THE SOCIAL SKILLS PICTURE BOOK

Teaching play, emotion, and communication to children with autism

Jed Baker, Ph.D.

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FUTURE HORIZONS INC.

Future Horizons, Inc.
721 W. Abram Street
Arlington, TX 76013

800.489.0727 Toll Free
817.277.0727
817.277.2270 Fax

www.FutureHorizons-autism.com
email: info@FutureHorizons-autism.com

Jody Foreman, Cour
Wheeler Element:
5700 Cynthia D
Louisville, KY 40:

MAKING YOUR OWN SOCIAL SKILLS PICTURE STORIES

Things to Consider

No set of skills can be complete for any individual, as the situations that demand social responses are constantly changing. Therefore, learning to make your own social skills picture stories and design skills to address specific situations allow you the greatest freedom.

Children can actively participate in the creation of new social skills picture stories by posing for pictures and assembling the books on paper or a computer. The benefits are doubled for youngsters who help to create their picture skills. They have the opportunity to role-play the skills during the picture taking, then have their attention drawn to a permanent, highly appealing record of themselves engaged in the skill.

In making your own picture stories, four areas need to be considered: (a) the target skill, (b) how to task analyze the skill, (c) what perceptions, thoughts, or feelings you want to highlight for the student, and (d) how to put the book together.

A. Identifying Target Skills

Parents, teachers, or students can identify target skills. Individualized skills can be patterned after one of the 20 skills depicted in this book, or a new skill can be developed that is based on a student's particular problematic behavior in a specific situation. Incorrect behaviors are often a clue to what behaviors need to be learned. When these behaviors occur, mentally ask, "Why or what was the student trying to achieve?" This process of determining the function of a behavior is called a functional assessment (see Durand, 1990).

The most common functions of a problem behavior are to:

- ESCAPE some task
- GET ATTENTION,
- provide SELF-STIMULATION,
- demand a TANGIBLE REWARD,
- DISPLACE ANGER from a previous situation,
- seek RETALIATION.

Whatever the function of the misbehavior, a crucial strategy to remedy the problem is to teach the student a more appropriate way to attain the desired reward or response. The appropriate alternative behavior can become the targeted skills for a new social skills picture sequence. Sample ideas for appropriate skills to teach for each proposed function of behavior are outlined below.

FUNCTION	INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR	TARGET SKILLS
Escape	Tantrums, physical or verbal aggression, refusals.	Asking for a break, negotiating more time, asking for help to make the task easier. Trying when it's hard, dealing with mistakes.
Get Attention	Teasing, disruptive noises, inappropriate jokes or comments, complaints of being hurt.	Initiating communication or play, joining in communication or play, asking for help, asking to tell or show something to others.
Self-Stimulation	Rocking, hand flapping, twirling.	Performing the self-stimulatory behavior in a less disruptive way, alternative ways to relax or self-soothe.
Tangible Reward	Tantrums for a toy or privilege, refusing to cooperate with anything until reward is given.	Accept no for an answer or learn to wait for what you want, negotiating skills.
Displaced Anger	Verbal or physical aggression directed at the wrong person, refusal to cooperate with any instructions.	Identifying common sources of anger (e.g., someone yelled at or reprimanded the student) and learning to say how you feel to the person who upset you rather than act it out.
Retaliation	Teasing back, hitting back, stealing from someone who upset you.	Recognizing and appropriately expressing emotions, (i.e. Saying how you feel in a positive way "I feel ____ when you ____ because ____"). Telling someone to stop, ignoring, telling an authority.

B. Task Analysis

Task analyzing the skill simply means to break it up into smaller component steps. This will probably not be the same from student to student. Breaking down a skill too far will make it cumbersome to learn. Likewise, failure to break it

down enough will lead to the student having difficulty learning the skill. As an example, imagine teaching "complimenting" as a skill and one of the steps was, "Say nice things about how the person looks." Some students would know what "nice things" are, but other students would need that step broken down further. We might create an interim step to show that "nice things to say" use the words "I like ___ " and "Your ___ looks good." Pay attention to whether or not the student grasps a step being taught. If he is not learning or understanding the step, then it needs to be broken down further.

C. Perceptions, Thoughts and Feelings

Highlighting perceptions is a critical part of creating social skills picture stories. The better the student understands what people are thinking and feeling, the more likely he is to understand why to enact the skill. It is important to clearly demonstrate the benefit for the student to engage in the skill. Is it because it makes the other person happy and then the other person will give you something you want or play with you again? For example, the skill "Accepting No" illustrates that other people feel good when you accept no and that it is likely that you will get what you want later. Or "Dealing with Losing" teaches that others will be happy and play with you again if you do not get mad when you lose.

D. Assembling the Social Skills Picture Stories

Picture stories can be created several ways. Once a skill has been identified and the accompanying perceptions and verbalizations have been thought through, map out the skill steps and what pictures are needed. As often as possible, use the student as the model for the photographs. Pose students for the pictures while going through each skill step, first modeling what to do for each step. Do not worry if the student does not understand the skill fully at first, as learning will be reinforced after the picture set is created. The social skills picture stories included in this book were originally taken with a digital camera and then imported into a Microsoft Power Point presentation, where the bubbles and text were created. A similar process can be generated using a variety of suitable photograph software or desk-top publishing/layout programs. Alternatively, pictures can be taken with a non-digital camera and pasted to paper. Bubbles and text can then be hand-written or typed onto colored paper and pasted onto the pictures. Be consistent in using one color for bubbles that express verbalizations and another color for thought/perception bubbles, so as not to confuse the student. Students can not only pose for the pictures, but can participate in the cutting, pasting and assembling of the skills. With some students, the exercise of sequencing the skill in the right order can be made into a game to further enhance the understanding of the individual steps.

Most importantly, creating new social skills picture stories - with or without the student - should be fun. Behavior modification can be a challenging task for many parents and teachers. Social skills picture stories are a creative and fun way to reduce the stress often associated with teaching alternative behaviors. Reduced stress can translate into better teaching and more progress for your child or student. So have fun and be creative.

Sample Steps for Other Skills

Two new skills are task analyzed for you below, followed by suggestions for other skills that might be appropriate for your child or a student with whom you work. Individualize the steps as needed to make them as user-friendly and meaningful as possible for the particular child.

Don't be the Rule Police!

- Do not tell other people what to do. It is not your job to make people follow the rules.
- If you tell other people what rules to follow or you tattle on them for not following rules, they may be annoyed with you.
- There are some exceptions when it is okay for you to tell people what rules to follow:
  When you are the teacher, boss, or put in charge of other people.
  When people ask you what the rules are.
  When people break a rule that could cause great danger to themselves or others.
  If people do something to hurt you, you can use the "I" statement or tell an adult what they have done.

Dealing with Specific Fears (also refer to Trying Something New for ideas)

- Tell someone that you are afraid, rather than run, scream or hide.
- Think to yourself, "I will feel better after I have tried it."
- Break down what you want to do into smaller, easier steps.
  If you are afraid to try a new food, try just looking at the food first, then watching others eat it, then smelling it, then licking it, then trying just a small bite of it.
- Find something calming you can do while trying to overcome your fear.
  Try holding a stuffed animal, taking deep breaths or reading a book.
- Go through each step in bullet number three while engaging in the calming activity.
- Receive a reward and praise for taking any steps towards facing the fear.

Dealing with Specific Triggers to Anger

- Refer to Accepting No for an Answer, Dealing with Mistakes, or Dealing with Teasing for ideas

Becoming More Flexible when Change Occurs

- Refer to Compromising for ideas

Stopping a Favored Activity

- Refer to Accepting No for an Answer for ideas

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