

7. Teaching Social Problem Solving to Students

Students with learning and behavior problems often have difficulty dealing with interpersonal problems, which further limit their academic and social success at school (Nelson, Dykeman, Powell, & Petty, 1996). For that reason, teaching social problem solving skills has become a common feature of programs designed to prevent and remediate discipline problems (Bear, 1998). Social problem solving skills are skills that students “use to analyze, understand, and prepare to respond to everyday problems, decisions, and conflicts” (Elias & Clabby, 1988, p. 53). Learning these skills helps students to improve their ability to cope with stress (Dubow & Tisak, 1989; Elias & Clabby, 1988), handle interpersonal situations (Elias & Clabby, 1988), experience more positive social adjustment, improve academically, and show improvements in behavior (Dubow & Tisak, 1989; Gootman, 2001; Nelson et al, 1996). Social problem solving skills also help students to better “read” (analyze) the various demands associated with social situations (Elias & Clabby, 1988) and exercise greater self-control over their behaviors (Gootman, 2001). Like any new skills we want students to learn, children who have difficulty with social problem solving need to be directly and systematically taught the skills and given frequent opportunities to use them in a normal context (Elias & Tobias, 1990; Gootman, 2001; Van Acker, 1993).

Social problem solving skills can be taught in a number of ways. For example, they can be worked into the curriculum (Elias & Clabby, 1992; Elias & Tobias, 1990; Elias & Tobias, 1996; Gootman, 2001), taught using cooperative learning strategies that give students the chance to develop and practice their social and academic skills at the same time (Van Acker, 1993), or taught in a group counseling setting (Nelson et al., 1996). Peer mediation programs also are a

popular forum for teaching students conflict resolution and problem solving skills (Cangelosi, 2000).

School personnel developing school-wide programs find that having use of a common language and skills that are to be reinforced throughout the entire school has a positive effect (Elias & Clabby, 1992; Quinn, Osher, Hoffman & Hanley, 1998). Bear's (1998) evaluation of a number of different social problem solving programs observed that they are either (a) functional—they teach the behaviors students should use or (b) structural—they teach the cognitive strategies students should use to know when and how to employ the skills, or a both. Neel, Jenkins, and Meadows (1990) emphasize the fact that teaching the skills alone is not enough. The goal of any effective program of social problem solving instruction, however, is to teach students that interpersonal problems are within their control and how to more effectively manage or avoid the events and situations that lead to such problems (Nelson et al., 1996).

Most effective programs are designed to teach students social problem solving in ways that combine both cognitive and behavioral problem solving skills (Elias & Clabby, 1988; Elias & Tobias, 1990; Goldstein, 1999; Gootman, 2001; Williams, 1991). First, students learn an ordered set of skills that are broken down into their component parts and modeled by the teacher (Elias & Tobias, 1990; Goldstein, 1999; Gootman, 2001). Next, the focus shifts to discussion on decision-making situations that require the skills and students are provided with a cognitive strategy to evaluate the various situations and how to use specific problem-solving skills. Students are taught to employ some combination of the following steps that are practiced repeatedly with feedback from the teacher and then implemented in real-life situations (Burden, 2003; & Clabby, 1988; Curwin & Mendler, 1988; Goldstein, 1999; Gootman, 2001; Nelson et al., 1996; Shure, 2001):

1. State the problem.
2. Gather information from self and others.
3. Think of possible solutions.
4. Evaluate each solution.
5. Choose the best, mutually acceptable solution.
6. Try out the solution.
7. Evaluate the solution.
8. Decide what to do next time.

It is important for programs to be highly useable by both educators and parents, so that the programs can be implemented in school and at home. Teachers should also be sure to incorporate activities to help ensure that the problem solving skills the students are being taught can be maintained and will generalize to other situations and settings (Elias & Clabby, 1988).

While researchers have evaluated individual programs for their effectiveness with students and found many to have positive short-term outcomes, there is limited long-term data on any social problem solving programs (Bear, 1998; Nelson et al., 1996). The results that are available show that students who receive social problem solving instruction demonstrate better knowledge of problem-solving skills, more empathy for other students, increased acceptance by peers, and are more likely to expect positive outcomes from problem solving (Elias & Clabby, 1992; Shure, 2001; Williams, 1991). Further, these students evidence increased use of appropriate behavioral solutions to real-life problems (Goldstein, 1999). Elias and Tobias (1990) conclude that, as with academic instruction, the best outcomes for these programs "...occur when there is continuity over a period of years, reinforcement and application of skills at time

other than during formal lessons, and support from school personnel at a variety of levels” (p. 25).

Catherine Hoffman Kaser, M.A.

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