Peer Engagement in Social Skills Groups

Belinda Williams, M.A., CCC-SLP
ASHA Conference 2012
Atlanta, GA
Disclosure Statement

• I have a professional relationship with the authors of the products described in this presentation.

• Authors: Gentry, B., Wiley, P., and Torres, J.

• Description of relationship: Professional/financial relationship
Learning Outcomes

At the culmination of this session the participant will be able to:

• Identify the highest and lowest levels of peer engagement
• List the challenges for social skills groups held at schools compared to those held at clinics
• Identify an appropriate social skills goal to target peer engagement for children at the pre-school, school-age, and adolescent level
Overview

• I. Review peer engagement and its relationship to autism spectrum disorders (ASD)
• II. Define social skills groups and relevance
• III. Give examples of goals in social skills groups
• IV. Offer snapshots of peer engagement in social skills groups across 3 different age and developmental levels
• V. Questions and Wrap Up
Peer Engagement States

Games with Rules

Joint Engagement

Parallel Play

Onlooker

Solitary
Peer Engagement States

Solitary
• Unengaged and alone

Observational
• Looking at other kids playing but not engaged
Peer Engagement States

Parallel Play

• Children are playing beside each other but not with each other
Peer Engagement States

Joint Engagement
• Kids are actively interacting

Games with Rules
• Most complex play level
• Rules are embedded
Autism and peer engagement

Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are characterized by the presence of deficits in 3 key domains:

• Social interaction
• Speech and language
• Restricted and repetitive behaviors

The hallmark of ASD is impaired social communication
Peer Engagement in children with ASD

• Children with ASD frequently display deficits in pragmatic language and social communication skills.
• Difficulties with peer engagement often emerge when children try to engage in age-appropriate social relationships.
• Kids with ASD often report wanting to establish friendships, but lacking the skills to do so. As such, they report more loneliness than their neurotypical peers (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000).
Pragmatic language skills and ASD

- Even children with ASD who later display optimal outcomes continue to demonstrate pragmatic language difficulties and social awkwardness (Sutera et al., 2007).
- Researchers frequently conclude that pragmatics are a component of language consistently impaired in individuals with autism (Kelley, Paul, Fein, & Naigles, 2006).
- Pragmatic language skills include a range of verbal and non-verbal behaviors.
Pragmatic Language Skills

• Commonly reported areas of deficit include:
  Speech prosody (intonation is inappropriate)
  Vocal volume (too loud/soft)
  Topic perseveration
  Eye contact
  Taking the listener’s perspective
  Speech rate (too fast/slow)
  Posing contingent questions
  Offering relevant comments
* Theory of mind
Social skills and speech-language pathologists

Roles and Responsibilities of Speech-Language Pathologists in Diagnosis, Assessment, and Treatment of Autism Spectrum Disorders Across the Life Span

“The ASHA (2001) Scope of Practice in Speech-Language Pathology states that the practice of speech-language pathology includes providing services for individuals with disorders of pragmatics and social aspects of communication, which would include individuals with autism spectrum disorders.”
Why are social skills groups important?

- Social skills are an area of persisting difficulty for individuals with ASD at all levels of functioning
- Peer engagement contributes to our social IQ, an area adversely impacted in individuals with ASD, despite average or above average intelligence
- Interaction with peers and speaking out in class are included in school curriculum goals
- Social skills have implications throughout the life span
Social Skills Groups

• Designed for children with autism and other diagnoses that impede social pragmatic skills
• Target children with reported deficits in peer engagement
• How are they identified?
Social Skills Groups Strategies to Promote Peer Engagement

• Methods of instruction can include:
  - role-playing
  - video modeling
  - computer games
  - social language games
  - direct teaching

• Groups should incorporate parent involvement to facilitate generalization
Settings for Social Skills Groups
School-Based Intervention

Pros

• No additional transportation required from parents
• Possibility of greater generalization since intervention can include classroom peers
• Teacher involvement and support

Cons

• Missing other school activities while in intervention
• Potentially labeled as “different” by typical peers
Clinic-Based Intervention

Pros
• Kids don’t miss any school activities
• Kids are exposed to peers outside of their school setting
• Ideally, parents are included in intervention via regular meetings with professionals implementing the intervention

Cons
• Potential burden to parents for transportation
• Possible poor generalization to social contexts outside of the clinic setting
• Limited funding
Peer Engagement Across the Ages

- When should participation in social skills groups end?

- Social skills deficits for individuals with ASD may span across the lifespan, particularly at certain time points when social expectations radically change
It’s important to remember that social skills and pragmatic language are areas of persisting deficits across the lifespan for individuals with ASD.
Social Skills Groups to Target Peer Engagement for Children of Different Ages

GOALS AND INTERVENTION
Peer Engagement in Pre-Social Skills

• Designed for children who are minimally verbal
• Primary goals include: targeting initiating and responding to bids for joint attention and increasing quantity and quality of play engagement
• Targets younger children around preschool age of 3+ years
• Ratio of 1:2 or 1:3
Sample Intervention Goals

• Child will engage in simple play acts given a model (e.g., pushing a car, rolling a ball down a ramp, completing a puzzle) in 8/10 trials across 3 consecutive sessions

• Child will imitate a pre-symbolic play act (e.g., pretending to eat, drink, brush hair) given a model in 3/4 opportunities across 3 consecutive sessions

• Child will participate in joint engagement with a peer for a minimum of 5 minutes given moderate facilitation from an interventionist (e.g., bids for joint attention, verbal prompts) across 3 consecutive sessions
Sample Schedule

• 12:30-1:00p Arrival and Observational Play
  Goal: Facilitating peer engagement in unstructured contexts
• 1:00-1:15p Snack
  Goal: Facilitating peer engagement in semi-structured contexts
• 1:15-1:30p Bathroom and Transition to Small Groups
• *1:30-2:15p Small Groups
• 2:15-2:30p Closing Circle / Parent Weekly Meeting
  Goal: Facilitating generalization
Stimulating Peer Engagement

• Environmental arrangement: command the space

• Provide opportunities for direct peer involvement
Peer Engagement with verbally fluent children

- Targets children with high functioning autism who are verbally fluent
- There is a marked decrease in use of concrete toys with an increase in use of language complexity
- More concepts are introduced
- Ratio of 1:4
- Increased language demands
Sample Intervention Goals

• Child will initiate play with a peer in 3/4 opportunities given minimal prompts across 3 consecutive sessions

• Child will remain engaged in an age-appropriate play routine (joint engagement, games with rules) with a peer for 10-15 minutes given minimal support
Sample Schedule

• 3:30-4:00p  Arrival and Observational Play
  Goal: Facilitating peer engagement in unstructured contexts
• 4:00-4:15p  Snack and Bathroom
  Goal: Facilitating peer engagement in semi-structured contexts
• 4:15-4:30p  Opening Circle
• *4:30-5:15p  Small Groups
• 5:15-5:30p  Closing Circle / Parent Weekly Meeting
  Goal: Facilitating generalization
Peer Engagement in Adolescent Social Skills Groups

- For middle and high school students ages 12-16
- Significant parent involvement is necessary at this group level to assess most pressing needs of kids
Sample Intervention Goals

- Child will identify a friend who also reciprocates
- Child will demonstrate joint engagement during unstructured activities
- Child will initiate conversation with a peer
- Child will maintain a topic with a peer for a minimum of 6+ conversational turns while demonstrating appropriate to-and-fro exchange
Sample Schedule

• 3:30-3:45p Arrival and Unstructured Peer Engagement Time
• 3:45-4:15p Social Outing
• 4:15-5:15p Large and Small Group Activities
• 5:15-5:30p Group Wrap Up / Parent Weekly Meeting
Lesson: Physical Distance

• An area of commonly reported deficit in kids with ASD is physical distance
• Awkward body positioning can impede peer engagement because peers can be turned off or uncomfortable during conversation
A review of sample units and lessons for adolescent groups

- *The Power of Positive Thinking*: Exuding a positive affect; Identifying positive/negative feelings; Identifying desirable qualities in others

- *Hit Me Up*: Communicating with friends both in and out of class/school; How to make calls, send text messages and email, and use social media appropriately

- *The Big Invite*: How to invite a friend to hang out after school/class; How to select mutually engaging activities; How to initiate small talk
A Social Skills Program to stimulate peer engagement

• Autism: Attacking Social Interaction Problems (AASIP)
• Can be applied in schools or in clinics
• A language-based program
• Includes lesson plans and carryover activities
• Includes a parent resource guide
Additional Information

• For more information on peer engagement, identifying ideal participants, or starting a social skills group please contact us at

Los Angeles Speech and Language Therapy Center, Inc.
5761 Buckingham Parkway
Culver City, CA  90230
(310) 649-6199
www.speakla.com

Follow us on Twitter @LASpeech
Like us on Facebook
Questions and Comments

Belinda Williams, M.A., CCC-SLP
Contact via email: blw252@gmail.com
References


