

# Fact Sheet

Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC)  
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## What Are Social Skills?

Social skills are the skills we use in every environment that includes two or more people. They include such things as manners and reading and reacting appropriately in '*social environments*'. Being able to read social cues is probably the most important skill we need as almost every environment we are in is a social environment.

Many children with LD and/or ADD/ADHD have a social disability in that they are unable to read the '*social cues*' of the many environments of which they are part ~ family, school, recreational activities, etc. If they are lacking in these skills, they are often labeled as being social misfits, loners or having behavior problems. This disability can cause far more challenges for them than the academic difficulties they may have because academic problems can be dealt with by remediation, calculators, computers, taped materials, etc. Also, this lack of social awareness creates problems that quickly destroy their self-worth as they are seen as being different or '*weird*' by their peers, and therefore, have few or no friends or the wrong kind of friend.

As with the disabilities that affect their academic achievement the '*social skills*' must be taught, practiced and sometimes even over learned. Not all children pick-up the social nuances by being exposed to parents or others who have developed good social skills.

Some of the most important '*social skills*' needed to survive in our world include:

### **1. Listening skills**

*The ability to sit and listen to people around you.* This skill is imperative for school, recreational activities and employment. With this comes the ability to follow directions, a difficulty for many children. To help your child learn these skills:

- a) use a timer to have them sit for a short period of time and then build the time up slowly,
- b) start by giving two directions at a time and then increasing them when they have become proficient,
- c) have the child repeat back the directions so you are sure they have processed the information.

### **2. Skills for social acceptance**

These include manners ~ please, thank-you, answering the door, answering the phone, asking for help. Role playing can be beneficial in helping the child know what to expect, how to react and be accepted in new social situations.

### **3. Skills for dealing with anger (your own and others)**

This includes teaching children that it is okay to be angry, but it is not okay to speak or act violently because you are angry. They also need to be taught how to deal with others who are angry so as not to make the situation worse. Some steps to help teach this skill are to teach them to walk away from the situation, count to ten and return to the situation when he/she or the other person has calmed down.

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#### **4. Skills for dealing with your feelings**

Teaching children that we all have feelings and our feelings are always changing. It is important to be able to express our feelings so others know how we are feeling. However, the way in which we express our feelings must also be appropriate. For example, feeling angry but not acting or speaking violently, or feeling happy but not laughing too loudly at inappropriate times. It is also important that children learn to read others' feelings so they can act appropriately and avoid embarrassing or difficult situations. Children need to be taught to recognize the way to read peoples' feelings ~ body language and facial expressions.

#### **5. Skills for thinking before acting**

Many children with LD and/or ADHD speak or act impulsively which tends to get them into difficult situations with their peers and adults. They need to be taught to stop, think about what they are going to say or do, and then make the right decision as how to go about it. A good way to teach these skills is to role play different situations the child may encounter and how they should deal with the situation.

#### **6. Skills for accepting consequences**

Teach children that when they do make a mistake they must accept the consequences for their actions or words. Parents frequently want to protect their children from negative actions by others, but when the child is wrong they need to admit it and face the consequences.

#### **7. Skills for dealing with peer pressure**

Many children with LD and/or ADD/ADHD will do what others ask them to do, even when they know it is wrong, thinking it will make people like them. We need to teach them not to succumb to peer pressure by saying '**NO**' in a polite way. This also gives the child a sense of control as they are in charge of their own actions and words.

#### **8. Skills to improve self-image**

Parents can help their child improve his/her self-image by focusing on the positive. Help your child discover the things that they are '*good*' at (their strengths - playing the piano, art, sports, etc.) and make that your main focus. Children with LD and/or ADD/ADHD often are more focused on the disability and have difficulty realizing all the things they do well.

#### **9. Skills for problem solving**

Teach your child how to solve interpersonal problems by modeling the skill for them using everyday examples in your home (i.e. We have a very busy week coming up and we need to decide how we can all cooperate to get all the jobs done and everyone where they need to be. Let's brainstorm some solutions to this problem).

All of these skills will help the child become a better advocate for themselves. You cannot advocate for yourself if you do not feel you are worthy or if you cannot read the '*social climate*' whether it be with a teacher, a parent, a coach, or an employer.

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## Making Friends – Do's and Don'ts

To be a good friend a child must be able to consistently be flexible, sensitive, responsive, be able to read social situations, take a joke, etc,. Often kids with LDs are very concrete thinkers, which makes them inflexible and get them into more conflicts with their classmates, siblings, families.

To be able to effectively join in a social group a child must be able to read and interpret the clues of how best to join in. The child will also need the:

- Ability to establish & maintain friendships
- Ability to resolve conflicts
- Ability to pay attention to social skills

How can parents help?

- Listen, acknowledge and validate your child's feelings – even the difficult ones!
- Create a home atmosphere that is tolerant and accepting
- Use structure for daily routines
- Consistency in discipline
- Appropriate expectations
- Support & Reassurance ♥ ♥ ♥

When children/adolescents know that it is okay to feel things and can communicate these feelings it boosts their self-esteem.

Recognize that impulsivity and distractibility may look like the child is not interested, being rude etc. While these are serious issues that must be addressed it is important to try and not take them personally.....it would be similar to getting upset with a child with epilepsy for having a seizure but not giving them their medicine or taking them to the doctor.....you can't ignore the symptom of the disorder (the seizure) but you must treat the cause if you want to ever be able to control the disorder itself.

### **Social Skills Do's**

1. Of course, you can't teach/discuss other ways of doing things in times of stress – for example if you're child is going to a birthday party next week and they are anxious about it practice the week before how to hand over their gift to the birthday boy and how to accept the treat bag – doing it beforehand will be better than in the car on the way to the party when nerves will be running high.
2. Show genuine interest in what the child does – ask questions, take time to learn more!

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### 3. Other suggestions:

- Behaviour that receives attention will likely be repeated
- Positive feedback can change behaviour
- Logical consequences can change behaviour
- Clear expectations, rules and limits
- Viable and frequent choices can minimize power struggles
- Proactive rather than Reactive
- Role model the expected behaviour and social skills

Reinforcers can be very effective – catch a child being good and give them praise and reward them in the act of being good rather than the incentive approach which rarely works.

### ***Social Skills Don't***

1. The sink or swim approach often doesn't work – enrolling your child in various activities such as scouts or soccer where they will have to interact with others to succeed often is not successful – always exceptions....when your child is extremely skilled at something more allowances are made, certain activities lend themselves better than others but generally without certain adaptations put into place it is likely that if your child has social skills deficits they will struggle in all social settings.
2. Incentives such as "if you are good at grandma's for supper, we will stop for ice cream on the way home", tend to also be ineffective. Like saying to a child who should have glasses on, if you can read the board without your glasses today, we will stop and get ice cream on the way home. These types of incentives presume that the child is capable of the behavior and it is just a choice he/she is making not to comply rather than a neurological deficit that makes it impossible for him to control his/her actions.
3. Don't necessarily discourage the child from having friendships with younger children – may be seeking more developmentally appropriate friendships that allow them to achieve a status that would otherwise be out of their reach.
4. Don't force a child to participate in large groups or in highly competitive activities, if they don't want to. You can work their way up to adding more kids in and try to find sports that are at their level and focus more on participation.
5. Don't assume that child understood oral directions if they don't ask questions – ask them to repeat back what you said to determine that they got it.
6. Don't scold your child if they tell you about a social confrontation, etc as they might become reluctant to share with you in the future. Try to use the opportunity to discuss other ways they could have handled the situation.
7. Punishments don't tend to work as they don't teach appropriate behavior, kids become immune to them and just tried to avoid the situations in which they are being punished the most; might come up with inappropriate strategies to avoid punishments, such as lying, cheating, blaming others, etc. The point of the punishment is often lost in the resultant fear, anger, anxiety, stress and tension of the act itself. Children generally associate the punishment with the punisher, not the offending behavior ie: "the coach yelled at me today" vs. " I got in trouble today because I punched someone in gym class".

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## Tips on Preventing Mental Health Issues

There are certain aspects of learning disabilities which increase the risk for an individual to experience mental health issues. Failure to identify a learning disability at an early age and to consequently delay the provision of intensive, individualized instruction results in school failure. A child who was well-adjusted as a five or six year old can acquire overlays of emotional disturbance after years of school failure. Anxiety and depression would be likely experiences for such a child from the age of nine or ten.

Certain specific learning disabilities are characterized by perceptual deficits, including misinterpretation of facial expression, body language, or verbal cues that lead to awkward social interactions. These, along with impulsivity associated with ADHD, contribute to generally poor social skills, which in turn lead to alienation or social conflict. Individuals of all ages with learning disabilities and ADHD are subject to ridicule from peers and are often the objects of bullying behaviors. Low self-esteem is a frequent by-product of learning disabilities.

School failure leads to disassociation from school settings, and the adolescent and teen with learning disabilities who has not received proper academic supports and services runs a higher risk than average for becoming involved with tobacco, alcohol and drugs. School drop-out is linked strongly to functional illiteracy; teens who drop out are at high risk of becoming involved in illegal activities and eventual incarceration, and for becoming teen mothers and fathers. Teen addictions, aggressive and other anti-social behaviors, and risky pregnancies are therefore linked to learning disabilities and ADHD.

Here are some basic suggestions for avoiding problems associated with poor mental health

1. **ENCOURAGE YOUR CHILD TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR HIS/HER BEHAVIOR.** We do not control others. We can only influence others to want to change their behavior.
2. **ESTABLISH AN ATMOSPHERE OF MUTUAL RESPECT BETWEEN YOU AND YOUR CHILD.** Children respond more positively when adults are consistent, honest, open and supportive.
3. **DETERMINE THE BEHAVIOR OR EVENTS THAT TAKE PLACE BEFORE AND AFTER UNWANTED OR UNDESIRABLE BEHAVIORS.** It is important to identify the things in the environment which set off or positively reinforce the child's inappropriate behavior.
4. **ESTABLISH CONSEQUENCES THAT ARE NATURAL AND/OR LOGICAL AND APPLY THE CONSEQUENCES OBJECTIVELY (WITHOUT ANGER).** If the consequence for the child is to sit and think for 15 minutes, to also yell in anger or to spank the child will destroy the effect of the learning process.
5. **PERMIT THE INDIVIDUAL TO MAKE HIS CHOICES AND TO LIVE WITH THE CONSEQUENCES.** If the individual makes the choice, then the outcome should rest with the one making the choice. When the parent accepts the consequence, then the parent denies the child the opportunity to grow and mature.
6. **MAKE CERTAIN EACH OF YOUR CHILDREN IS A VALUED CONTRIBUTOR.** Maturation demands that everyone is treated as a full-fledged member of the family.

*Permission to adapt granted from LDA America*

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## Techniques to Help the Anxious Child

Dealing with social and emotional challenges is part of every day, but it can be particularly challenging for children with learning disabilities (LD). Learning disabilities can affect many skills including listening, thinking, speaking, reading, writing, mathematics and reasoning – skills that children must use every day to fulfill their roles as students and family members.

The consequences of their learning disabilities, however, changes. While the setting shifts from school to home and the community, the implications are equally significant. The child with learning disabilities may rely on family and school for support. If not supported, these challenges may lead to more severe mental illnesses. **Anxiety** is the most frequent emotional symptom reported by individuals with learning disabilities. As a consequence of struggling day in and day out at school, many children with LD perceive themselves as less competent and may become excessively worried or anxious.

A “vicious cycle” can develop, as the anxiety begins to make already difficult challenges with school and friendships even worse. Children with LDs become fearful because of their constant frustration and confusion in school. These feelings are exacerbated by the inconsistencies of their learning disabilities. Because they cannot anticipate failure, entering new situations provokes extreme levels of anxiety. Anxiety causes human beings to avoid whatever frightens them. The individual with LDs is no exception. However, many teachers and parents misinterpret this avoidance behavior as laziness.

In fact, the individual with LDs hesitancy to participate in activities such as homework or peer activities is related more to anxiety and confusion than to apathy.

### ***Signs and signals that indicate a child might be experiencing undue stress include:***

- recurring headaches, tummy aches or neck pain
- increased irritability, sadness, panic, anger
- being more quiet than usual
- trouble relaxing or sleeping
- lethargy, daydreaming, withdrawal from activities
- excessive energy or restlessness
- reverting to less mature behaviours
- nervous habits such as nail biting, hair twisting, thumb sucking, or sighing deeply
- subtle reactions, a strained look, frowning
- trouble getting along with friends.

### ***Stress Management Techniques***

Children who have experienced stress for some time need extra patience and reassurance. They might respond to a combination of the following:

- **physical contact** – hugging helps children relax and builds self-esteem

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- **listening** – ask children how they feel
- **encouragement** – help children find something they are good at and tell them how proud you are of them
- **honesty and openness** – talk and encourage children to express their feelings openly
- **security** – try to be consistent
- **balanced diet** – encourage children to eat a healthy, varied diet
- **physical exercise** – exercise helps burn off stressful feelings
- **role model** – show them how you problem solve, organize yourself, prioritize, etc
- **quiet** – allow for quiet time
- **humour** – help children see the funny side of things

Teach children to recognize the symptoms of stress and the changes they feel in themselves — e.g., rapid heartbeat, sweaty palms, fast breathing, headaches, tummy aches, tight tense muscles and nervous panicky feelings.

One of the things parents need to do is introduce “strengths and weaknesses” into the family vocabulary—the idea that everybody in this family has some things they’re very good at and things they **aren’t** so good at. So, the youngster who’s got learning disabilities—who’s got, say, serious weaknesses in reading comprehension—also has some strengths in soccer or piano playing or packing the car for the camping trip. With this approach, this child doesn’t stick out as the only one in the family who doesn’t do well.

When kids with learning disabilities start middle school, we need to scaffold them. A lot of parents think, “They’re in middle school; they ought to be able to take care of all this.” Well, often they aren’t taking care of all of this and they’re failing. So parents need to realize that, although they **wish** their youngster was an independent learner, they are not yet. And if we don’t provide them with some of the scaffolding – like helping them plan and organize – we’re deluding ourselves.

Parents should also keep a keen eye on a young adolescent’s social interactions. One of the primary anxieties reported in a longitudinal study for middle school was social anxiety. And that is the fear that their learning disability will be discovered by their friends and that they will not be considered cool. Parents need to shift the balance more toward “private,” clandestine remediation, and away from noticeable, or “public,” remediation.

If you’re being the disciplinarian or if you’re too invested in the homework getting done, then you lose the most important role for a parent to play. Ultimately, the child needs you as their parent, not as their tutor. They need you to love them no matter what. They need to cry and have you hold them and pat their head and say, “It’s okay, honey; I know it’s hard.” Even if they fail a test, even if they can’t do a single problem on that “stupid page,” they need you to love them. They need to know it’s okay, that you believe that they’ve made their best effort. And that tomorrow’s another day, and we’ll get up and try it again.

If parents have found particular things that are helpful to them in dealing with anxiety — whether it’s yoga, meditation, deep breathing, visualization, it’s great for them to teach those to their kids, and to do them together. Exercise is really important in both anxiety and depression control. Families can go out bicycling or jogging together.

Model peaceful living and good relaxation techniques.