

Developing Critical Competencies: Social Skills Groups in Schools

Jessica Lee

Loyola University Chicago, MSW Student

jlee91@luc.edu

Abstract

It is virtually impossible to overstate the importance of social skills for childhood development and achievement. Early scholarship broadly organized social skills into four categories of behaviors: self-related, environmental, task-related, and interpersonal (Stephens, 1978). Contemporary academics have built upon those categories, defining social skills as how individuals are able to build relationships, express feelings in constructive ways, and communicate with others (Svavarsdóttir et al., 2012).

For students at a variety of developmental levels, these are the skills that are paramount to their success. Underdeveloped social skills can often compound or cause academic and behavioral challenges (Elliot & Gresham, 1993; Williams, 2011). Conversely, well developed social skills bolster resiliency and contribute to positive long-term outcomes (Williams, 2011).

This poster describes and assesses group interventions designed to address social skills in an all-boys, urban elementary and middle school. The school is a scholarship funded private school in a historically marginalized community of color. Students ranged in age from 8 to 13, in grades third through fifth. Social skill groups consisted of three to six students and were run weekly for an average of ten weeks.

Methods

Over the course of three years, nine groups were run which addressed the development of social skills. Groups targeted a variety of maladaptive behaviors by utilizing a psychoeducational approach and opportunities for experiential learning. Groups were designed to engage students through tailored activities and themes. Examples of this included group themes of plants,

exercise, and board games. While each group was slightly different in theme and execution, they all utilized the same framework.

Initial sessions focused on developing group cohesion, establishing a common language, and fostering self-awareness through facilitator observations. Collaborative mini-lessons were used to define social skills within the group context. Experiential activities highlighted the importance of specific social skills.

Subsequent sessions built on established common language to set goals. Goal setting was structured into the beginning and end of each session, giving students the opportunity to reflect and evaluate. Mini-lessons were phased out during middle sessions and more non-deliberative, experiential activities were prioritized. These activities gave students a safe space to practice and integrate social skills.

Final sessions incorporated less deliberately structured activities and gave students more opportunities to exert autonomy and leadership within the group setting. They initiated conversations and directed activities. As the groups began to wrap up, growth and relationships were celebrated. This happened through individual, peer, and facilitator feedback.

Framework in Practice

As example of this framework in action, one group was themed around plants. This theme was chosen due to the interests of several of the group members. Each group included activities that promoted interaction while still tying into the general theme. Through collaborative mini-lessons, students developed the “Parts of Communication Plant”. This established common language for positive communication while using a growing plant as a metaphor.

In subsequent sessions, they selected an element from this construct as a goal for the session. They would receive increasingly limited coaching on their goal while engaging in experiential activities such as group drawings, games, or minimally structured conversations. At the end of each session, students and the facilitator would evaluate their progress on their goal. Using dual evaluation prompted discussion and developed perspective taking.

By the end of the group, all students were achieving a minimum of three out of five, with five meaning “Absolutely, I met my goal!”. The majority averaged four out of five for the last

four weeks of group sessions. For some students, this was a three point increase from their initial self-evaluations. In the case of the four students who participated in the plant themed group, the growth made within a group setting had clear impacts for their classroom participation, as reported by teachers.

Themes

Key themes that emerged through these group experiences were adaptability and engagement, establishing common language, integrating deliberative and non-deliberative activities, and focusing on experiential learning. Keeping group activities and themes adaptable led to more engaging, student centered interventions. Establishing common language set the foundation for effective skill practice. Joint use of deliberative and non-deliberative activities led to multilayered opportunities to hone social skills (Lang, 2016). Finally, keeping the focus on experiential learning fostered a collaborative environment for growth (Gussak & Rosal, 2016). Additionally, experimental learning activities helped to address cognitive or academic differences between students, reducing barriers and potentially increasing effectiveness (Degges-White & Colon, 2015; Cortina & Fazel, 2015).

References

- Cortina, M. A., & Fazel, M. (2015). The Art Room: An evaluation of a targeted school-based group intervention for students with emotional and behavioural difficulties. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 42, 35–40.
- Degges-White, S., & Colon, B. R. (2015). *Expressive arts interventions for school counselors*. Springer Publishing Company.
- Elliott, S., & Gresham, F. (1993). Social Skills Interventions for Children. *Behavior Modification*, 17(3), 287-313.
- Kelly, A. (2019). *Social skills : developing effective interpersonal communication*. Routledge.
- Lang, N. C. (2016). Nondeliberative Forms of Practice in Social Work: Artful, Actional, Analogic. *Social Work with Groups: Nondeliberative Forms of Practice: Activities and Creative Arts in Social Work with Groups*, 39(2-3), 97–117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01609513.2015.1047701>
- Stephens, T. M. (1978). *Social skills in the classroom*. Columbus, OH: Cedar Press.
- Svavarsdóttir, S., Ólafsdóttir, K., Sturludóttir, E., & Júlíusdóttir, S. (2012). Psychiatric Group Work in Social Skill Training. *Social Work with Groups*, 35(2), 103-123.
- Williams, C. (2011). Mentoring and social skills training: Ensuring better outcomes for youth in foster care. *Child Welfare*, 90(1), 59-74.