



Tip Sheet for Educators: Social Competence

Many students with learning disabilities (LDs) experience social difficulties in addition to academic challenges. Social competence plays an important role in developing and maintaining relationships, and fostering well-being and mental health across the lifespan. We know students with LDs need more time, more direct teaching, and supported opportunities to practice social competence skills in a safe environment. Consider the following strategies:

Narrating:

Some students do not know how to interpret a social situation or may not know what to do or say. It can be helpful to tactfully pull the student aside to interpret the situation and provide coaching in the moment.

Elementary example:

“Aaron looks like he is angry. His arms are crossed and his forehead is scrunched. Maybe he wants to be left alone.”

Secondary example:

“Susan was being sarcastic when she said she loves doing homework for four hours.”

Conversation skills:

Directly teach the student how to share information in a conversation and practice following up a statement with a related question.

Elementary example:

“I played Minecraft last night. Do you also play Minecraft?”

Secondary example:

“I watched the new Star Wars movie last night. Have you seen it yet?”

Conflict resolution:

Help the student to become aware of when they may have hurt someone's feelings or made a social 'misstep' by explaining the situation and the observed behaviour. Teach the student how to 'repair' by apologizing, and practice the skills.

Elementary example:

"When you took over the game and changed the rules, it was frustrating for Johnny; he made a mad face and didn't want to play anymore."

Secondary example:

"When you interrupted Naomi during the school fair and told everyone she copied your science project, she looked very upset and she left the event early."

Acknowledge, label and validate emotions:

For some students with LDs, emotion regulation can be difficult, especially in certain social situations. Support students in building their emotional vocabulary by acknowledging, labelling and validating their emotions.

Elementary example:

Help younger students label their feelings by using a 'Feeling Thermometer'.

E.g., "It looks like you are starting to get frustrated. How hot is your thermometer? What can you do to cool down your thermometer?"

Secondary example:

While the 'Feeling Thermometer' may not be an appropriate analogy for older students, you can still help them regulate their emotions by modelling a calm response, as well as labelling and validating their emotions.

E.g., "I understand why you're frustrated. What do you need in order to stay calm and focused?"

Natural learning moments:

Use media (e.g., TV shows, movies, video games, books) or real life examples to talk about appropriate social behaviours and expectations.

Group work:

Strategically assign students to work in pairs or triads (e.g., based on shared interest). Group work can provide a peer group for students, who are often isolated, and it can help to foster social competence by improving social skills and building self-esteem. Before the group activity, identify the behaviour or skills you hope to see. Reinforce and praise those behaviours or skills throughout the activity.

Recess and lunch:

Ensure recess and lunch times are supervised to prevent bullying and exclusion. Some students may also benefit from a buddy system where they play and eat with a carefully chosen group of peers.