

Social Skills Training for Students With Emotional and Behavioral Disorders: A Review of Reviews

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ABSTRACT: Teaching social skills to students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) has become an accepted practice. Literally hundreds of social skills training (SST) efficacy studies for students with EBD appear in the literature. As a result, many authors have published both narrative and meta-analytic reviews of the literature. Reviews have highlighted various problem areas as targets for future research. Nevertheless, SST has subsequently often resulted in only modest changes in the social competence of students with EBD. The purpose of this article is to review the reviews on SST with students with EBD, discuss issues based on conclusions reached, and present implications for practice.

■ The acquisition and performance of prosocial behaviors is part of normal human development (Alexander & Entwisle, 1988). Youths who lack social competence have been at risk for many difficulties, including, but not limited to, aggression, rejection by peers, academic failure, loneliness, social dissatisfaction, difficulty maintaining employment and relationships with others, mental illnesses, and contact with the legal system (Parker & Asher, 1987). Consequently, many social skill training (SST) studies have appeared in the literature during the past 25 years as a way to lessen the impact of these deleterious outcomes.

SST has been conducted with a variety of youngsters throughout the years, including those with mental illnesses; adolescents who have been adjudicated; students who are unpopular, rejected, or neglected; and students with disabilities (e.g., Forness, Kavale, Blum, & Lloyd, 1997; Nanyang & Hughes, 2002; Parker & Asher, 1987). Lack of social competence has been considered characteristic of students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) (e.g., Kauffman, 2005). Many authors have discussed the relevance, effectiveness, and caveats of SST for students with EBD (e.g., Gresham, 1997, 1998; Mathur & Rutherford, 1996; Smith & Travis, 2001; Strain, 2001).

Reviewing the research on SST has become a daunting task simply because of the sheer number of published studies in existence. Therefore, it may be more judicious to review the reviews. In addition, most reviewers have pointed out methodological flaws and made recommendations for future research. A review

of reviews may provide clues about why some mythological flaws and recommendations have been addressed and others have been ignored. Reviews of SST began appearing in the mid-1980s (e.g., Ladd, 1984) and continue (e.g., Kavale, Mathur, Forness, Rutherford, & Quinn, 1997; Mathur, Kavale, Quinn, Forness, & Rutherford, 1998). Their foci have been vast and—besides different populations—included methods of skill selection, assessment techniques, training approaches, outcome evaluation, and lack of generalization (e.g., Landrum & Lloyd, 1992; McIntosh, Vaughn, & Zaragoza, 1991; Zaragoza, Vaughn, & McIntosh, 1991).

A particularly troubling issue has been the heterogeneity of participants who received SST under the umbrella terms “emotional and behavioral disorder” or “seriously emotionally disturbed.” These terms, for better or worse, are used to classify students as being eligible to receive special education services under federal and state guidelines (Forness & Kavale, 2000). Participants in many studies, however, did not meet any federal or state eligibility criteria and, instead, were those who had been diagnosed with psychiatric disorders (e.g., conduct disorder, oppositional-defiant disorder), adjudicated (e.g., juvenile delinquents), “at-risk,” or simply nominated by their teachers as having behavior problems (Maag, 2005). Consequently, all conclusions about SST for students with EBD are, to a certain extent, problematic.

Although heterogeneity of participants makes it difficult for interpretation, there are some constants. For example, Gresham

