



VANDERBILT KENNEDY CENTER

Building Social Skills in Schools



This toolkit provides strategies and resources for those within the public education setting who are supporting autistic students. This includes teachers, administrators, paraprofessionals, and all other service providers (e.g., counselors, school psychologists, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, board certified behavior analysts (BCBAs)). Learners will be provided ways to support autistic students in building social and personal competencies (SPCs) in school by specifically focusing on the areas of social awareness and relationship skills in order to improve student connections.

Note: we will be using the term **Social and Personal Competencies** or **SPCs** when speaking about the broad noun of social skills. When talking about SPC intervention, we will use the term **SPC support**.

Identity-first language is used throughout this pamphlet. For more information visit: triad.vumc.org/identity-language.

A more detailed review of this material and additional resources can be found in the interactive online toolkit, which can be accessed by registering for a free account at triad.vkclearning.org and accessing the information in the **School-Age Services** folder.

Introduction

❑ What are social and personal competencies (SPCs)?

Grounded in research, SPCs include five core competencies which include: responsible decision-making, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, and self-management.

These competencies allow students to develop healthy identities, understand and manage emotions, achieve personal goals, and develop and maintain positive relationships (CASEL.org). Understanding oneself is critical to forming healthy, respectful, and meaningful relationships with others.

SPC support focuses on teaching students' critical life skills including self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, decision-making, and relationship skills, all of which have been adopted as part of the Tennessee Social and Competencies Framework (<https://bit.ly/42oPTIS>).

SPCs are skills that all students learn throughout their life, whether directly or naturally. While subtle cues may be sufficient in teaching some learners, others would also benefit from explicit instruction.

❑ Why are SPCs important?

SPCs are related to academic success and better long-term outcomes for students:

- Students who receive interventions targeting SPCs have been shown to have increased academic performance, improved classroom behavior, an increased ability to manage stress and depression, and better attitudes about themselves, others, and school (Durlak et al., 2011).
- For every \$1 that is spent on social-emotional learning programs, research has shown a return of \$11 (Belfield et al., 2015).

SPCs also help students build relationships and promote more school connectedness.

- School connectedness is an important factor which has been shown to produce better long-term social and emotional outcomes for students (Resnick et al., 1997; Eccles et al., 1993; Osterman, 2000).
- However, students with disabilities experience lower levels of school connectedness to improve their long-term outcomes. (Bauminger, Shulman, & Agam, 2003).



What do SPCs mean for autistic students?

All students can have difficulties communicating and socializing with their peers, but autistic students may feel extra pressure to fit in.

- When problems occur, autistic students may be blamed for not socializing “appropriately” enough due to their diagnosis (Hilary, 2020).
- Rather than focusing solely on how to be accepted by their peers, SPC support should help autistic students understand their own identities in order to build confidence for social interactions.

The focus on social AND personal competencies can greatly improve mental health outcomes for autistic students.

- Historical “social skills training” that prioritized masking was shown to be damaging to autistic emotional wellbeing and could even lead to an increase in suicidal ideation and attempts (Mitchell, Sheppard, & Cassidy, 2021; Cassidy et al., 2019). Masking refers to “the suppression of aspects of self and identity” to “fly under the radar” or “appear normal” (Wiley, 2014). This often includes adapting behaviors to act in ways which are more socially acceptable and is also known as “camouflaging.” Example: suppressing the need to “stim” (e.g., self-stimulate).

- Shifting from “social skills training” to Social and Personal Competency support focused on building emotional regulation, self-awareness, and responsible decision-making skills, can increase the likelihood that autistic students will experience a stronger sense of self that can carry over into social situations, helping to build and maintain healthy, supportive relationships.

❑ **How to design SPC support to be autistic affirming:**
Let’s take a look at some dos and don’ts for designing SPC support to be autistic inclusive.

Do

Teach SPCs as supports or facilitators to bridge understanding between autistic and neurotypical students.

Teach SPCs as an explanation on how to form connections with others while still maintaining one’s sense of self/identity.

Teach SPCs as a means of practicing boundaries which **respect** individuals and others.

Teach SPCs as a way to navigate changing social contexts/environments in a flexible manner.

Don’t

Teach SPCs as one set of rules to follow.

Teach SPCs as a way to shame or guilt autistic students who have difficulty socializing with others.

Teach SPCs by having a specific “script” to follow with inflexible use of language and skills.

Teach SPCs by “training” an individual to behave a certain way that would compromise their own sense of identity or personality.

SPC Areas of Need

For students eligible for special education services under the category of autism, there will be adverse impact in social communication. Therefore, as part of a comprehensive evaluation, social and personal competencies should be assessed to determine a student’s SPC needs and their effects on student progress in general education. This information will serve as the foundation for developing SPC components of a student’s IEP including specific goals, supports, and services that will provide the student not only a free and appropriate education, but will equip the student with the tools to live a self-determined life (e.g., establish meaningful connections when he/she chooses to do so).

Often, autistic students have developmental differences that impact their ability to relate to and engage with their peers, which is a needed skill within educational settings. These differences can impact activities such as making friends, participating in group work, being a part of academic clubs, etc.

Therefore, the main question we must ask when considering which SPCs to support is, “what social differences are most impacting the student within the classroom and school environment?”

To answer this question through the comprehensive evaluation process, it will be important that the educational team gathers information from multiple sources, including the student, their caregivers and teachers, using multiple methods including direct assessment and observation across multiple settings including structured and unstructured school, home, extra curricular and community settings.

In order to inform the student’s needs in the areas of Social and Personal Competencies, consider what are the student’s strengths and social preferences and how can that inform SPC interventions?

❑ **How do we turn SPC competency needs into interventions?**

First, we start with a student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Included within a student's IEP are two main components which drive interventions and supports: **Present Levels of Educational Performance (PLEP)** and **Measurable Annual Goals (MAGs)**. Below you will find some brief information and considerations for implementing SPC competencies and support within these two areas of an IEP. See the Tennessee Special Education Framework (<https://bit.ly/42kzuFg>) for more information.

❑ **Developing PLEP in SPCs:**

- The PLEP will be based upon what SPCs are identified as areas of need for the student.
- PLEPs form the foundation of a student's IEP and all educational and functional areas of need identified during the evaluation process.
- It is the PLEP statement that will serve as the basis for the student's IEP goals, supports, and services in the identified areas of need.
- PLEPs serve as brief statements which provide a snapshot of a student's skill level (including both strengths and weaknesses) within specific areas.

❑ **Considerations for writing PLEPs:**

PLEPs should:

- Define behavior in observable and measurable terms
- Be positive
- Be current
- Include multiple data sources
- Include skills of all levels (e.g., mastered, in progress, and skills of concern)
- Include information about accommodations/modifications which were/were not successful in supporting the student
- Identify previous instructional supports and services utilized by the student (e.g., Response to Intervention)
- Address WHY this is a current level of concern

❑ **Developing MAGs in SPCs:**

- MAGs are descriptions of what the student can reasonably be expected to accomplish in each area during the IEP timeline as a result of the provision of special education intervention and related services. MAGs are concrete and specific and emphasize students' strengths and current area of skills while identifying individual needs which can be supported through the IEP.

- First and most importantly, MAGs for SPCs should be based on the PLEP, and they should also be guided by the Tennessee SPC state standards, and therefore, tied to social and emotional expectations for all students.
- MAGs should be clearly and easily described by including the specific conditions, the target behavior, the performance criteria, the specific timelines, and the schedule of evaluation/progress monitoring.

❑ **Short-Term Objectives**

Also included within your MAGs is a clear scaffolding of skills which includes smaller skills that must be met first as part of a larger MAG.

These short-term objectives should be met before a student demonstrates overall mastery with the MAG. However, it is important to note that sometimes objectives serve as a "road map," which doesn't always follow a clear sequence (e.g., sometimes students will skip objectives and master goals instead).

Short-term objectives are a required part of creating MAGs and include the same components of creating a MAG:

- condition
- behavior/skill
- criteria
- measurement tool and schedule

Within measurement it is important to establish:

- A progress monitoring tool
- How often data will be collected (consider beginning, middle, and end of intervention time points)
- Who will be responsible for collecting data
- How (specifically) progress will be monitored

See the following for resources on establishing goals and data collection:

- IRIS Center: Defining Behavior
<https://bit.ly/3VC5tP6>
- Kansas State Department of Education: Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance Statements
<https://bit.ly/3LvwyYK>
- Center for Parent Information and Resources: Present Levels (Component of the IEP)
<https://bit.ly/3I1ld7B>

SPC Support and Interventions

Forming Groups	<p>The first step in forming SPC groups is thinking about which autistic students would benefit the most from participation. See the following for group considerations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include autistic students who have social skills identified within their IEP • Which autistic students would be likely to benefit and which would not <p>For example, autistic students who struggle to self-regulate their own behavior and may pose some safety concerns to other students would likely be a better candidate for individual supports. For more information in supporting these students, please see our resources on behavior and mental health at triad.vkclearning.org.</p>
Group Logistics	<p>An important step in determining logistics for your group will be considering the content that you will be presenting to your students, i.e., what will be your curriculum? Many school districts opt for a pre-packaged curriculum; however, this can be costly. As a result, school districts may instead choose to design their own curriculum and create their own lessons.</p> <p>See the following resources on pre-packaged curriculums and designing your own SPC lessons:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CASEL Program Guide https://pg.casel.org/review-programs/ • PBIS Missouri Tier 2 SPCs Group https://bit.ly/3pNEvYT • Critical Features of SPC Interventions Document https://bit.ly/3lgtegg • Determining Your SPC Curriculum: Workbook Activity https://bit.ly/42CMypU
Resource Logistics	<p>Consider how, where, when, by whom, and how long your group will take place. Important considerations include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the time you selected work for all students? • Do you have staff available to teach the group? • Do you have the space allocated for the group? • How many students will be within your group? • What types of materials will you need within your group's classroom? (e.g., computer, whiteboard, desks, writing materials, etc.) <p>See the following two documents which can be helpful in thinking through this process:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workbook Program Materials https://bit.ly/3OgkqV5 • Workbook Program Logistics Where When https://bit.ly/42Ynqtw
Time Frames	<p>It will also be important to think about time frames when setting up your groups. This will involve considering how long groups are anticipated to last in conjunction with individual student IEP timelines.</p>

SPC Intervention Lessons

Now that we have been able to plan out some of the logistical aspects required prior to starting a group, it's important to understand three components of how to deliver your SPC intervention support lessons.

Step 1: Environmental Components

Environmental Arrangement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This includes thinking and planning ahead of the group meeting to make sure that the environment is set up to support student success.• This might include supports such as access to a break space, a pair of noise cancelling headphones, or a yoga ball to engage in movement.• It may also involve adjusting your physical space such as creating clear physical and visual organization (clear visual boundaries between student areas and teacher areas), clarifying expectations, and limiting distractions.• See TRIAD Environmental Arrangements EBP Tip Sheet (https://bit.ly/3nqR7Em).
Predictable Schedules	<p>To support student engagement and increase predictability, it will be important to have a consistent flow and structure to each. See the following example templates of how to set up your SPC lessons each time:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Explicit Instruction Lesson Plan Template https://bit.ly/3HBXDz5• Explicit Instruction Lesson Plan Example https://bit.ly/417898i
Visual Supports	<p>Using visual supports is another way to provide clear expectations in an accessible format.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Behavioral contract This is a written contract which outlines expectations and rules for the group before the group starts. See Social Skills Behavior Contract (https://bit.ly/3VKGIG1). <p>Here it will also be important to help students orient to why they are in the group. Here you can help students identify their WHY and how they hope to use the skills to support them in their goals.</p>

Step 2: Instructional Components

When supporting social and personal competencies for autistic students, we want to make sure we are using evidence-based instructional strategies while ensuring our support is autistic-affirming. This can be done through what is known as explicit instruction.

The three key parts of an explicit instruction lesson format are the opening, the body, and the closing.

Please see the following resources on how to set up and deliver a lesson using an explicit instruction lesson format:

- Explicit Instruction Lesson Format <https://bit.ly/458QINi>
- Social Skills Daily Session Guide <https://bit.ly/3HD9cWD>

Step 3: Customizing Your Instruction

Now that you have the components of how to format your instruction, you can start to think about how to customize your lessons to your students' needs. For example, students of different ages may need different interactive features to capture their attention.

You can start by considering the level of interactive, dynamic instruction needed according to the attention and motivation of different age groups.

Elementary Students	<p>Consider including more interactive and engaging activities such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modeling or acting out scenarios/scenes for students • Increasing opportunities for dynamic involvement and allowing students to be more hands on with their learning: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » For example: Making a Stress Ball • Allowing opportunities for video or character modeling by including videos or interactive stories <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » PBS LearningMedia: Empathy, An ARTHUR Interactive Comic https://bit.ly/3AYzsXH » Model Me Kids: Autism Apps, Videos, & Software https://modelmekids.com
Middle School Students	<p>Consider including components such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Narratives: which can provide stories and opportunities for autistic students to engage in perspective taking with characters and stories and relating it to their own social encounters • Power Cards: which can provide a visual example for autistic students which incorporates elements or visuals which are reinforcing and engaging for the autistic student • Video resources may provide the opportunity for video modeling or for video examples of social situations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Model Me Kids: Autism Apps, Videos, & Software https://modelmekids.com
High School Students	<p>Incorporating the following elements can help to engage autistic students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social autopsies: can be a way for students and their teachers to be “social detectives” and go back and discuss social situations or interactions which were confusing to the student. The teachers work with students on helping to guide them through the situation and specifics such as: what happened, how the student responded and why, and how they might respond in the future and why. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » See Social Autopsies Template (OCALI) https://bit.ly/3LDHaMa • Video modeling: this may include videos of unclear or confusing social interactions. A group discussion should immediately follow where the group is allowed to discuss what happened and how things could be done differently in the future. <p>This discussion may also have students think of their own examples from their lives and discuss their roles within those situations.</p>

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