

# Critical Social Skills

Dr. Karen Wolffe

# Rationale for teaching social skills

- ◆ Bonding with parents and siblings provides a social safety net for children
- ◆ Engagement with peers and acceptance in social groups provides age-appropriate feedback and opportunities to develop friendships and other relationships

- ◆ When other people like you, they are more inclined to support and encourage you and help when necessary
- ◆ Social skills are part of the soft skills battery that employers covet in prospective employees and they set the stage for job maintenance and career advancement

The background is a solid blue color with several white-outlined geometric shapes scattered across it. These shapes include triangles, squares, and rectangles, some of which are tilted or rotated. The shapes are of varying sizes and are positioned in the lower right and middle sections of the frame.

**CRITICAL SOCIAL SKILLS**

**CHILDREN AND YOUTH**

**NEED TO DEMONSTRATE**

## ◆ Be Polite

- Use social amenities (please, thank-you, you're welcome, excuse me...)
- Demonstrate an absence of socially inappropriate behaviors (coughing or sneezing without covering mouth, chewing or speaking with mouth open...)
- Assist others (holding doors, carrying packages, giving up seat on bus...)

## ◆ Initiate Greetings & Interactions

- Speak when you hear someone or sense that someone may be present (e.g., in an elevator or a room you enter)
- Ask leading questions such as “Have we met?” or make comments “Your voice sounds familiar to me.”
- Extend your hand to shake when greeting an adult

## ◆ Maintain Eye Contact

- Look toward a conversation partner, when feasible – even if you can see better “out-of-the-corner” of your eye (explain if you cannot easily maintain eye contact)
- Orient toward another’s voice, when you have no functional vision
- Keep your chin parallel to the ground throughout a conversation

## ◆ Follow a Conversation

- Pay attention only to the person talking  
(don't answer your phone!)
- Respond to what the other person says
- Ask pertinent questions and add relevant comments when there is a pause in the conversation – stay on topic!
- Know when to “let go!” – listen for others’ hints, “Okay!” “All right!”



## ◆ Attend to Others

- Maintain orientation & personal space
- Smile or use other facial expressions appropriately (grim, serious, sad...)
- Nod your head to indicate agreement or shake your head if you disagree
- Lean in toward the speaker
- Take notes, if you're in class or an interview

## ◆ Attend to impact of your behavior on others

- Listen closely to how others are responding to your questions or comments: Do they sound happy, sad, angry, or fearful?
- Understand how to use “I” and “You” messages to converse with others about your feelings and theirs toward you
- Apologize if you sneeze, cough, bump into someone, or step on a toe!

## ◆ Cooperate

- Play with other children (sans aide!)
- Join groups, clubs, or teams (invite others home)
- Participate with others in group learning experiences (study groups, for example)
- Participate in extracurricular activities
- Help to plan and coordinate activities (parties, shopping expeditions, going to events, etc.)

## ◆ Listen & respond consistently

- Hear what is said
- Listen for the speaker's feelings
- Guess at what speaker means or feels
- Ask appropriate questions for clarification
- Respond with care rather than hatefully
- Speak carefully so as not to harm others who may be in the vicinity (don't gossip)

## ◆ Use gestures appropriately

- Understand common hand signals (hello, good-bye, I-give-up, I-don't-know, stop, come, thumbs-up, thumbs-down, etc.) - waving
- Understand rude hand signals
- Understand subtle nuances of gestures (hand-glued-to-forehead, fed-up, hands-on-hips, arms-crossed, thinker-pose, blow-a-kiss)
- Understand local hand signals

## ◆ Solicit help, only as needed

- First try to do tasks yourself
- Ask for assistance only when unable to complete a task, get somewhere independently, or solve a problem
- Pay attention so that help isn't needed repeatedly (demonstrate competence)
- Ask for help politely – do not demand
- Thank the person giving you assistance

## ◆ Problem solve social situations

- Recognize that there is a social interaction or situation that may require analysis (you feel discomfort or longing...)
- Consider what alternatives are available
- Consider the pros & cons for each alternative
- Choose the option with the most pros – commit to doing something!
- Evaluate behavioral outcomes

# ◆ Social interactions – levels of engagement

- Recognize levels of relationships (public, acquaintances, friends, intimates, private)
- Adjust interactions to situations (asking for street directions vs. asking for a date)
- Understand where to find people to solicit aid (store clerks vs. street people)
- Know how to avoid dangerous situations (walk in lighted areas; stay in well-traveled areas)



## ◆ Follow social rules:

- Wait your turn in games
- Don't interrupt conversations
- Raise your hand in class
- Don't speak out-of-turn
- Don't jump in line or go to the head of the line
- Don't take another's seat
- Push in chair when finished at table/desk

- Eat with a knife & fork – not your fingers!
- Eat with your mouth closed
- Use a napkin when eating
- Don't talk when eating – don't slurp drinks...
- Don't pick, poke, or scratch inappropriately
- Don't burp or pass gas intentionally; if you do, excuse yourself
- Refrain from public displays of mannerisms!

## ◆ Complete social interactions

- Find out when you may meet or call a conversation partner again
- Say farewell, good-bye, see you later!
- If formal, shake hands & use titles...
- Wave good-bye...repeatedly if the person is driving or walking away from you
- Smile, smile, smile

# Tips for Caregivers

- ◆ To determine if child is engaged in age-appropriate behavior, you need to observe same-aged peers without disabilities to ascertain what they are doing
- ◆ Encourage children to participate in activities of interest to sighted peers (pep club, hand-held computer games, iPods...)

- ◆ Provide tutoring or hand-under-hand instruction to teach the skills and movements needed to participate in activities other children are doing
- ◆ Encourage children to demonstrate their competence with adapted games (Monopoly, Scrabble, Candy Land, Beep Baseball, Goalball, brailled playing cards)

- ◆ Provide honest feedback to children and youth concerning their social interactions with you and what you observe in their efforts to engage with others
- ◆ Make sure that children are dressed like their classmates and that they have similar accoutrements (lunch money, pets, toys, books, CDs, DVDs) so that they can share

- ◆ Teach children how to problem solve social situations. Remember the model:
  - Recognize that a social interaction or situation is problematic (a feeling of discomfort or longing)
  - Consider what alternatives are available
  - Consider the pros & cons for each alternative
  - Choose the option with the most pros – commit to doing something!
  - Evaluate behavioral outcomes

- ◆ When children work on solving social problems/challenges; they need:
  - Positive feedback from those who care about them – always verbalize how pleased you are to see their efforts and acknowledge change
- ◆ When children don't work on solving social problems/challenges; they need:
  - Empathetic confrontation from those who care to let them know someone's noticed



# Resources

**Teaching Social Skills to Students with Visual Impairments: Research to Practice (Sacks & Wolffe, 2006)**

**Skills for success: A career education handbook for children and adolescents with visual impairments (Wolffe, 1999)**

**Focused on: Social skills (Wolffe, & Sacks, 2000)**

# Resources

**Independent living: A curriculum with adaptations for students with visual impairments (Loumiet & Levack, 1993)**

**Promoting acceptance of children with disabilities: From tolerance to inclusion (MacCuspie, 1996)**

**Get out of my life but first could you drive me and Cheryl to the mall?  
(Wolf, 1991)**

# **Thank-you for your interest!**

**Dr. Karen Wolffe**

**2109 Rabb Glen Street**

**Austin, TX 78704**

**512.707.0525**

**[karenwolffe@gmail.com](mailto:karenwolffe@gmail.com)**