Social Skills *equals* Life Skills The Primary Determinant of Success

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IMAGINE what it might be like for an individual, sitting in a classroom or boardroom, who is unable to listen to or fully understand the nuances of communication (i.e. subtle remarks, facial or hand gestures). This leads one to ask further, how well do people listen? Do they make eye contact? Are they comfortable and confident in social situations? For both children and adults, the effectiveness of these interactions along with the development of a strong self-concept are the hallmark of essential social skills.

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While it was traditionally felt that only those individuals who displayed some particular difficulty with social skills required training, that view has changed. Social skills training is now often used in a pro-active way to enhance skill proficiency, to develop advanced learning capacity, and to promote competitiveness. Specifically, adults have been receiving specialized job training and executive coaching skills, while children are now being taught to develop and sustain interpersonal relationships in order to achieve life long success. It is for this reason that social skills training courses are being offered and are in such great demand.

"The development of social skills is an ongoing process."

While one would readily acknowledge the importance of basic learning skills and core academic subjects, it is social competency that is the primary determinant of future success. The development of social skills is an ongoing process. However, these skills need to be taught or learned and are not inherently acquired. Social skills are perhaps not easily defined, yet when an individual is unsuccessful in developing these skills, the impacts are obvious and may be emotionally damaging. Typical consequences include social isolation or rejection. Social skills training can help to prevent these negative effects.

Social skills enrichment training is a preventive program that uses a cognitive-behavioral approach. The program is offered over a specified number of sessions in small, structured groups with same-age peers in a comfortable, fun, and supportive environment. This training utilizes positive reinforcement along with a number of learning principles to develop these skills. These principles include the introduction and modelling of skills, role playing and direct feedback in order to shape behavior, along with the promotion of skill maintenance through self monitoring.

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Each session is divided into four parts. During the first part, skills from the previous session are reviewed. Following this, new skills are presented in a few simple steps. The facilitator then has the participants demonstrate an understanding of the new skills by explaining and then practicing the "skill

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steps". Finally, the participants are encouraged to use the skills outside of the group. By having children rehearse the skills repeatedly, the generalization (transfer) of these skills to different settings (such as the schoolyard, the classroom, and the family) is ensured. Facilitating this transfer process requires parents to support and observe the child using the skill at home or in the community and to report on their rate of success.

Some of the more common and essential skills include the following:

- Friendship Making

- Understanding and Expressing Emotions (one's own and those of others)

- Increasing Attention and Listening

- Accepting Responsibility

- Developing Assertiveness and Self-Concept

- Learning Effective Problem-Solving Strategies

- Working Cooperatively

- Dealing with Teasing, Bullying and Victimization

In successful social skills training programs for children, an experienced facilitator provides guidance, much like an effective parent, portraying characteristics of warmth, directiveness and enthusiasm. He or she also offers a great deal of variety in order to maintain interest and provides flexibility to accommodate the needs of each individual.

The primary goal of social skills training is to enable participants to become pro-active in developing, maintaining, and improving upon skills that are useful for positive social interaction. Furthermore, this training helps to reduce anxiety and improve self-control through mastery of problem-solving strategies. This is achieved by helping participants develop effective interpersonal skills, appropriate work habits, and the ability to resolve conflict. Participants also quickly learn to improve self-confidence and develop a sense of self-efficacy in daily interactions. In addition, the development of social skills leads to greater peer acceptance.

Social skills are life skills that give each person greater control and autonomy. They are key to maintaining employment and relationships. The ability to develop and maintain appropriate interactions is recognized as an important influence on success. This is because the establishment of relationships is a vital social skill in both a child's and adult's life.