

# Developing Critical Competencies: Social Skill Groups in Schools

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## Abstract

This poster highlights themes from group interventions designed to address social skills in an all-boys, urban elementary and middle school. Social skills are essential for healthy development and contribute to long-term positive outcomes.

## Background

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).

## Presenting Need

For students at a variety of developmental levels, social skills 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; Kelly, 2018).

Working within a scholarship funded, all-boys private school in a historically marginalized community of color, the need for social skill interventions was clear. Students were referred to school social workers for a variety of reasons, ranging from aggressive communication styles, peer conflict, lack of relationships, to social anxiety and other related behaviors.

School social workers were tasked with addressing these needs within a group setting.

## Methods

Over the course of three years, nine groups were run which targeted the development of social skills. 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. Sessions lasted between 45 minutes to an hour. Groups utilized experiential approaches and tailored activities to engage students. For example, tailored activities and themes led to groups focused on plants, board games, and exercise. While each group was slightly different in theme and execution, they all utilized the same framework, outlined below.

### Initial Sessions:

#### *Education and Awareness*

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

### Middle Sessions:

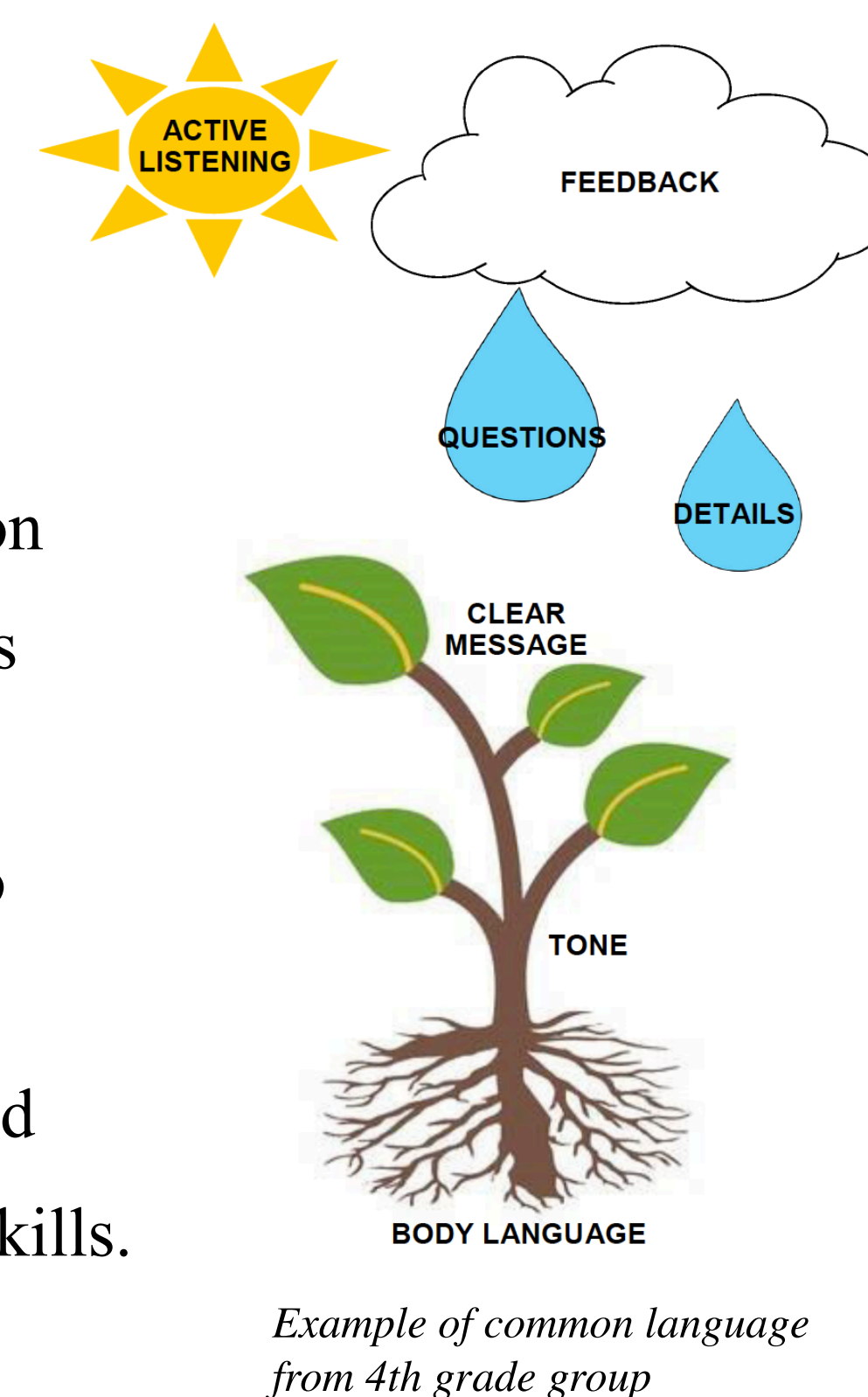
#### *Goal Setting*

Middle sessions use an established common language to set goals and mini-lessons are replaced by a consistent goal-setting activity. The facilitator prioritizes activities as an opportunity for skill practice. Students engage in self-reflection for both goal setting and evaluation.

### Final Sessions:

#### *Increasing Autonomy and Celebrating Growth*

Sessions become less deliberately structured as the group progresses. Final sessions are used as an opportunity for students to increase their autonomy, directing activities and initiating conversations. In group termination, growth and relationships are celebrated while goals for the future are discussed.



## Themes and Findings

In seven out of nine groups, students met their individual goals an average of 80% of the time, as measured through self evaluations. With few exceptions, the facilitator observed growth in how group members connected and communicated with each other over the life of each group. Additionally, students were able to identify and explain critical social skills.

Key therapeutic factors that were prominent during groups were the instillation of hope, imparting information, imitative behavior, interpersonal learning, and developing socializing techniques (Yalom, 2006).

## Challenges

Challenges the facilitator encountered through running social skill groups included developing appropriate group climate, involving parents or guardians, persistent absences, and accommodating co-occurring emotional and/or academic needs.

In the current school social work climate, anticipated challenges would include virtual applications and engagement.

## Future Applications

Based on these group experiences, it is recommended that future interventions approach social skill building with four key themes in mind:

- Adaptability and engagement
- Establishing common language
- Integrating deliberative and non-deliberative activities
- Focusing on experiential learning

## References

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