Strategies for Increasing Peer Social Interactions: Prompting and Acknowledgment

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For many children, interacting with their peers is difficult. A child may be shy, have a language delay, or have developmental or social disabilities that make interacting with other children difficult. For example, Sam, a child at the Sand Creek Preschool, has difficulty initiating and maintaining social interactions with his friends. When Sam arrives at the classroom, Ms. Kerry greets him and helps him hang up his jacket and say goodbye to his mom. Ms. Kerry then gets ready to direct Sam to Table Time, the first activity of the day. However, as she does so, she also directs his attention to the table where Lisa and Dominick are already playing and says, “Look, Sam. Lisa and Dominick are playing with Mr. Potato Heads. When you get over there, ask Lisa if you can have one.” Ms. Kerry knows that Sam likes to play with Mr. Potato Head, and she sends him on his way. She then follows behind him, waiting to see whether Sam will indeed ask Lisa for one. Sam walks up to the table, looks at the Mr. Potato Head, looks at Lisa, looks at Ms. Kerry, and then looks back at Lisa and asks, “Can I have one?” Lisa gives Sam a Mr. Potato Head, and Ms. Kerry tells Sam what a great job he did asking Lisa. She gives him a pat on the back, then goes back to meet other children arriving for the day.

Later that day during Center Time, Ms. Kerry joins Sam who is playing at the sand table, in proximity to other children but not interacting with them. Ms. Kerry asks Sam if he would like a shovel, which he takes. After watching Sam play for a few seconds, Ms. Kerry asks him if she can use the shovel, which he gives her. They continue to play a little longer, and Ms. Kerry gives the shovel back to Sam. Then, moments later, she says, “Sam, can you pass the shovel to Kristi?” while she points to Kristi on the other side of the sand table. After the three successful interactions with Ms. Kerry, Sam is confident and hands the shovel to Kristi. Ms. Kerry and Kristi both thank Sam for sharing the shovel.

What Is Prompting and Acknowledgment?

Throughout the day, children engage in all kinds of activities and interactions. Some of these behaviors are likely positive behaviors that we would like the children to do more often. Occasionally, the behaviors are not positive, and we would like to see them decrease. Positive social behaviors include appropriate interactions, sharing, and helping. Positive social behaviors can be verbal like saying “Hi,” asking a friend for a toy, or giving a friend a play suggestion. Positive social behaviors can also be nonverbal like giving a “high five” or a hug, handing a toy to another child, or helping a friend put on a coat.

One way that adults can increase the likelihood of positive social behaviors occurring is through the use of prompting and acknowledgment. Adults can use a variety of prompting strategies to encourage children to interact with each other and to give children ideas on how to interact with each other. Providing children with prompts or cues to engage in social behaviors has been shown over time to increase their social behaviors with their peers. These strategies are best used in addition to general cues that are already found in the environment and with direct social skills instructions. (To learn more about these environmental cues and social skills instructions, see What Works Brief #6: Using Environmental Strategies to Promote Positive Social Interactions and What Works Brief #8: Promoting Positive Peer Social Interactions.) Once children learn positive social behaviors and are able to use them consistently, adults can gradually decrease the number of prompts that they give children.

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Prompting strategies include:

1. **Behavioral Momentum.** The first step with this strategy is for adults to ask a child to do something that he or she is already really good at doing. For example, requests might be something like, “Billy, touch your nose, touch your
Promoting and acknowledging strategies have been improved social and emotional development for the child. Research has indicated that peer social behaviors are often not a focus of early childhood caregivers. However, research also shows that by using systematic prompting and acknowledgment the number of positive social interactions can be significantly increased. Additionally, these increases occur rapidly and can be maintained when intervention is gradually faded. Once a positive social behavior is established, the use of intermittent or periodic acknowledgment (reinforcing a behavior occasionally instead of every time it occurs) helps to maintain targeted behaviors over time. Research also suggests that this increase in the frequency of peer interactions can lead to greater acceptance of the child by his or her peers and improved social and emotional development for the child.

Who Are the Children Who Have Participated in This Research?

Prompting and acknowledgment strategies have been researched with a wide variety of children, in a wide variety of settings. These strategies have been shown to be successful with preschool-age children, including 3- to 5-year-old boys and girls who are typically developing and those who are withdrawn, and young children with mental retardation, autism, conduct problems, and emotional disturbance. Settings have included inclusive preschools and child care, early childhood special education settings, and Head Start. These strategies, when used in inclusive settings, benefit typically developing children as well as children with disabilities, increasing positive peer social interactions with all children. Moreover, this intervention has been used successfully with children across a broad racial, ethnic, and family income span. The importance of individualizing this strategy to meet the unique needs of the children in a teacher’s care cannot be overstated.

Revisiting Ms. Kerry’s class later that year, we see the cumulative effects of the prompting and acknowledgment of peer social skills. Sam is now initiating and responding more often to peer interactions. He still has trouble occasionally, and adults provide prompting if needed. Adults have learned to identify what times of the day Sam does well, and when he struggles, so they can plan accordingly. Acknowledgment is used on a less-frequent basis (intermittent reinforcement) but is still a strategy that adults are actively using. In addition, the adults are amazed at how many more peer social interactions now occur on a daily basis in the class through the combined use of strategies to increase positive interactions, including Prompting and Acknowledgment, Embedded Instruction, Environmental Strategies and Teaching Class Peers to Promote Interactions (see What Works Briefs #5, 6, and 8).
Where Do I Find More Information on Implementing This Practice?

See the CSEFEL Web site (http://csefel.uiuc.edu) for additional resources.

Information on using prompting and acknowledgment is available in the following publications:


What is the Scientific Basis for the Practice?

For those wishing to explore this topic further, the following articles have documented the scientific basis on using prompting and acknowledgment to build positive peer social interactions:


This What Works Brief was developed by the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning. Contributors to this Brief were T. Bovey and P. Strain.