

Social Skills Are Critical for Those With Disabilities

By Sandra Houghton

Premium article access courtesy of Edweek.org.

Read more **FREE** content!

•  [Printer-Friendly](#)

•  [Email Article](#)

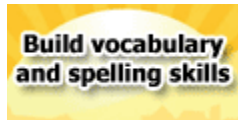
•  [Reprints](#)

•  [Comments \(2\)](#)

•

•  [BOOKMARK](#)    ...

• ARTICLE TOOLS SPONSORED BY:



Imagine a childhood without play dates or birthday parties, sleepovers or school dances. Doesn't sound like much of a childhood, does it? Well, for children with disabilities—developmental and otherwise—it is, more often than not, the norm.

Having grown up with cerebral palsy, I know what it feels like to be "different." Even within my own family I felt like an outcast. My brother could do no wrong. My little sister had the looks and the brains. But I was just the disabled kid. I didn't have the opportunities that my siblings had. I had no friends, no social experiences.

During my school years, I was a target for bullies; ridiculed for the way I talked, the way I walked, and even the way I dressed. On top of that, I had no support system. Sure, I had my fair share of sympathetic teachers, but on the whole, there were no systems in place to help me. I graduated at the bottom of my class and struggled as a young adult to find meaning and purpose in my life. Unfortunately, my story is no different from that of most students with developmental disabilities.

I got lucky when I connected with people from the [Massachusetts Developmental Disabilities Council](#), or MDDC, who helped me find an identity and purpose. It was a long

and often painful road, but I am a better and happier person having gone down it. What I learned was this: The skills that were most important for me to grow didn't come from a textbook or a classroom; they came through developing what professionals today refer to as "soft skills" or social skills.

I have seen firsthand the importance of teaching self-awareness and social communication to students. Youngsters and teenagers without disabilities learn these skills through peer interaction and social opportunities. Skills such as making and keeping friends, being a good listener, being a team player, and being assertive rather than aggressive are what contribute to future success as an adult. But for people with disabilities, most school environments provide little to no opportunity to develop these skills.

Fortunately, I gained a support system through the MDDC and learned new advocacy skills that helped me stand up for myself. In 2000-01, I received a **Gopen Fellowship**, which provides mentoring and financial support for someone with a developmental disability, or a family member, to work in the disability-advocacy field to empower others like me to be agents of change. As a fellow, I developed the leadership course I now teach at MDDC.

My leadership series at MDDC provides an interactive learning environment that focuses on the person, teaching individuals about themselves, their strengths, and their abilities. We introduce different ways that people communicate, the way our body language speaks to people, and how attitudes and feelings influence our behavior toward others. We teach students how to work together, how to dress for success, and how to be part of a team. Ultimately, the program works to improve a person's self-esteem, increase confidence to try new things, and develop the soft skills needed to succeed.

I struggled to get where I am today, and it pains me to see that young people are still struggling decades later. Understanding who you are as a person and how to make a good impression on others is necessary for success in life.

School is tough—and it's even worse for children with disabilities, who are too often alienated from their peers and made easy targets for bullies. By sticking up for children with disabilities and fostering inclusive environments in our schools, we can dispel the indifference that shelters bullying.

As a society, we must invest time and effort to develop and expand support systems and training programs similar to those at MDDC for students and young adults transitioning out

of the education system. Focusing on soft skills will enhance opportunities for students and young adults with disabilities to improve their social skills, increase their self-confidence, and lead more productive lives.

No one should feel left out.

Sandra Houghton is a self-advocate for human rights and public services for individuals with developmental disabilities. She developed the Self-Advocacy Leadership Series, or SALS, which is the first long-term program in the United States to teach individuals with developmental disabilities to become "self-advocates" through improving communication and social skills. Ms. Houghton conducts SALS training seminars at the Massachusetts Developmental Disabilities Council, in Quincy, Mass.

Vol. 30, Issue 26

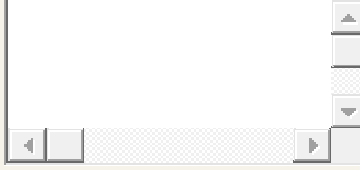
RELATED STORIES

- ["Study Finds Special Educators Get Less Mentoring,"](#) January 6, 2011.
- ["Efforts to End Bullying, A Challenge to Leaders, Gain New Momentum,"](#) May 12, 2010.

Recommend this Story

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Login](#) | [Register](#)

Your bio is currently empty. Now is a great time to [fill in your profile](#). Type Comment



(optional)

Sort by:

Report Abuse



Score: 0

Name withheld

Margo/Mom

12:21 PM on March 23, 2011

This comment is hidden because you have chosen to ignore Margo/Mom. [Show Details](#)

Thank you for saying out loud what I have long observed with regard to my child, who has a disability. It never made sense to me that while lack of social skills was most often held up as the justification for removing students with disabilities from a regular classroom, the result was to place them in a situation in which there were no role models of appropriate behavior (not to mention little in the way of explicit instruction in such). And it is puzzling because children are so often willing to be exemplars and teachers of behavior when provided with the proper explanations and expectations. I have worked in many diverse groups in which it was necessary to explain to children that so and so needed some coaching of some kind---to clue them in when they violated boundaries, or to let them know when someone did or did not want to play, or to simply volunteer to "be a friend" to someone otherwise being excluded.

In my child's case I watched the struggle for identity, preferring the appellation of being a "bad" kid to being a "dumb" kid, to the discovery that being a gay kid was also a piece of the picture and a fit, followed by the discovery that being gay sometimes justified others in blatant harassment and bullying that was de facto officially sanctioned.

We have to move beyond not only our willingness to turn a blind eye to these kinds of behaviors when they occur in the hallways and on the playgrounds, but we also have to restructure our hidden curriculum of school organization that teaches that such behaviors as exclusion are "normal."

Report Abuse



Score: 0

Name withheld

Project ACHIEVE

2:56 PM on March 24, 2011

This comment is hidden because you have chosen to ignore Project ACHIEVE. [Show Details](#)

We believe that social skills should be taught within the context of school-wide Positive Behavioral Support Systems. The ultimate goal of a Positive Behavioral Support System (PBSS) is to facilitate all students' social, emotional, and behavioral competency and self-management. In order to accomplish these goals, our Department of Education's State Improvement Grant uses Project ACHIEVE's evidence-

based PBSS blueprint. This blueprint includes these six components: (a) Social Skills Instruction for all students; (b) building-wide Accountability processes; (c) staff and administrative Consistency; (d) a “Special Situations” process focusing on student behavior in the common areas of a school and as related to student teasing, taunting, bullying, harassment, and physical aggression; (e) school-based Crisis Intervention and Response Strategies; and (f) Community and Parent Outreach activities.

On our website (www.arstudentsuccess.org/intervention-tools-and-resources/positive-behavioral-supports.html), we have a number of resources. One resource is a Technical Assistance paper that discusses the evidence-based components of Positive Behavioral Support Systems, including the characteristics of effective social skills programs. It then describes how to teach social skills in the classroom, and reviews eight notable research-based social skills programs. The TA paper concludes with recommendations on ways for districts to select a social skills program for use across all of its schools.

The website also has a number of related PBSS implementation documents and tools, and links to four PBSS webinars that I presented this year (if you have problems, go to the webinar archive on the www.spectrumk12.com website).

We hope that these resources are helpful to you.

