

# Strategies for Teaching Important Social Skills to Young Children

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## Description

Parents can help their children learn new behavior in a positive way by practice, praise, prompting, and pointing out,

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One of the most important roles that parents play in their child's development is that of teaching their child social skills. These skills include daily interaction skills such as sharing, taking turns, and allowing others to talk without interrupting. The category of social skills can also be expanded to facets of self-control such as appropriate anger management. For many children, social skills are learned by observing how others in their environment handle social situations. These children then imitate desirable responses such as turn taking and little thought is given to how the young child became so adept at playing board games, cards, or other activities that require a child to wait for others.

For some children, however, more direct instruction is needed to help them develop appropriate social skills. Such instruction is more effective than using a discipline strategy such as time out, as the issue of concern is skill building and not compliance. The conceptualization of social skills as skills to be taught may seem foreign to parents who are focused on the child's apparent "misbehavior."

By helping parents look at social skills as just that— skills that the child must learn like any others (e.g., riding a bike or playing the piano), parents may be better able to tolerate some deficits in their child's behavioral repertoire. Of course, the parent may also suffer from poor social skills in addition to inappropriate responses to the child's social efforts. Thus, parents also need to be informed about how their social behavior impacts the child, requiring the parent to model more appropriate behaviors if he or she wants the child to do the same.

## 4 Ps: Practice, Praise, Point Out, and Prompt

One framework that can be effective in teaching parents how to encourage their child's social skills development is referred to in our clinic as the "4 P's" approach (Christophersen & Mortweet, 2003). The four P's stand for Practice, Praise, Point out, and Prompt. The purpose of the four "P's" is to break down the skills into concrete components that the parent can easily teach to their child. To illustrate this approach to building social skills, we will use the common scenario of the child who interrupts during the parent's telephone conversations to others.

In our example, the child is playing quietly in the other room while the parent makes a phone call. A few minutes into the conversation the child enters the room and begins whining, pulling on his mother's arm, repeating his request over and over in an increasingly louder voice. His mother pauses her conversation and asks the child to wait. When her initial pleas to not interrupt are ineffective, she eventually begins lecturing about how many times she has told him not to interrupt her while she is on the phone. She may then request that the child go to time-out to punish him for interrupting, only to find herself in the same situation as she places another phone call.

The telephone scenario really involves deficits in both the way the parent is handling the situation and in the way the child is handling the situation. The parent's strategies of repeating commands, reasoning, and time out for interrupting do not address the child's need for an acceptable alternative to interrupting. In other words the child must build in a new skill of not interrupting that must be established and encouraged by the parent. Strategies for applying the 4 P principles to interrupting are elaborated below. The same process is effective for teaching skills such as sharing and taking turns. We use a handout to supplement our verbal discussion of the child's individual issues.

As mentioned previously, the 4 P's are **Practice, Praise, Point Out**, and **Prompt**. Parents should be told that the process of learning a new skill takes all children some time, and can take some children longer than others. Each step must be used consistently and repeatedly for the child to be successful. Parents must also focus on the skill building aspect of learning versus punishment, as many social skills usually do not get better in spite of repeated attempts to discipline children for not exercising them. Finally, parents must also have realistic expectations for their child's behavior.

The parent who expects to be able to make and complete a telephone call without being interrupted by her child may be asking too much of the child, and may not be the most realistic option for the household. The interrupting protocol not only teaches the child an interruption strategy, it encourages the parent to interrupt their phone when the child uses an appropriate strategy.

#### **The 4 P strategies applied to interrupting are:**

**Practice** an appropriate behavior. Tell your child you are going to try something new for when he wants to talk to you when you are talking to someone else. Show your child how to gently place his hand on your forearm as the signal to gain your attention without interrupting. In response, put your hand over your child's hand so he knows that you have seen his signal. Practice by pretending you are talking to someone and ask your child to use the signal, prompting as much as necessary. The moment he places his hand on your forearm, stop your conversation, gently place your free hand over his hand, and immediately ask him what he wants. You can then begin to extend the time between the signal and when you respond but certainly try to respond as quickly as you can so your child learns an alternative to interrupting. An explanation about what you are doing, without any negative references, is appropriate periodically. You can also practice by setting up conversations at home or in public with dad or other caregivers. Phone conversations can also be contrived (e.g., grandma knows you will be calling and that you are working on the not interrupting skill) or you can simply pretend like you are talking to someone on the phone as another practice opportunity. Continue to practice the new skill (placing her hand on your forearm) a couple of times each day for the week or two that it takes to establish the new skill. Over that time, gradually extend the length of time between when the child places their hand on your arm, and you place your hand on their hand, and when you stop your conversation to ascertain what they want.

**Praise** or reward the child for practicing. Your child may not particularly enjoy learning this new skill and may resist your efforts to have her practice. Thus, incorporating a reinforcement system for practicing (and for eventually using the skill appropriately) is very important for the practice to work. The reinforcement can be as simple as a "high five" during the practice, but should also include rewards such as reading an extra bedtime story that day or playing a game with the child for cooperating with the practice sessions.

**Point Out** the behavior in yourself and in others. Most young children won't notice you waiting to take your turn in a conversation. So, if you are standing in line at the grocery store, point out that you will wait until the lady in front of you has finished her conversation with the clerk before you

start to talk to the clerk. You can also point out examples on children's television shows and in their storybooks. Examples abound in the real world of people waiting for their turn to speak.

**Prompt** your child when the behavior would be appropriate. As your child is learning the new skill of not interrupting, prompt your child to use the new skills when you see opportunities for him to do so.

For example, if daddy is talking on the phone, prompt your child to go over to him, place his hand on daddy's forearm, wait for daddy to place his hand on top as a signal that he will soon be asking the child what he needs. Dad, in turn, would praise or reward the child for practicing the behavior.

## Anger Management

We have successfully used these strategies for teaching Anger Management Skills to young children as well. One alternative to becoming out of control when angry that we teach is to stop and breathe deeply until the person calms down. To teach such breathing in a concrete way, we ask the child to practice blowing soap bubbles and identify how taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly results in the most bubbles out of the wand. We routinely have children, and their parents, Practice blowing soap bubbles as an alternative to getting angry.

As with practicing the alternative to interrupting, children with poor anger control need extensive experience with the alternative if they are ever to be expected to use it, such as taking deep breaths. We usually have the child practice both real and imaginary bubbles so that they will not need to try to find their soap bubbles when they notice that they are starting to get angry.

Parents are asked to Praise the child for practicing blowing both real and imaginary bubbles. Although there is a strong temptation to "expect" children to enjoy practicing, they typically do not. Always start out rewarding them for their efforts. We also recommend that parents Point Out the times when they frustrated but do not get angry. An example might be when the parent is trying to park in front of a shoe store and someone takes the space they wanted. The parent can then point out to the child she is getting mad at that person and that "mommy needs to take her deep breaths" or "help mommy blow her bubbles."

In this way, your child will be able to observe how you handle frustrating situations yourself. Parents should be warned, however, to NOT use times when they are frustrated with their child or spouse as these examples. Finally, the parent is asked to Prompt the child to blow his bubbles when he encounters a situation that, in the past, has made him angry.

The examples used here illustrate what to do once a social skills deficit is obvious. These strategies can also be used proactively by having the primary care provider discuss the importance of social skills development at each well-child visit. A few simple questions about how the child shares, waits for things, or controls his frustration can provide the opportunity to discuss the skills most important to the parent and most appropriate to the child's developmental level.

## Discipline is About Skills

By presenting these skills as comparable to other skills such as learning to dress or riding a bike, the provider may help take the emotional edge off of the social skill deficit that may be causing the parent such frustration.

The strategies discussed in this piece are practical for application with the majority of families seen in a primary care office. Some parents, however, are quite deficient in their own social skills, and some children have behavioral or learning problems that challenge these strategies.

A referral to a mental health practitioner is probably indicated when there is a history of depression or anger management problems in the primary caregiver, when the caregiver is socially isolated, and when there are co-morbid disorders such as ADHD, ODD or learning delays.

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