Make Social Learning Stick!
How to Guide and Nurture Social Competence Through Everyday Routines and Activities

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Contents

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Introduction

It's recess time for Johny's fourth-grade class, and the kids run gleefully to different parts of the playground with the exception of Johny, who sighs and then sits down on a bench and pulls a book out of his backpack. In the past, he tried to join in when a group of boys talked about movies or video games, but he always seemed to say the wrong thing. Were the other boys making fun of him? He wasn't sure. And when he approached the kids playing tag, they always told him he had to be "it," and that was no fun.

So Johny pretends that he prefers to sit on the bench and read, even though he is feeling rejected by his peers and confused about what to do. At lunchtime, he also sits alone, and he rarely gets invited on play dates or to birthday parties. Some mornings he tells his parents he is too sick to go to school. His parents see how lonely Johny is but don't know how to help.

The importance of *social competence*, a term that has been used to describe social success or the ability to achieve social goals, cannot be overstated. It plays a major role in developing and maintaining relationships, academic achievement, working in small groups, and eventually in holding a job (Bodrova & Leong 2005; Blair, 2002). Our world is filled with social situations that we have to navigate by knowing when and what to say or how to act around others. This can be a struggle for those who are not hard wired to pick up on social cues or struggle to understand how to relate to others. It can also be difficult for individuals with anxiety, attention deficits, or behavioral challenges because if you are not feeling comfortable internally, it's hard to think about the external environment – the people around you and how to relate to them.

When social goals are not met, it can have a negative effect on mental health and quality of life. But the good news is that **social competence can be taught, practiced, and improved!**

Making Sense of the Social Murkiness

It is good to be aware of other terms that are used when referring to social competence, such as *social communication, social skills, social language, pragmatic language, social cognition, Social Thinking®, social learning, social intelligence,* and *social regulation*. As a matter of fact, it was difficult to determine the title for this book due to all the various terms used and uncertainty about which ones readers would be familiar with. However, it was felt that *social competence* is familiar and commonly understood and *social learning* is the act of gaining social skills to become socially competent, which is what we want to "stick" with our children. A brief overview is provided to clarify what is involved; however, this book is not designed to go into deep explanations or definitions of these terms. Instead, it is designed to be a useful, hands-on guide to build awareness, to help put **social skills** into practice, and to build **competence** for functional use in everyday life.

One of the key terms that is often separated out when talking about social competence is self-regulation. *Self-regulation* has been defined as the ability to gain control of bodily functions, manage powerful emotions, and

maintain focus and attention (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). This is similar to self-control, self-management, anger management, impulse control, etc. When children struggle in these areas, they are often viewed as "behavioral problems" – both at home and/or school. Since social interactions can't be avoided in life; it is important to realize that self-regulation plays a huge part in social competence and cannot be viewed separately.

To make the link between self-regulation and social competence clearer, Kuypers and Sautter (2012) suggested combining the words *social* and *regulation*.[1] They define *social regulation* as the ability to adjust our level of alertness and modify how we reveal emotions and behavior in order to achieve social goals. In other words, it is the ability to monitor and adjust internal feelings and states (both mental and physical) in order to exhibit behavior that is "appropriate" for the social situation.

This may seem simple; however, social regulation is vast and complex, and many skill areas and brain functions need to be developed and integrated to keep us socially regulated. Some of the main components involved are sensory processing, emotional regulation, language processing, pragmatic language, perspective taking/theory of mind, and executive functioning, all of which are briefly reviewed below.

Sensory processing (Ayres, 2005) refers to the way we receive and manage information from the environment through our senses, such as how we sense if a sweater is comfortable or itchy based on the sense of touch. After receiving this information, we make decisions to keep ourselves feeling comfortable. For example, if it's really bright outside, we can put sunglasses on or if it's cold, we put a sweatshirt on. When children have sensory sys-

tems that are over- or under-reacting, it can be difficult for them to process sensory input and feel comfortable internally, which in turn affects how they feel and act in their social environment.

Emotional regulation refers to being able to control our emotions rather than letting them control us. Experiencing emotions is innate; however, we can regulate the timing, display, duration, and intensity of how the emotion is expressed or revealed depending on the social situation. When our emotions control us, on the other hand, we might act before thinking and do something that gets us in trouble or makes someone else upset. For example, if a child is mad about what he thinks is an unfair play in a kick ball game, he might act out physically or verbally, which in turn might get him into trouble and create a larger problem.

Language also plays a part in social regulation in that the brain has to process and understand language (**language processing**) and then use the information in a socially expected manner (**pragmatic/social language**). We have to understand the words and messages being sent as well as the context and rules for how they were sent in order to know what, when, and how to effectively communicate with others and in various settings. This involves understanding verbal (spoken) and nonverbal (facial expression and body language) communication and how we change our language/communication to adapt to the situation at hand. Knowing how to "code-switch," that is, being able to change our use of language to match the people and places around us, helps with the social use of language. For example, we know that it is okay to give a high five or a hug to a good friend whom we haven't seen in a long time who comes to the front door. However, if we gave the mail carrier who comes to the front door a hug, that would be unusual and in most cases considered "inappropriate." Similarly, most people know how to change their tone of voice and body language

1   The authors recognize that their definition of social regulation shares similarities with other instances of its use in the literature (see Grau & Whitebread, 2012; Patrick, 1997; Volet, Vauras, & Salonen, 2009).

when they are talking to a baby versus talking to an adult. Speaking of tone, we cannot overlook the importance of being able to understand, as well as demonstrate, emotions and messages through our voices, facial expressions, body posture, hand gestures, proximity, and all other essential nonverbal clues that are involved in communication.

We also need to be able to "step into someone's shoes" or take others' **perspective**, also known as **theory of mind** (Baron-Cohen, Leslie, & Frith, 1985). This refers to the ability to think about other people and what they might be thinking or feeling and understand that their thoughts, feelings, desires, and experiences differ from our own. This is similar to what is known as social cognition which, simply put, means how we think about being social and how we think about the people we are interacting with. What do we know about them? What are their beliefs, culture, age, or feelings? What do we know about the place or social situation at hand? How do we learn about the social rules at a new school or job? What do we say and how do we act to keep the people around us feeling comfortable? Not only can this be very abstract and difficult, but just when we think we have a social situation figured out, it changes. For example, as children get older, they may realize that it's not "cool" to kiss their parents good-bye in public any more or sit on their lap. That is why we not only have to teach the **social skills** (the behavior) but also talk about the thinking that comes before the skills or that goes hand-in-hand with the skills.

This is what Michelle Garcia Winner, a speech-language pathologist and leading expert in the area of social cognition, refers to as **Social Thinking**®. The Social Thinking teaching framework she developed (www.socialthinking.com) helps children become better social thinkers and social problem solvers. This emphasis on thinking provides them with the tools and strategies to bet-

ter understand their social surroundings and make the best choices in terms of what skills to use in the moment. This also involves developing a sense of how their behavior affects the thoughts of others, how others treat them and, in turn, how they feel about themselves (Winner, 2005). For example, when children are playing a game and someone gets hurt, it is expected that they think about what would make that person feel better and use social skills to show that they care about her, such as stopping what they are doing and walking towards her and asking if she is okay. This would not only show that they are caring individuals but also prompt others to have positive thoughts about them.

The idea of taking another's perspective may seem "natural" to those of us with neurotypical social development, but explaining this complex concept to individuals with social learning challenges can be challenging. One strategy Winner developed to turn this abstract concept into teachable elements is the Four Steps of Perspective Taking (see below). These steps demonstrate that taking perspective is an active process that involves considering our own as well others' thoughts and feelings within the context of the situation.

The Four Steps of Perspective Taking (Winner, 2007)

1. When you come into my space, I have a little thought about you and you have a little thought about me.
2. I think about your intentions and you think about mine. Why are you near me? What do you want from me? Is it because you are just sharing space, do you intend to talk to me, or do you intend to harm me?
3. I realize you are having thoughts about me and you realize I am having thoughts about you. We each think about what the other might be thinking.

4. I monitor and possibly modify my behavior to keep you thinking about me the way I want you to think about me. You do the same toward me. The thoughts we are having about each other are often tiny thoughts that are almost at the unconscious level. However, it is this always-present, very active thought process about the people around us that allows us to constantly regulate our behavior to make sure most people have "comfortable" thoughts about us most of the time.

Finally, **executive functioning** refers to the cognitive process required to plan and direct activities (Dawson & Guare, 2010). It involves skills for emotional and impulse control, attention, motivation, flexibility, problem solving, planning, organization, and initiating. Executive skills allow us to manage those innate emotions we experience as well as monitor our behavior and ability to have effective communicative exchanges. Ward and Jacobsen (2012) add that it involves the ability to integrate a present awareness with future anticipation (forethought) and past experience (hindsight) to develop a reasonable plan for a present action or goal. For example, if a child knows that Halloween is two weeks away and he wants to be Batman, he needs to think ahead and tell his parent very soon because he can think back and remember that in the past all of the popular costumes sold out fast. Being able to stay calm, as well as plan, organize, and initiate goals, based on hindsight and forethought, is a huge part of social competence.

Making It Stick! – Carryover of Learned Skills

Most children learn how to be "social" through their everyday environment by watching, imitating, and learning from others. However, some don't learn these skills intuitively through their social milieu. This may be due to a specific diagnosis, such as an autism spectrum disorder, lack of exposure or practice in social situations, or other reasons that delay development. Whatever the cause, we need to support children to help them move from the early stages of social development of thinking about "me" to being able to relate to others and think of "we" so they can experience the pleasure of being with others and achieving their social goals. These children need direct instruction and support. They need abstract concepts broken down, explained, and practiced. For example, if we want our children to understand what "being friendly" means, we can explain this abstract term by breaking it down, defining it, talking about ways to show friendly behavior (e.g., smile, say hello, or share a toy), and talking about how it makes others feel when we use those friendly skills. As Winner's (2005) Social Thinking® concepts teach, we can help these children understand that when we are friendly that makes people feel good and want to be around us and be our friends. That, in turn, makes us feel happy and good about our behavior and ourselves.

Another challenge is when a child learns a skill in a certain setting and fails to realize that it applies to other situations, or, conversely, that similar situations require different social skills. For example, if a child is taught that greeting others with a high five is cool at school with her peers, she can learn to give high fives on the playground or when she sees people in different environments that she is familiar and friendly with. But she also needs to learn that this gesture is most likely not cool when she greets her teacher, the principal, or the bagger at the grocery store. That is, it is important to consider the context in order to know which skills pertain to a specific social situation (Barry et al., 2003; Stewart, Carr, & LeBlanc, 2007; Vermeulen, 2013). Some children struggle to understand that while a certain learned skill, such as a high five, can be used in a variety of settings with many people, when it is used in the *unexpected* way, it can cause problems. For example, asking for a high five when the child just heard that a friend got a bad grade on a test would be unexpected and considered rude.

When skills are introduced, therefore, it's essential to make sure that the child is using them correctly, not only with her friends or at school, but also with the people she interacts with in other settings. Each social interaction is unique in terms of the skills needed to be successful, and the subtle clues to figuring out what is expected in those exchanges and relations, from second to second, can be extremely nuanced and easily missed. It's important to realize this in order to support our children's ability to use their learned social skills in a variety of environments in the most successful way.

When children learn these skills and then carry them over to their natural environment and use them across multiple settings, it is called generalization or carryover. In this book, this is what we mean by the term *making it stick*.

Parents and Professionals Working as Partners

To foster and uphold the process of generalizing skills into the daily routine, everyone in the child's life must work together and support the child on a regular basis. When the home and school teams collaborate, it results in more rapid acquisition of target behaviors and increases the likelihood that positive behavior change is maintained over time (Koegel, Matos-Fredeen, Lang, & Koegel, 2011). All members of a child's life are teachers, with the parents or primary caregivers being the most important teachers, who provide opportunities for the child to learn and generalize skills for a lifetime. Parents are usually the first on the scene, and provide the greatest influence and strongest models. Parents must be partners with the teaching team and, as such, be ready to serve as coaches in the natural environment who guide and reinforce their child to learn and be successful.

For many years as a speech-language pathologist and social cognitive specialist, I have been influenced by and have incorporated strategies from experts in the field of social learning and self-regulation into the therapy that I provide to support children with social regulation challenges. It is important for therapists and teachers to understand how to effectively teach these skills; however, this work does not stop at school or in the therapy office. I know this both as a therapist who believes in a family-centered approach and as a family member of individuals with social challenges. In addition, I am a parent, and through research, as well as trial and error, I have practiced and refined many tips and tools to support my children's social and emotional growth. It happens seven days a week and needs to be infused into all aspects of the child's life and daily schedule. While this sounds like a tall order when added to everything else parents need to do on a daily basis, it can become part of the daily schedule without too much fuss or added stress, as illustrated in this book.

Therefore, including parents, other family members, and caregivers as social facilitators is essential for a child's success. This is the glue that makes the skills stick!

About This Book

This book is for parents, caregivers, teachers, and therapists who want to support children's social and emotional competence and participation. Specifically, children who have difficulty following directions, thinking about others, being flexible, reading nonverbal social cues, working in small groups, participating in conversation, advocating for themselves, seeing the "big picture," and making friends can benefit. However, the activities can enhance the social and emotional development of all children.

Make Social Learning Stick! offers a "social learning diet" that can be used in everyday life to increase verbal and nonverbal language, listening skills, understanding the hidden rules, perspective taking, executive functioning, and much more. Children need a steady intake of social examples, explanations, and practice throughout the day to help them understand these concepts. The activities presented in this book give an idea of what has worked for other families as well as help readers create their own ideas and "diet" of what might work for their unique child and family. In short, this book is not meant to tell parents to do extra work but, rather, to utilize their natural routines to influence and increase social learning and to supplement teachings from outside professionals or other books that provide deeper and more specific social curriculum.

Many books provide the global view, or the whys of social and emotional development, and are designed for therapists. This book is more about the whats and how-tos – what to do in the moment and how to make the moment teachable. As a caregiver, you're probably already using a variety of strategies (consciously or unconsciously) to help your child develop better social skills and regulation. Take some credit and have confidence knowing that you're playing a vital role in making the child's social skills stick.

Make Social Learning Stick! also helps teachers and therapists provide practical suggestions for caregivers and equip them with the tools to practice and help generalize social skills into the natural setting from situation to situation. With over 185 fun and easy activities, including contributions from leading experts, this book shows how to take advantage of natural routines throughout the day and embrace teachable moments in order to increase social regulation.

Geared toward children preschool through elementary-school age, the ideas are meant to inspire creativity that suits the specific child's level and can be tailored to meet the child's skills or needs. Every child is different, and the suggestions are meant to be examples that can be customized and individualized for each child. If reading or writing is difficult, adapt the activity so that the child dictates to the parent or the parent reads to the child. If the child has sensory processing or physical challenges, modify the activity or suggestion and adjust it to the child's ability/capacity.

How the Book Is Organized

The book is divided into three major sections, (a) At Home, (b) In the Community, and (c) Holidays and Special Events, that focus on daily routines and give suggestions for increasing social participation within those routines and throughout the day. The book is not meant to be read from cover to cover, nor are the activities meant to be used in a particular order; however, the

home section and some of the holidays are presented in chronological order to help with organization. Within each section, strategies are grouped by daily, weekly, and yearly activities and events that occur in most families' lives.

Each activity includes "hidden rules" – the unstated rules in the various social settings that we follow throughout our lives. For those who don't learn social norms intuitively, the hidden rules or "hidden curriculum" (Myles, Trautman, & Schelvan, 2013) can be confusing and need to be explained and reinforced on a regular basis. For example, we might think our children know that taking food off of another person's plate or taking up too much space on an airplane seat is considered rude, but they may not know these "rules." Review these social rules and remember to share them with the child either before, during, or after a social situation. As such, the book can be used as a starting point to discuss these various social situations and the social rules that go along with them.

Sprinkled throughout this book, you will find examples of an effective tool that Ward and Jacobsen (2012) call "job talk." These are tasks or actions (verbs) that are turned into nouns or "job talk" (see page 58 for more information). Simply adding "-er" to a verb or making the action into an occupation helps the child take ownership and become more willing to jump in and complete the task. For example, instead of saying to the child, "Can you help me sweep?," say, "Can you be the sweeper?" Or instead of saying, "Take a picture of that view," say, "You be the photographer." The examples are intended to serve as reminders to try out this tool to help the child initiate, take ownership, and increase motivation to do certain tasks. Job talk can be presented in the form of a question or a request. Give it a try; it's amazing how a small change in language can change a person's attitude!

Throughout the suggested activities you will also find user-friendly social learning vocabulary in italics. Many of the terms (but not all) are part of the Social Thinking Vocabulary developed by Michelle Garcia Winner. They provide a common language adults can use with children to describe the abstract concepts that are part and parcel of everyday social situations – concepts that we often have a hard time explaining. For example, we can say, *"keep your brain in the group"* when a child is daydreaming. This helps the child understand that she needs to be thinking about the subject at hand. It is more descriptive and, therefore, more concrete than saying, "stop daydreaming" or "pay attention." Refer to the back of the book for these vocabulary definitions and terms.

Finally, at the back of the book, you will also find tools and strategies to help you understand and implement the suggested activities, as well as a chart of all activities outlining the most pertinent area of social competence that they support.

Use, modify, or change the suggestions as you like, and realize that some activities may not work for your child or your family. Use what you need, when you need it, and adapt the activities to fit. The hope is that these activities will spark new ideas that you can use and even share with others. Consider keeping this book in a place that is easily accessible to family members and caregivers so that they will remember to review and use the ideas throughout the day and be a part of the team that guides and supports the child's social and emotional development. The goal is to make social interactions fun and memorable while helping the child connect the dots. As you incorporate the activities into everyday life, the child will build comfort and skills in a broad range of social situations.
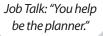
AT HOME

Mood Meter

Have the child check in each morning with a visual scale or meter (see page 72). Ask him to indicate how he is feeling. Encourage him to express his mood and explain why he is feeling that way. If he is feeling scared or upset about something, help him talk about why he is feeling that way and come up with a tool or way to make him feel better (e.g., taking a walk, thinking about something that makes him happy). Checking in like this throughout the day is a great way to regulate emotions and thereby prevent major behavioral outbursts.

Plan of the Day

Do some briefing/priming and talk about the "plan of the day" and what behavior is *expected* for each activity. Outline or map out situations that might be difficult, such as waiting in line at the grocery store or not being able to go to the park if it is raining. Don't forget to talk about the backup plan or Plan B in case something changes, such as going to the movies instead of the park if it rains. This practice will lessen anxiety and create more structure for children who need help with *flexible thinking*.

Job Talk: "You help be the planner."

STARTING THE DAY

Match the Picture

Take a picture of the child one day when he is dressed and ready to go to school with everything he needs to bring. The next day, help him get ready by showing him the picture and tell him that this is what it looks like when he is ready: hair brushed, fully dressed, backpack on, etc. Tell him to "match the picture." This is a tool for building a mental image of what he should look like in a given situation.
Contributed by Sarah Ward

Hidden Rules: 1. It may be *expected* to wake up groggy or grouchy, but it is *unexpected* to be rude or mean to others. 2. We all experience changes we cannot control, but it is *expected* that we control our reactions when we get frustrated or disappointed.