Are Social Skills Best Learned In Groups?

On Jamie's first day of CLASS, Inc.'s Social Skills group, he appeared to be angry, defiant and uncooperative. He didn't want to interact with the other boys, refused to share his toys and began screaming when asked to engage in a cooperative game. Eight weeks later, he runs up to his peers in the waiting room, greeting each one and engages in social dialogue. During the social skills session, he offers to trade toys as he suggests an imaginative scenario for to his peers as a suggestion for a play scheme.   This is a classic example of what we observe over and over again during our social skills groups. When provided the right amount of structure, support and challenge, children quickly learn skills that lead to social success.

Just what is the right amount of support and structure? First, we need to understand social skills themselves. Social skills are defined as "specific behaviors that result in positive social interactions and encompass both verbal and non-verbal behaviors necessary for effective interpersonal communication" (Rao, Beidel, Murray, 2008). The term covers a broad range of abilities such as, use of eye-contact, initiating social interactions, maintaining social interactions, reading and providing facial expressions and body language, empathizing, and taking the perspective of others. These skills permeate all social, emotional, and academic functioning. Deficits in social skills are common among children with speech and language difficulties and are one of the hallmarks of autism spectrum disorders.

In general, social skills groups "are designed to teach children the skills necessary to navigate their social environment" (Rao, Beidel, Murray, 2008). A variety of treatment approaches have been posed for targeting social skills; however, there is little consensus in the field regarding the most effective approach, and the research on this topic is still in its infancy. However, there is agreement that children with social skills deficits do not simply "outgrow" these deficits. Furthermore, without appropriate treatment, these difficulties result in long-lasting problems that extend into all aspects of an individual's life through adulthood (Rao, Beidel, Murray, 2008). Therefore, at CLASS, Inc. we develop social skills in group settings with a multilayered approach, pulling techniques from various programs that have been demonstrated to be effective because they have the combination of targeted support and structure that leads to social success.

 Group-based approaches have been found to be one of the more effective means of training social skills. While these skills can be taught in individual treatment sessions with a clinician, it has been found that these gains are not well generalized, and children will only demonstrate the learned skills in the presence of the particular clinician in the isolated environment (www.asha.org). Consequently, the inclusion of peers allows dynamic learning where social rules must be applied to a variety of ever-changing and unpredictable situations

Another theoretical underpinning is direct teaching , because children fail to acquire social skill rules implicitly through peer interaction (White, Keonig, Scahill, 2006). In direct teaching, rules are explicitly laid out using a "social thinking" framework, which was developed by Michelle Garcia Winner (2005). The framework emphasizes how the "social world" works and why these skills are important in different contexts (Winner, 2005; Crooke, Hendrix, Rachman, 2007). Child-friendly language is used . For example, when focusing on eye-contact children are told to "think using your eyes," (as opposed to directives like "look at your friend's eyes") to emphasize that looking at someone shows you are thinking about them and what they are saying.. Following the more structured instruction, children are provided the opportunity to practice new skills

during less structured, naturalistic play. While the skills that are emphasized change from week to week, children are reminded of previously practiced rules and skills as they come up in natural interactions.

One limitation that has been identified by many researchers in looking at all types of social skills interventions is the issue of generalization; children have difficulties using learned skills in different environments. At CLASS, Inc. we facilitate generalization by including parents in the intervention. Following each group session parents are given handouts and/or ideas for applying the vocabulary and rules introduced in the group into their child's varying environments. Additionally, parents are provided specific feedback regarding their child's successes and difficulties in each session. We have found that parental involvement in carrying these skills into a child's everyday life is essential for social success.

In CLASS, Inc. Social Skills sessions, children are grouped based on mutual strengths and weaknesses. To support each child's unique set of strengths and needs, targeted skills are individualized. Further, we look to the best available evidence for the most effective teaching techniques, and we keep detailed data on each child's performance throughout the term to continuously evaluate our instructional methods in relation to each child's progress on their targeted goals. Our treatment intervention is dynamic, as we adapt our instructional methodologies based on the daily data. Through this research and data-driven approach, many of the children in our groups have dramatically improved their performance in a wide range of social skills and have been able to successfully apply these skills to their daily lives at home, school and in the community.

References:
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