinforcing positive behaviors**

We don't use the "group huddle" ONLY when conflict exists. We also freeze action with group members any time we witness appropriate social interactions. For instance, we may stop action when group members are demonstrating good sportsmanship skills too.

### **S - (Stop action)**

*"Hey, guys, let's freeze for a second here."*

### **O - (Observe aloud)**

*"Is anyone else noticing what great sportsmanship is happening on the field today? I'm sure you have all witnessed examples of good sportsmanship today. Can anyone give me an example?"*

### **A- (Ask for feedback)**

*"What is it like to have your fellow group members cheer you on? If you like it, yell 'YES!'"*

### **R - (Reinforce the skill)**

*"This group has shown terrific teamwork today!"*

With guidance and coaching, our group members initiate positive changes that improve their interpersonal relationships and give them the opportunity for greater friendships. Group members are empowered, furthering their own social skills and confidence.

If you are interested in more information about our outdoor Stepping Stones summer program, please call 703-876-8480 x 10.