

The Teacher's Role in Developing Social Skills

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The effective educator must be ever mindful of the simple fact that children go to school for a living. School is their job, their livelihood, their identity. Therefore, the critical role that school plays in the child's social development and self-concept must be recognized. Even if a child is enjoying academic success in the classroom, his attitude about school will be determined by the degree of social success that he experiences.

There is much that the teacher can do to foster and promote social development in the student. Children tend to fall into four basic social categories in the school setting:

REJECTED - Students who are consistently subjected to ridicule, bullying and harassment by classmates.

ISOLATED - Students who, although not openly rejected, are ignored by classmates and are uninvolved in the social aspects of school.

CONTROVERSIAL - Students who have established a circle of friends based upon common interests or proximity but seldom move beyond that circle.

POPULAR - Students who have successfully established positive relationships within a variety of groups.

Many students with learning disabilities find themselves in the rejected or isolated subgroups. Their reputations as "low status" individuals plague them throughout their school careers. It is important for the teacher to assist the students' classmates in changing their view of this child.

Punishment is an extremely ineffective method of modifying bullying or rejecting behavior. If you punish Billy for rejecting Joey, you only increase Billy's resentment of his classmate. However, you can increase a child's level of acceptance in several ways.

First, the teacher must become a "talent scout." Attempt to determine specific interests, hobbies or strengths of the rejected child. This can be accomplished via discussions, interviews or surveys. Once you have identified the child's strengths, celebrate it in a very public manner. For example, if the student has a particular interest in citizen band radios, seek out a read-aloud adventure story in which a short-wave radio plays an important role in the plot. Encourage the child to bring his CB into class and conduct a demonstration of its use. By playing the expert role, a rejected or isolated child can greatly increase his status.

Assign the isolated child to a leadership position in the classroom wherein his classmates become dependent upon him. This can also serve to increase his status and acceptance among his peers. Be mindful of the fact that this may be an unfamiliar role for him and he may require some guidance from you in order to ensure his success.

Most important, **the teacher must clearly demonstrate acceptance of and affection for the isolated or rejected child.** This conveys the constant message that the child is worthy of attention. The teacher should use her status as a leader to increase the status of the child.

The teacher can assist the child by making him aware of the traits that are widely-accepted and admired by his peers. Among these traits are:

- smiles/laughs
- greets others
- extends invitations
- converses
- shares
- gives compliments

It is important that the teacher recognize the crucial role that the child's parents and siblings can play in the development of social competence. Ask his parents to visit school for a conference to discuss the child's social status and needs. School and home must work in concert to ensure that target skills are reinforced and monitored. Social goals should be listed and prioritized. It is important to focus upon a small group of skills such as sharing and taking turns, rather than attempting to deal simultaneously with the entire inventory of social skills.

Working with Preschoolers

Early childhood educators are in a particularly good position to foster the acceptance of the socially incompetent child. By demonstrating acceptance of the child despite his behavioral or language weaknesses, the teacher generally finds that this attitude is mirrored by the child's classmates. The teacher's goals should focus on promoting age-appropriate language/communication skills for the child. This instruction should be provided in a positive, supportive and accepting manner.

Working with Elementary School Children

Assign the troubled child to work in pairs with a high-status child who will be accepting and supportive. Cooperative education activities can be particularly effective in this effort to include the rejected child in the classroom. These activities enable the child to use his academic strengths while simultaneously developing his social skills.

The teacher must constantly **search for opportunities to promote and encourage appropriate social interactions** for the socially inept child (e.g., "Andrew, would you please go over to Sally's desk and tell her that I would like her to bring me her math folder?") Have students work in pairs to complete experiments, bulletin boards and peer tutoring.

The student with social skill deficits invariably experiences rejection in any activity that requires students to select classmates for teams or groups. This selection process generally finds the rejected child in the painful position of being the "last one picked". Avoid these humiliating and destructive situations by **pre-selecting the teams or drawing names from a hat**. An option is to intervene at the point when six or eight students remain unselected. Arbitrarily assign half of the students to one team and the remaining students to another. This prevents any one student from being in the damaging position of being "last picked".

Board games and card games can be used effectively to monitor and foster social development in the classroom. Such activities require students to utilize a variety of social skills (voice modulation, taking turns, sportsmanship, dealing with competition, etc.). These enjoyable activities can also be used to promote academic skills. Because games are often motivating for students, these activities can be used as a positive reinforcer. This setting also provides an opportunity to conduct effective social autopsies. However, these activities should be limited to a few times each week.

Working with Secondary School Students

Teachers at the high school level must be particularly aware of the student who is being ignored or rejected by peers. During adolescence, it is critically important that the student be accepted by his classmates. The rejection suffered by adolescents with social skill deficits often places the student at risk for emotional problems. It may be unrealistic to expect an overworked algebra teacher to conduct social skill activities but the professional should, at a minimum, be willing and able to refer the child to appropriate resources in the school administration or guidance department.

The socially incompetent child often experiences isolation and rejection in his neighborhood, on the school bus and in group social activities. The teacher can provide this student with a classroom setting wherein he can feel comfortable, accepted and welcome. In the words of Robert DeBruyn, "Coming to school every day can become a hopeless task for some children unless they succeed at what they do. We teachers are sentries against that hopelessness".

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