

Social Skills Training



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KEYWORDS

• Social skills • Social competency • Peer relationships • Social behavior • ADHD

KEY POINTS

- Social impairment among youth with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is common, and often persists after administration of interventions documented to reduce the core symptoms of the disorder (eg, medication, behavioral contingency management).
- Traditional SST is an intervention intended to target social impairment, which focuses on increasing children's knowledge of skilled behaviors and in-session practice. However, traditional SST approaches may have difficulty with encouraging treated children's generalization of knowledge to out-of-session contexts and with changing peers' negative biases toward children with ADHD.
- Alternative SST approaches that heavily involve parents and teachers to provide children with in vivo reminders during real-world peer interactions, and to help alter peers' behaviors toward children with ADHD, may hold promise.

INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

Although social problems are not part of the diagnostic criteria of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), impairment in social functioning is a prominent associated feature of this condition.¹ Social impairment can be displayed in multiple ways,² but a common manifestation is the poor, unskilled behaviors that children with ADHD display in social situations.^{3,4} Specifically, children with ADHD are likely to engage in aggressive and disruptive behaviors with peers, such as intruding into ongoing conversations, breaking rules in games, and being a sore loser.⁵ Children with ADHD also may be less likely than their typically developing peers to display prosocial behaviors, such as helpfulness, consideration, or leadership.⁶ However, the differences between children with ADHD and typically developing children may predominantly lie in the presence of disruptive/offensive social behavior and less in the absence of prosocial behavior.^{6,7} At least partially as a result of these poor social behaviors, children with ADHD are likely to be rejected (disliked) by their peer group and tend to have fewer, or no, reciprocated friendships,⁸ problems referred to as poor regard by peers.

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Abbreviations	
ADHD	Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder
SST	Social skills training

Poor peer regard is another commonly considered indication of social impairment in this population.²

These social problems are concerning because they incrementally increase the likelihood that children with ADHD will experience subsequent emotional/behavioral maladjustment. Several studies find that if children with ADHD had social impairment, this augmented the risk associated with ADHD diagnostic status for depression/anxiety, delinquency, academic problems, eating pathology, and substance abuse in adolescence^{9–11}; note that these effects have been found regardless of whether measures of unskilled social behavior or peer rejection were used to index social impairment. Poor social behavior and negative peer regard may compound one another, leading to cascading negative effects of peer problems over time. In one study, the extent to which classroom peers disliked the participant in childhood predicted children lacking socially skilled behavior, which in turn predicted exacerbated peer rejection and maladjustment in adolescence.¹²

Another reason why social impairment is concerning is because treatments that reduce the core symptoms of ADHD are less successful in improving the associated feature of social impairment. In the Multimodal Treatment Study of Children with ADHD (MTA),¹³ intensive pharmacotherapy and the combination of pharmacotherapy and behavioral management were efficacious at reducing inattentive and hyperactive/impulsive symptoms. However, although the combination treatment yielded improvement in adult informant reported social skills, no study treatment resulted in improvements in children’s peer regard, as assessed via liking and friendship nominations from classroom peers.¹⁴ Taken together, these reasons underscore the need for specific treatments targeting the associated feature of social impairment in ADHD populations.

SOCIAL SKILLS TRAINING INTERVENTIONS

Social skills training (SST) has proliferated in the past 2 decades to address the prevalent social impairment among children with ADHD,^{15,16} although it also has been used to treat children who have social problems but do not have ADHD.¹⁷ The traditional form of SST is based on the logic that children lack the core skills to enact prosocial, positive behaviors, and therefore they resort to displaying disruptive, offensive behaviors in peer situations. According to the theory behind SST, the reason why medication and behavioral management interventions may remediate ADHD symptoms but fail to reduce social impairment is because these treatments focus on suppressing children’s disruptive/offensive behavior as opposed to teaching children skills to enact positive behaviors.^{18,19}

Consistent with this logic, the predominant focus of traditional SST is on providing direct instruction (and practice opportunities) to children in how to enact prosocial, socially skilled behaviors. Traditional SST does not attempt to directly affect the child’s positive regard by peers. The assumption is that if children with ADHD increase their display of skilled behaviors, then peers will respond naturally with more liking and friendship¹⁸; as will be discussed in this article, however, this logic may be faulty.

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