

Social Skills Games for Children

Deborah M. Plummer

Illustrated by Jane Serrurier

Foreword by Professor Jannet Wright



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London N1 9B , UK
and
400 Market Street, Suite 400
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Introduction

Social Skills Games for Children offers ways to support children who are struggling to develop or to demonstrate their social skills and shows how youngsters can build on their existing skills for social interaction through the medium of games.

The underlying philosophy governing the use of games as a basis for learning comes from my experiences as a speech and language therapist and a deep belief that children have an amazing array of abilities which often go untapped in our rush to teach them what we know about life from an adult perspective. Play is a natural childhood activity and a child's imagination is a valuable inner resource which can be used to foster creative thinking, healthy self-esteem and the ability to interact successfully with others. Games that are facilitated mindfully and with integrity can provide a rich learning experience that goes beyond the teaching of skills as a way of masking or compensating for social ineptness and opens up the possibility of a much deeper learning instead – the type of learning that leads to socially intelligent interactions and promotes feelings of personal fulfilment and self-respect.

Why use non-competitive games?

This book is one of a collection based on the use of games to enhance social and emotional well-being (see *Self-Esteem Games for Children* and *Anger Management Games for Children*, also published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers). In line with the other books, *Social Skills Games for Children* also focuses on non-competitive games where the enjoyment and the challenge come from the process itself rather than from winning. This is not because I have an aversion to competitive games. In fact, I believe that these can form an important part of a child's learning once she is ready to engage in them and does so by her own choice. The child's world is after all a competitive arena and most children will naturally play games of skill that involve winning or losing or being 'in' or 'out' whether we adults encourage them or not. However, the ability to cope successfully in competition with peers is a tricky hurdle to negotiate and one which will complicate the process of focusing on the building of other social

skills. Younger children and those who are particularly vulnerable to low self-esteem often find win or lose games extremely difficult to manage. For such children, the anticipation of the 'rewards' of winning might be so great that the disappointment of losing has an equally dramatic effect on their mood. In order to enjoy and benefit from competitive games they will therefore need to first develop a certain degree of emotional resilience, competence and self-efficacy, all of which can be fostered initially through non-competitive activities.

Who will benefit from social skills games?

The games are suitable for all children from 5 to 12 years of age. In the school setting they will fit into a wide selection of personal, social and health education (PSHE) and other learning objectives. They can be used to teach and enhance a variety of skills at primary level and to reinforce strategies for social interaction during the vulnerable period of transition to secondary education. The material can be incorporated into individual behaviour plans (IBPs) and can be used to target specific aspects of individual education plans (IEPs). The concepts fit with the ethos of The Children's Plan (DCSF 2007), an important element of the Government's Every Child Matters programme which sets out goals that include the participation of all children and young people in 'positive activities to develop personal and social skills' and which will include a specific play strategy to be published in 2008.

The games in this book can also be used to complement other approaches to social and emotional development currently promoted within the primary education system such as the SEAL programme (Social and emotional aspects of learning, DfES 2005).¹

Children attending after school clubs, youth groups and play schemes will enjoy and benefit from engaging in the activities and crucially, all the games can be played at home by families. The central role played by parents and carers (and often by the wider family network) in supporting a child's social and emotional development is of course tremendously important. The special time shared during a fun game can be a boost to helping family members to understand each other, show their love, and strengthen their relationship. Sharing moments of laughter, problem-solving and creativity during games can be rewarding and re-affirming for everyone concerned.

The material will also complement intervention methods used in a diverse range of therapy approaches with individual children or groups, including existing social skills programmes.

1 The DfES (Department for Education and Skills) ceased to exist in June 2007 and was replaced by the DCSF (Department for Children, Schools and Families).

Strategies are outlined for helping children to transfer skills to a variety of different situations and to maintain their progress, particularly at times of stress, and facilitators are invited to reflect on their own interactions with children and to consider how this reflection can support the process of change.

How the games are structured

The games and activities are divided into nine sections, including warm-ups and wind-downs. This division is designed to aid the process of evaluating and adapting games to suit specific needs. In practice, many of the games could be placed in more than one section and you will find that you are often touching on several aspects of social skills within just one game.

Each game has been marked with a set of symbols to aid in the selection of the most appropriate ones for different groups of children:

- Ⓢ This gives an indication of the suggested *youngest* age for playing the game. There is no upper age limit given.
- Ⓢ 10 mins An approximate time is suggested for the length of the game (excluding the discussion time). This will obviously vary according to the size of the group and the ability of the players.
- ↑ ↑ ↑ Indicates that the game is suitable for larger groups (eight or more).
- ↑ ↑ The game is suitable for small groups.
- ☞☞☞ The game involves a lot of speaking unless it is adapted.
- ☞☞ A moderate amount of speaking is required by players.
- ☞ The game is primarily a non-verbal game or one requiring minimal speech.
- ☑ empathy This gives an indication of a foundation ability or specific skill used or developed by playing this game.

Foundation abilities and specific skills

There is an inherent difficulty involved in compiling a definitive list of social skills since each of our social interactions is of course unique and dependent on such aspects as who is involved (taking account of culture, gender, age and developmental factors); what has brought them together; the goal of the interaction; the environment; and the mood and previous experiences of each participant.

However, there are certain recognizable core abilities which underpin the socially intelligent selection and use of appropriate behaviours. Each of these abilities is specifically addressed by different sets of games in Part Two. They are:

- Self-awareness – a child's ability to be aware of her feelings, thoughts and behaviour and also of her own needs in social interactions (Chapter 9: Staying on track).
- Self-control – her belief that she has some control over her feelings and thoughts and the ways in which she expresses them; an ability to manage impulsivity and to show emotions appropriately (Chapter 9: Staying on track).
- Effective listening – her ability to really hear what others are saying and to reflect on what she hears. This involves attention control and is an important pre-requisite for being able to negotiate and cooperate (Chapter 10: Tuning in).
- Effective observation – her ability to observe and reflect on non-verbal aspects of interactions such as changes in facial expression and body posture (Chapter 10: Tuning in).
- The ability to understand and use verbal and/or non-verbal forms of communication with others (Chapter 11: More than just talking).
- A knowledge and understanding of a range of different emotions and how to cope with other people's emotions. For example, noticing when someone is upset and offering to help (Chapter 12: You and me).
- Imagination – an important element of empathy: her ability to see things from another person's point of view and to be aware of other people's needs (Chapter 12: You and me).
- Tolerance and respect of differences and knowing how to convey this (Chapter 13: You and me together).
- The ability to understand the 'mutuality' involved in cooperation and negotiation (Chapter 13: You and me together).
- The ability to apply appropriate problem-solving strategies (Chapter 14: Got it!).

Within this framework for social competence there are certain *behaviours* which demonstrate the abilities. For example, in relation to being able to cooperate and negotiate successfully in a verbal exchange any or all of the following communication skills may be utilized:

- initiating and ending an interaction
- asking/answering questions

- making requests
- taking turns in conversation
- giving personal information
- explaining/giving instructions
- encouraging and reinforcing others
- giving and receiving specific praise
- keeping an interaction going/staying on the subject
- flexibility in communication style
- being appropriate and timely in interactions
- awareness of appropriate personal space (proximity to others).

The lists of skills and foundation abilities provided for each game have been limited to just a few key areas but you may find that you want to add others relevant to your own focus of work. Undoubtedly, the more often that you play these games, the more you will want to add to each list.

Adaptations

Ideas for expanding and adapting the games are offered as a starting point for your own experimentation with the main themes. Most games can be adapted appropriately to enable children with diverse strengths and needs to take part. Older children should also be given plenty of opportunities to invent new versions of familiar games and to alter the rules of games in discussion with other group members. Experimentation with the structure of games helps children to understand the value of rules and to distinguish more easily between what works and what doesn't. Discussion with peers also provides opportunities for developing skills in negotiating and decision making. Before any alterations are made it is of course important to make it clear to all players that there are certain safety and non-discriminatory rules which must always be followed.

Reflections and notes

Personal reflection and reflections about the games themselves are a vital part of the learning process – even the briefest time spent in thinking about behaviour and feelings or actions and consequences can help children to make enormous leaps in realization.

Valuing children's views about a games session is also likely to foster increased motivation to engage more fully in the learning process, and their comments about a

particular game could guide you in choosing another game to address that specific issue.

Suggestions for discussion with older children are provided after each game description. As a general principle I would suggest that we should not give more time to a discussion at the time of playing than we do to the game itself. Many children who play games regularly eventually gain insights into their own behaviour and emotions and those of others purely through the experience, and will not necessarily need to take specific time to reflect on what happened within every session. However, these topics do also provide an opportunity for drawing links between different themes at later times. You could remind children of particular games when this is relevant: 'Do you remember when we played that game of...?' 'What did you feel when...?' or 'How might this game help us to understand what happened in the class yesterday?'

The suggestions for discussion can also provide focus points for you to use during your own planning and reflection sessions (see pp.51–3 for further guidelines). To aid this process, each game description includes space for you to add your own notes. These might include such things as personal insights and experiences of using the games, personal preferences, dislikes, problems and successes, and any issues raised concerning age, cultural or gender differences etc.

Additional notes

Finally, because you will undoubtedly have many more games in your repertoire and will gather extra ideas from colleagues and children, each of the games sections ends with a blank summary page for 'additional notes'. Here you can add to your list and make any further general comments on your experiences with the games that you have used.

My hope is that this format will encourage reflective practice but that it will not discourage enjoying the pure fun of playing games with young children. This, after all, is one of the essential values of this approach – having fun while learning about ourselves and others!

Integrating games into different settings

The ways in which the games are adapted and incorporated into family life and into educational and therapy approaches can and should vary according to the setting and according to the needs, strengths and experiences of the children. Each adult who facilitates games will naturally bring his or her own personality, imagination, expertise and knowledge to the games and create something new from the basic format. Also, because of the nature of group dynamics, the same game played with a

different group will inevitably have a different feel to it and probably have different outcomes for the participants. In this way, playing with the process of playing becomes an integral part of our own learning.

However, the games in this book do follow a logical progression. If you are structuring sessions based specifically around the development of social skills, I suggest that you always start with a warm-up game (Chapter 8: Getting to know each other), followed by two or three games from one of the subsequent sections (or from two consecutive sections), and finish with a relaxation/wind-down game.

Warm-ups and ice-breakers foster group cohesion and help to develop a group identity. They encourage children to interact with each other, and help them to feel that they have been acknowledged by everyone else. They act as a ritual to mark the beginning of a session and to ensure that each person has fully 'arrived' in the group.

The relaxations and wind-downs emphasize the skills involved in managing levels of emotion and teach simple strategies for 'letting go' of any left over feelings which may have arisen during earlier games and discussions, or which may occur in the future. This combination is important because children need to feel safe and contained when they are exploring social and emotional skills. The structure of a games session can facilitate this by providing predictability and certainty.

The focus of each game should be made explicit where appropriate. For example, you might introduce a warm-up game by telling the children that it is a game for getting to know each other better. Where you are intending to follow a game with a discussion about a specific social skill you might set the focus with a more detailed introduction, perhaps by telling a short story or recounting a fictitious event to illustrate a particular use or misuse of a social skill. You could then introduce the chosen game(s) as being a way of exploring that skill. On completion of the game(s) 'debrief' or discuss what happened during play. As children become used to the format they can be encouraged to choose familiar games (perhaps from a small selection of possible options) which they think might be relevant for a particular skill. This process of choosing can also engender useful discussions about how skills are learned and developed.

Further guidelines for facilitating the games can be found in Chapter 4: Structuring the emotional environment.

Understanding social skills¹

Key concepts

- The foundations for social skills are laid down in infancy.
- A child's ability to engage in socially skilled interactions is also related to the successful development of a range of cognitive processes.
- Naturally occurring periods of heightened self-awareness may result in vulnerable children becoming more isolated.
- Social skills difficulties can be specific or more generalized.
- Children who fail to develop appropriate social skills often continue to experience problems in later life.
- Helping children to build social skills will enable them to develop a balance between the formation of healthy relationships and personal autonomy.



Four-year-old Jack is playing with his favourite toy animals in an Early Years classroom. He has constructed an elaborate farm yard on the floor and is busy loading sheep into a plastic truck. When Alex sits down next to him Jack pushes him away forcefully, saying 'You can't play!' Alex

¹ For an outline of the social skills covered by the games in Part Two please see *Foundation abilities and specific skills*, pp.15–17.

begins to cry. Four-year-old Hannah, who is evidently disturbed by her classmate's tears, watches from a distance for a few moments and then silently offers Alex the doll that she has been playing with. When this doesn't console him she briefly puts her arm around him and then goes to fetch one of the adults.

Hannah is demonstrating two very crucial aspects of social competence: she is making a connection with the emotions of another child and she is attempting to repair the situation by trying out a range of learnt strategies. She is discovering that handling another person's emotions is no easy task and that sometimes adult intervention might be the best option!

Like most children, it seems that Hannah is learning social skills by observing others and through a process of trial and error. When something works well for her it is likely to be reinforced in some way, for example by verbal praise from an adult, by resolution of a difficult situation or by her own internal sense of calm. Successful interactions will tend to have a positive effect on others and are likely to lead to increased social contact and more opportunities for Hannah to alter and refine her skills. Eventually, she will be able to call on different sets of appropriate behaviour for different situations, utilizing what is often referred to as 'social intelligence'.

But what if we were to discover that Hannah's mother suffers from bouts of depression and is often unresponsive to Hannah's emotional needs? In fact, Hannah is ambivalent and insecure in her relationship with her mother and, in consequence, has become hyper-sensitive to other people's mood changes. Or what if we learn that Jack has autism and cannot tolerate interference in his game, or that Alex and his twin brother are in separate classes for the first time today? Now this seemingly simple interaction suddenly reveals itself as being more complex and more poignant as each child tentatively engages in the social 'dance' that reflects his or her early life experiences.

The foundations for social skills are laid down in infancy

The early interaction patterns between babies and their care-givers play a crucial part in the development of social skills, both in terms of particular behaviours and, as we now know, in the chemical and neurological make-up of the baby's brain. When parents are sensitive and responsive to their child's needs and moods they naturally engage in interactions which reinforce such skills as turn-taking, eye gaze, interpreting and mirroring facial expressions and the ability to initiate enjoyable interactions. Sensitive parenting also encourages the establishment of an effective emotion-regulation system: the baby's ability to self-regulate and self-calm so that he or she is not constantly overwhelmed with difficult emotions. Parents who are attuned to their baby's feelings will automatically provide the comfort and touch which allows the

emotion-regulation system to develop and to function effectively. But research shows that where this natural process is inhibited there may be long-term consequences:

Stress in infancy – such as consistently being ignored when you cry – is particularly hazardous because high levels of cortisol in the early months of life can also affect the development of other neurotransmitter systems whose pathways are still being established... When stressed, these various biochemical systems may become skewed in ways that make it more difficult for the individual to regulate himself in later life. (Gerhardt 2004, p.65)

These early experiences affect the development of the pre-frontal cortex – the area of the brain that deals with feelings and with social interactions. The pre-frontal cortex plays a vital role in inhibiting or regulating the more primitive responses of the amygdala – the area of the brain which deals with the fear and self-defence systems – and is most vulnerable to outside influences during its critical period of development in the first four years of life.

Without a well-developed pre-frontal cortex children will not only have difficulty with self-control and self-regulation but also with the ability to feel ‘connected’ to others. It has been found that some four-year-olds who have been brought up in chaotic and stressful environments (for example where there has been severe neglect or abuse) have a measurably smaller pre-frontal cortex compared to four-year-olds who have experienced a nurturing environment. These children show clear signs of lack of social competence, an inability to manage stress and the inability to see things from another child’s viewpoint (Gerhardt 2004).

Where development has been unimpeded however, even very young children are capable of showing ‘prosocial and reparative behaviours such as helping, sharing, sympathizing, and comforting victims’ (Harter 1999, p.111).

Although negative experiences may make it extremely difficult for a child to empathize with others and to understand social signals, there is fortunately much that can be done to redress the damage. The brain is remarkable in its capacity to adapt and respond to new influences, particularly during early childhood. Supportive interactions and the teaching of key skills can therefore greatly enhance a child’s capacity for self-control, self-regulation and connection to others.

A child’s ability to engage in socially skilled interactions is related to the successful development of a range of cognitive processes

With increasing maturity, a child’s thought processes and the ways in which she appraises situations will start to play a bigger part in how she interprets social interactions and in how she monitors and evaluates her own skills. There is a strong link, for

example, between social understanding (learning about how other people think, feel and behave) and social skills. In particular, a great deal of research has focused on children's ability to understand that people can misrepresent true facts and events but will nevertheless still base their behaviour on these misrepresentations or 'false beliefs'. This understanding of false beliefs appears to emerge some time between four and six years of age and has been linked with such social skills as the ability to play cooperatively and to follow rules in simple games (Lalonde and Chandler 1995 cited in Carpendale and Lewis 2006).

By seven or eight years of age (coinciding with the point of entry into the next stage of education and the changes associated with this) most children will have developed an ability to make judgements about different interpretations of events and will be more able to understand and tolerate ambiguity. This will help them to be accepting of others and to make more informed judgements about appropriate behaviour.

Naturally occurring periods of heightened self-awareness may result in vulnerable children becoming more isolated

It is also around the age of seven that children become much more self-aware and begin to compare themselves more directly with their peers. A child who has healthy self-esteem and age-appropriate social skills will usually weather this period well, striking a healthy balance between forming friendship groups and learning to be self-reliant. However, when children do not have this solid foundation, an increase in self-awareness may lead to feelings of acute vulnerability in terms of being 'judged' by others. This can be particularly noticeable with some children who have a communication or learning difficulty. Whereas such children may have appeared to cope well during their early years it is at this point that they may begin to withdraw from social contact or from participation in group activities. Social anxiety and negative expectations of how others will view them is also likely to have a direct influence on how children communicate when they do engage in interactions resulting in further misunderstandings, embarrassment and confirmation of their difficulties.

The period of transition to secondary school is another common point at which children may experience heightened social anxiety and awareness of moments of social ineptness. Popularity with peers becomes an increasingly important issue for this age group at a time when they are also trying to cope with the challenges of larger groups and of taking more responsibility for themselves and for their learning. A child who already has difficulties with understanding and using appropriate social skills will undoubtedly find this transition period even more confusing and overwhelming. This could result in withdrawal or in further development of inappropriate behaviour in an attempt to gain recognition from peers.

It is an unfortunate truth that while someone who has a physical problem in coordinating muscle movements may be seen by their peers as clumsy but 'doing their best', someone who is *socially* clumsy is much more likely to be seen as 'odd' or not fitting in with the social norm – a difficult and painful situation which can all too often lead to rejection or ridicule from others.

Social skills difficulties can be specific or more generalized

Child psychologists Stephen Nowicki and Marshall Duke, have used the term *dyssemia* to describe the very specific difficulty that some children have with understanding and using non-verbal communication. They believe that because children are not specifically taught about non-verbal aspects of communication (except through observation of others) many fail to learn some of the basic 'non-verbal rules'. In their book *Helping the Child Who Doesn't Fit In* they describe typically dyssemic children as those who 'may stand too close to others, touch them inappropriately, or misunderstand and misinterpret friendly actions.' (Nowicki and Duke 1992, p.5).

As already mentioned, sometimes the difficulty is not due to a failure to learn a specific skill but is the byproduct of a more general learning or communication difference:

Meera is ten. She has a hearing impairment and her language development is delayed. She has found it difficult to learn the social rules that will help her to interact successfully with her peers. Waiting her turn in a group activity is proving very difficult for her. She fidgets and calls out while other children are having their turn.

Theo is nine. He has Asperger syndrome and is struggling to join in with the classroom discussion about bullying. He is becoming increasingly anxious and is particularly agitated by the fact that some of the other children are sitting in close proximity to him.

Françoise is 12. She is dyslexic and has problems with organizational skills and short-term memory. She did not remember that she was supposed to meet her friend at the bus stop today. Now her friend has sent her an angry text. Françoise is upset but is unsure how to respond.

Social competence is a 'dance' between all participants – with each person appraising and adjusting the nuances of interaction, often at a subconscious level. It is hardly surprising that many children struggle to join the dance, or that they dance to a different tune, or with different steps.

Children who fail to develop appropriate social skills often continue to experience problems in later life

Whatever the causal factors, the consequences of social ineptness can be far-reaching. Children who do not learn to master the social dance are often seen as insensitive or