



Teaching Social Behaviors

What Do Teachers Need to Know About Teaching Social Behaviors?

Teaching social behaviors provides opportunities for teachers to communicate and encourage students with disabilities to demonstrate behavioral expectations and communicate needs more effectively. Rather than a stand-alone curriculum, the teaching of social behaviors requires teachers to implement an instructional sequence that includes defining the target behavior, teaching the social skill, and supporting the student to demonstrate the behavior through modifications to the classroom (de Bruin et al., 2013; Walker et al., 2018). The following three-phase cycle can be used when planning, implementing, and monitoring student social progress:

Social behaviors refer to interpersonal skills that represent student comportment, communication, and self-management. Importantly, the methods described for teaching social behaviors assumes that students learn behavior through interactions with adults, peers, and their classroom environment and that teachers can shape behavior through intentional modifications to these aspects.



In this brief, we focus on the PLAN phase of the three-phase cycle.

Planning to Teach Social Behaviors for Students With Disabilities

The most effective approaches for individualizing the teaching of social skills to students begins with acknowledging the individual and contextual nature of behavior, particularly for students with disabilities (Moore et al., 2019). Research suggests that teaching social and communicative skills must account for the specific needs of the student, the conditions of the environment that promote or inhibit the behavior, and the components that encourage the student to repeatedly perform the desired behavior. [Teaching social behaviors](#) to students with disabilities begins by identifying and defining a target behavior that poses problems for the student or the classroom environment and considering the conditions that provoke and maintain occurrences.

- **Replacement behavior selection.** After identifying a target behavior, school personnel must determine a replacement behavior to teach the student to serve as an alternative, prosocial response. For instance, a student with emotional and behavioral disorders may consistently call out in class, distracting other students and making learning difficult for peers. School personnel might consider teaching the student to raise their hand, use an alternative system (e.g., response cards), or incorporate technology to access teacher or peer attention in a more prosocial manner (Bowman-Perrot et al., 2015). The replacement behavior represents the desired response that school personnel will actively teach and support while concurrently working to reduce the occurrence of the nondesirable target behavior.
- **Modify the classroom.** Effective interventions for teaching students with disabilities prosocial behaviors require school personnel to [consider environmental conditions](#) that contribute to the display of undesired behaviors (Knowles et al., 2015; Royer et al., 2017). For many students, conditions within the classroom promote occurrences of problematic and challenging behavior. The environmental conditions vary based on the individual needs of the student and the setting but typically relate to incongruences between classroom expectations and the student's strengths, interests, or preferences. Research-based environmental modifications include reorganizing the learning environment and the schedule, preteaching lesson content, or making instructional modifications to increase student engagement and task completion.
- **Implement a system to promote replacement behavior.** School personnel must encourage students to demonstrate the prosocial replacement behavior across time and settings (Dart et al., 2014). Although [classroom and schoolwide interventions](#) are available, students with disabilities exhibiting intensive behavioral challenges benefit from receiving [positive consequences contingent on demonstrating the prosocial behavior](#). For instance, teachers may provide verbal praise or small rewards to students for exhibiting the selected replacement behavior. When coupled with a planned approach for responding to undesired behaviors, school personnel assist students to learn the appropriate responses and adaptive prosocial behaviors for the context.



Access to the General Education Classroom

The process for teaching social behaviors to students with disabilities and supporting their use of those behaviors across school settings remains similar regardless of the setting or context. Specifically, school personnel, including general education teachers, must identify and define the target behavior, select a prosocial replacement behavior, actively teach the new behavior, and encourage its use across a variety of settings (Bruhn et al., 2016).

To promote access to the general education classroom, all school personnel must commit to teaching and supporting the development of social skills. This includes leveraging existing systems, facilitating communication, and supporting consistent implementation of the strategy and data collection procedures. For students with disabilities demonstrating challenging behavior, general education teachers must work with their colleagues to develop an approach for teaching socially appropriate behaviors and delivering rewarding consequences when prosocial behaviors are emitted (Watts et al., 2019). Teachers must collaborate with special education teachers, school psychologists, social workers, administrators, and others around the building with expertise and training in supporting prosocial development to develop effective, evidence-based plans.

- For schools with a tiered system of behavioral support, personnel should draw on available [behavioral screening methods](#) and secondary interventions for students with disabilities to consolidate resources and increase the consistency of support across settings.
- School personnel must monitor student response to teach and support the development of prosocial skills to evaluate adequate progress. Using available schoolwide data such as office discipline referrals or collecting more proximal data through systematic direct observation or direct behavior ratings to assess response depends on the target behavior and available resources.

How to Get Started Planning for Teaching Social Behaviors

- To get started teaching social behaviors, teachers must teach and reteach the behavioral expectations and classroom routines to students to ensure understanding.
- For students who respond more (or better) to universal classroom management procedures, teachers should consider the three-phase cycle: Plan, Implement, and Review. Teachers must actively plan interventions to increase opportunities for the student to demonstrate prosocial behaviors and receive encouragement for demonstrating it.
- For students not responding to more intensive support, request a functional behavior assessment from the school psychologist, the social worker, the special education teacher, or the appropriate designated person.



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