

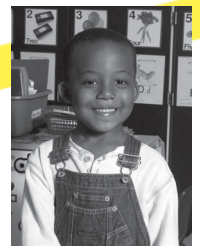
Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning



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Strategies for Increasing Peer Social Interactions: Prompting and Acknowledgment

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SERIES

WHAT WORKS BRIEFS

Strategies for Increasing Peer Social Interactions: Prompting and Acknowledgment

This *What Works Brief* is part of a continuing series of short, easy-to-read, “how to” information packets on a variety of evidence-based practices, strategies, and intervention procedures. The Briefs are designed to help teachers and other caregivers support young children’s social and emotional development. In-service

providers and others who conduct staff development activities should find them especially useful in sharing information with professionals and parents. The Briefs include examples and vignettes that illustrate how practical strategies might be used in a variety of early childhood settings and home environments.

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

mouth, touch your ears.” The second step, which follows immediately, is making a more difficult request. For example, after the child successfully touches his nose, mouth, and ears, the adult might give the child some positive descriptive feedback and then say, “Billy, come over here and play with Aaron.” The key to using behavioral momentum is for the child to experience a lot of positive attention before being asked to attempt a more difficult action.

2. *Priming.* This strategy involves providing children with ideas on how to participate in social activities before the start of those activities. For example, an adult might ask, “Bobby, who are you going to ask to play with you at choice time?” or “Haley, can you ask Phil to play house with you?” or “Teddy, you can ask Luwanda for some blocks.” For some children, it is best to follow such suggestions with an opportunity to practice the behavior. For example, the teacher might follow up with Teddy by saying, “Pretend I’m Luwanda, and ask me for some blocks.”
3. *Correspondence Training.* This strategy involves interacting with a child before he or she engages in an activity. However, instead of prompting or cuing the child to engage in a specific social behavior, you can ask the child what he or she is going to do at the activity center. For example, you might ask, “Marcus, what are you going to do with Jamal when you go to the messy table?” Then, once the child has completed the activity, you follow up regarding whether or not the skill(s) was used. “Marcus, tell me what fun things you and Jamal did at the messy table.”

Acknowledgment is used to increase the likelihood that children’s positive social behaviors will occur more frequently in the future. Acknowledgment should follow a specific, targeted behavior and should occur immediately after the desired behavior. For example, Ms. Kerry provided verbal feedback to Sam after he shared the shovel with Kristi at the sand table. Other examples of acknowledgment might include letting a child wear the “Super Friends” cape for inviting a friend to play in the housekeeping area or getting out a special toy for two children to play with after they agree to share it and take turns. Acknowledgment can be verbal, physical (e.g., praise, high fives), or tangible (e.g., food, stickers, toys). Adults need to closely monitor the kinds of reinforcers or positive feedback that they use and change them when necessary to ensure that they maintain their effectiveness.

Prompting and acknowledgment strategies should be used together when possible. Adults should be persistent in identifying natural opportunities for, and occurrences of, positive social behaviors throughout the day to use prompting and acknowledgment strategies. These strategies can be used across environments and people, and they should be used widely to achieve the best results.

Why Is It Important to Use Prompting and Acknowledgment?

Research has indicated that peer social behaviors are often not a focus of early childhood caregivers. However, research also has shown 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).



We welcome your feedback on this What Works Brief. Please go to the CSEFEL Web site (<http://csefel.uiuc.edu>) or call us at (217) 333-4123 to offer suggestions.



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:

LEAP Outreach Project. (2001). *Social skills: A classroom training packet*. Denver: Center for Evidence-Based Practices in Early Learning, University of Colorado at Denver.

Morris, S. (2002). Promoting social skills among students with nonverbal learning disabilities. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 34(3), 66-71.

Odom, S. L., McConnell, S. R., Ostrosky, M., Peterson, C., Skellenger, A., Spicuzza, R., Chandler, L. K., & McEvoy, M. A. (1997). *Play time, social time: Organizing your classroom to build interaction skills*. Minneapolis: Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota. [The curriculum can be ordered at <http://ici.umn.edu/products/curricula.html>.]



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:

Davis, C. A., Brady, M. P., Hamilton, R., McEvoy, M. A., & Williams, R. E. (1994). Effects of high-probability requests on the social interactions of young children with severe disabilities. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 27(4), 619-637.

Kohler, F. W., Anthony, L. J., Steighner, S. A., & Hoyson, M. (2001). Teaching social interaction skills in the integrated preschool: An examination of naturalistic tactics. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 21(2), 93-103.

McConnell, S. R., Sisson, L. A., Cort, C. A., & Strain, P. S. (1991). Effects of social skill training and contingency management on reciprocal interaction of preschool children with behavioral handicaps. *Journal of Special Education*, 24(4), 473-495.

Strain, P. S., Kohler, F. W., Storey, K., & Danko, C. D. (1994). Teaching preschoolers with autism to self-monitor their social interactions. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 2(2), 78-88.

Zanolli, K., & Daggett, J. (1998). The effects of reinforcement rate on the spontaneous social initiations of socially withdrawn preschoolers. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 31(1), 117-125.

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