



## **Practical Social Skills Assessment for Inclusive Classroom Settings**

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### *Abstract*

Social skills development is essential for optimal social, educational and professional growth and well-being. The development of these skills starts from childhood through interaction with others. Educational settings are crucial for promoting social skills development because they are the first structured settings children enter, and they provide social interaction opportunities. Educators should be prepared to facilitate social skills development in a diverse student body in today's inclusive settings. Social skills interventions are essential for those children that experience more challenges in their social interactions. Therefore, educators should be familiar with social skills assessment tools that help recognize children's strengths and areas that need intervention to support their social skills development. This article provides information on a practical social skills assessment that can facilitate developing Individual Education Plan (IEP).

Keywords: social skills development, social skills assessments, inclusion, individual education plan

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## ***Introduction***

One of the most important aspects of individual development is the ability to successfully interact with others (Ng et al., 2018). Socially skilled behaviour, also referred to as *social skills*, includes the “ability to interact, maintain and build relationships with others” (Kasture & Bhalerao, 2014, p. 1913) and adequately satisfy the demands of interpersonal relationships (Hosokawa & Katsura, 2017). Social skills include non-verbal, verbal, and cognitive skills such as self-awareness, empathy, emotional management, emotional expression, and self-regulation (Chinekesh et al., 2014)—and much more. These skills are crucial tools that reflect the ability to engage successfully and effectively across different contexts such as initiating and maintaining interpersonal relationships in social interactions (Hosokawa & Katsura, 2017; Salavera et al., 2017; Rose-Krasnor & Denham, 2009; Tocknell, 2014). As social skills development occurs in the context of relationships with others (Chen & Rubin, 2011; Halle et al., 2014; Sohrabi, 2019), the formal educational system represents one of the most crucial settings that can facilitate such social skills development in early learners (Ng et al., 2018).

### ***Why are Social Skills Important?***

Social skills development is pivotal in generating positive outcomes for mental health and wellbeing throughout childhood and long into later life (Abo-El Saud et al., 2021; Kumari et al., 2019). Difficulties with social skills in early childhood may become relatively stable over time with distressing consequences, such as the development of internalizing disorders like anxiety and depression or externalizing disorders such as aggressive behaviour, which may be precursors of more severe problems later in life (Barkley & Mash, 2003). Social skills development is also essential in acquiring social competence (Hosokawa & Katsura, 2017; Zahl, 2013). Developing appropriate social skills is crucial to achieving optimal social, educational, and even later professional growth (Ryan & Edge, 2012). A growing number of research projects indicate that a reason for the school-based failures is poor social skills (Ng et al., 2018, Arnold et al., 2012; Ryan & Edge, 2012) with what appears to be a bi-directional relationship between social skills development and educational success. Arnold et al. (2012), assumes that positive social skills development positively affects children's academic success as children with higher levels of social skills appear to build better relationships with others and experience more positive feelings about school. In addition, the educational system and its educators can affect social skills development where safe and structured environments—such as educational settings—positively affect the social development of children (Lai et al., 2017).

### ***Why Do We Measure Social Skills?***

Teachers should be prepared to teach diverse groups of learners, including individuals with disabilities, in today's inclusive classroom settings (Boutot, 2007), including the significance of social skills development in children with disabilities where unique challenges may be present

(Halle et al., 2014). Students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), for example, may experience challenges in social awareness, social competence, peer interactions, and overall social communication, leading to feelings of social exclusion, fewer friendships, higher rates of loneliness—and situation outside existing social networks within their classroom settings (Locke et al., 2017). If social difficulties are not addressed, they are likely to continue throughout adulthood and affect the quality life far beyond the classroom environment (Locke et al., 2017). As such, providing interventions that support their social skills development is critical.

The first step in any social skills training program is assessing the current level of social functioning to understand the current level of social skills development and recognize areas that necessitate support (Bellini, 2016; Hall & Maich, n.d.): "You cannot teach social skills to children until you know precisely what social skills need to be taught. Not all children need the same intervention strategies, and not all children need to be taught the same skills" (Bellini, 2008, p. 58). There are two main types of social skills assessments: standardized assessment tools and informal tools.

### ***Standardized Assessment Tools***

Formal or standardized assessment tools reflect extensive research around validity and reliability and after they are standardized and are typically described as norm-referenced (group comparison) to others or criterion-referenced (comparison to a standard or criterion) (Brown, 1998; Stone, 2010). The Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) is a norm-referenced assessment that assesses social behaviour for children aged 3–18 years (Gamst-Klaussen et al., 2016) and is one of the assessments most frequently used to identify children at risk for social behaviour difficulties and to selecting target behaviours for interventions (Gresham & Elliot, 1990). It aims to identify students who are at risk for poor academic performance, to differentiate the origins of difficulties, and to and identify strengths around social behaviour (Gamst-Klaussen et al., 2016). The Verbal Behavior Milestones Assessment and Placement Program (VB-MAPP) is a criterion-referenced assessment tool, curriculum guide, and skill tracking system. This tool is developed for children with autism and individuals who demonstrate language delays. The VB-MAPP established developmental milestones and research from the field of behaviour analysis (Sundberg, n.d.).

### ***Informal Tools***

Informal assessment tools are less structured, non-standardized methods of evaluating social skills, such as interviews, observations, rating scales and checklists, which are practical and useful tools providing essential information strengths and needs in individual social skills development (Bellini, 2016; Elliott & Busse, 2004). Such informal assessment processes may begin with an interview general social functioning; then move into observations and checklist type strategies (Bellini, 2016). Interviews can be undertaken with parents, teachers, those who are familiar with the child's social behaviours — and children themselves — providing information

about social awareness and even the ability to analyze social situations as well as providing opportunities observe social interactions with interviewees (Bellini, 2016). Observations can also help to identify necessary areas for intervention and provide information about specific social behaviours in particular settings—and can be sensitive to even subtle changes (Bellini, 2016; Merrell, 2001).

One frequently used method for assessing social skills is rating scales which help identify and select skills to target and provide information about children across various functioning areas—including their strengths and challenges (Bellini, 2016; Elliott & Busse, 2004). Rating scales can range from simple dichotomous checklists to a more standardized rating scale with options and can facilitate goal development for school-based Individual Education Plans (IEPs) (Bellini, 2016; McKinnon & Krempa, 2002). Rating scales can be used across settings and by different people, for example, teachers, parents, or those who have information about particular students, and children themselves, to provide multiple indicators of a wide range of behaviours (Bellini, 2016; Gresham, 2016). They can be used repeatedly in a specific period of time (e.g., every three months) following an initial assessment that provides a baseline of individual social skills development. Follow-up assessments can then measure the results of specialized programs and monitor progress. Repeating a test provides this opportunity to compare child with themselves over time, providing quantified judgments about social skills behaviours (Bellini, 2016; Gresham, 2016; McKinnon & Krempa, 2002).

When rating scales are used to measure social skills progress, data can be collected based on 1) Frequency: how many times particular behaviour occurred. 2) Rate: the frequency of a target behaviour occurring over a predetermined time. 3) Duration: how long a child engaged in the target behaviour. 4) Latency: the measurement of the time between the instruction to perform and the occurrence of the target behaviour. 5) Topography: description of what the behaviour looks like. 6) Locus: where the behaviour takes place—and with whom (McKinnon & Krempa, 2002). Three checklists that can be used in educational settings are the *Social Skills Checklist*, the *Socially Savvy Checklist*, and the *Autism Social Skills Profile (ASSP)*.

The *Social Skills Checklist* developed by McKinnon and Krempa (2002) is appropriate for a variety of children with ASD. The Social Skills Checklist has three separate levels representing the three levels of social skills development. The levels are not age-based; they depend on each student's baseline information. A student might be on Level 1 for one skill (e.g., self-awareness), but they might be on Level 2 for another skill (e.g., friendship) (McKinnon and Krempa, 2002). The authors have outlined sequential lists of social skills that build upon one another and, within these, social skills checklists that can be used to assess each child within these list of skills.

The *Socially Savvy Checklist* developed by Ellis and Almeida (2014) is another option to assesses the social skills development of preschool and elementary school children on an informal basis. This checklist helps to identify specific strengths and challenges, which in turn help to prioritize the skills in need of intervention and track the effectiveness of utilized interventions, and assesses growth social skills over time. The *Socially Savvy Checklist* is divided into seven general areas of skills development in detail, including joint attending, self-regulation, social/emotional, social language, classroom/group behaviour, and nonverbal social language. Specific skills are divided into these seven areas for a total of 27 separate social skills rated on a four-point scale.

This checklist can be completed by anyone who is familiar with a child's social function (e.g., teachers, parents). The expectation is that the rating should be based on the evaluator's observation of particular child over two weeks in their natural settings (Ellis & Almeida, 2014).

The *Autism Social Skills Profile (ASSP)* developed by Bellini (2016) measures social competence in children and adolescents between the ages of 6 and 17 who have ASD. The items on the ASSP represent a broad range of social behaviours including initiation skills, social reciprocity, perspective-taking, and nonverbal social behaviour. The ASSP was developed to serve two main purposes. First, the ASSP can be used as an intervention planning tool in helping to identify the specific social skills deficits of individuals with ASD. The skill deficits identified by the ASSP can then become the direct target for interventions. In addition, items on the ASSP are phrased to allow them to be easily adapted for use as social goals and objectives on IEPs. The second purpose of the ASSP is to assist in the measurement of intervention outcomes (Bellini, 2016) (see Table 1 for a summary of characteristics).

It is important to note, however, that although rating scales have numerous practical advantages, there can be issues with using them in everyday practice. First, rating scales collected from multiple informants show relatively low agreement among different raters (Gresham, 2016; Meehl & Rosen, 1995). Second, rating scales are relatively insensitive to short-term changes in social behaviour and cannot be administered repeatedly within short time frames. In these cases, systematic direct observations may be a more suitable alternative to monitoring individual responsiveness to social skills interventions (Gresham, 2016).

**Table 1: Comparison of Checklists**

<b>Title &amp; Author</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Area of Assessment</b>	<b>User</b>	<b>Scoring System</b>	<b>Function</b>	<b>Unique Characteristics</b>
<b>Social Skills Checklist (McKinnon &amp; Krempa, 2002).</b>	n/a	-Joint attention -Greeting -Social play -Self awareness - Conversation -Perspective taking -Critical thinking -Advanced language -Friendship	-Parents, teachers, mental health professionals working with children with ASD	YN	-Evaluating current level of social skills	-Baseline of information for specific teaching goals  -Evaluating post-intervention skills  -Specific to ASD

		-Community skills				
<b>Socially Savvy Checklists (Ellis &amp; Almeida, 2014)</b>	Preschool to elementary	-Joint attending -Self-regulation -Social / emotional -Social language -Classroom / group behaviour -Nonverbal social language	Anyone familiar with children's social functioning	4-point rating scale (never, occasionally, sometimes, consistently)	-Identifying specific strengths and challenges	-Ratings based on 2-week observation in natural settings
<b>Autism Social Skills Profile (Bellini, 2016)</b>	Children and adolescents	-Questions are about behaviors that a child might exhibit during social interactions or in social situations	Anyone familiar with children's social functioning	4-point rating scale (never, sometimes, often, very often)	-Intervention planning and to measurement of intervention outcomes	-Focus on independent behaviours (i.e., without reminders, cueing and/or prompting). -Ratings based on behaviour over the last 3 months -Requires approximately 15 to 20 minutes to complete.

### ***Using Information from Assessments for Developing Educational Goals***

The data from standardized and informal assessments can be used to identify whether any intervention for social skills development is needed and, if so, in what area (Bellini, 2016). Also, any social skills that need intervention should be analyzed and broken down into components such as its frequency, intensity, severity, and situation or in what circumstances it is more likely to happen—as changes in these more subtle data can demonstrate change over time (Bellini, 2016). It is also worthwhile to check whether there are agreed-upon social skills that need support to develop from different sources of assessments (Bellini, 2008). According to this information, an individual education plan (IEP) can be developed that outlines personalized curriculum programs for children identified as requiring additional instruction as their academic needs do not align only with standard curricular expectations (Boyd et al., 2015). The IEP explains goals and expectations developed to meet long-term outcomes (Jung, 2007). Using the SMART acronym, which stands for specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound, as a guide can help to develop IEP goals (Jung, 2007). Before developing SMART goals, assessments are essential because, without assessment, some objectives that are far from SMART may be developed (Jung, 2007).

#### ***Case Example***

The following example presents a hypothetical case study of a student named Sarah to illustrate the implementation of a checklist for developing SMART goals for an individualized education plan. An examination of Sarah's teacher's process helps illustrate the steps taken for developing SMART goals for her IEP. Sarah is a 5-year-old girl who started kindergarten a few months ago in an inclusive classroom with 16 classmates. Sarah's teacher employs a play-based approach to meet all her learners' needs. Sarah has also been diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder. She usually plays alone and does not yet have any interest in making friends with her classmates. After several months of school attendance and opportunities for observation, Sarah's teacher and parents—her IEP team—are developing an IEP to meet Sarah's needs, including specific programming in social skills development.

#### ***Assessment***

By utilizing initial informal assessments such as interviews with Sarah's parents, and anecdotal notes from ongoing observation, Sarah's teacher noted Sarah's support needs in some areas of her social functioning. One of those areas was friendship. To gain a better idea about the areas of social skills in which Sarah needs support, the *Social Skills Checklist* (Level 1) by McKinnon and Krempa (2002) (see Appendix) was administered. This assessment breaks down specific social skills to help identify specific areas of social skills functioning—and need—for children with ASD to help plan goal selection and interventions (McKinnon & Krempa, 2002). *Module 9*, which focuses on *developing friendships*, was completed. As above-noted, the *Social*

*Skills Checklist* (McKinnon and Krempa, 2002) has three separate levels that represent the three levels of development. The levels are not age based; they depend on each student’s baseline information around social skills, and can vary in level according to skill development. Sarah’s teacher chose Level 1 of the Social Skills Checklist, as it is more appropriate for younger children who are learning basic social skills. The checklist was filled out by Sarah's parents and educators who are familiar with Sarah's social behaviour with the hopes of using it for both a pre-test and post-test to identify Sarah’s baseline measurements and skill acquisition over time (McKinnon & Krempa, 2002).

**Table 2: The Social Skills Checklist (Level 1: Module 9)**

Module 9: Developing Friendship			
Student: Sarah	Yes/No 1:1	Yes/No In a Group	Yes/No In the Natural setting
-Sits next to the same peer consistently	Yes	No	No
-Plays with the same peer(s) across several days and several activities	No	No	No
-Shares (snack/toy) with peers	Yes	No	No
-Attends birthday parties with peers	No	No	No

McKinnon & Krempa (2002)

Analyzing the data from Sarah’s checklist confirms that friendship skills are an important area for Sarah to develop. Data regarding Sarah’s assessment in the area of friendship are presented in Table 2. Accordingly, Sarah’s teachers developed some SMART goals according to the criteria discussed above for her IEP, which are listed below. Such goals would then be aligned with instructional strategies and assessment methods. The assessment-based SMART goals developed for Sarah according to her needs are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3: Developing SMART Goals for Sarah**

<b>Program</b>	<b>SMART Goals (Which are specific for Sarah, relevant to her needs, and attainable)</b>
<b>Developing Friendship</b>	-During playtimes, Sarah will sit next to her peers maintaining personal space and speak with them with a not a loud voice
	-Sarah will work cooperatively with peers in small group settings (for example, share materials)



	-During unstructured play (recess, choice time), Sarah will play (participate, share, follow directions/rules, take turns) with 1–2 peers
	-During conversations, Sarah will participate in a back-and-forth conversation with one conversational turn (such as a greeting or a toy)

### ***Conclusion***

Skills development of students who struggle in some areas of social skills development depends significantly on delivering instruction that focuses on individual learning needs. A program that focuses on the students' varying needs will actively engage the students and encourage personal, academic, and social growth. Implementing an effective program depends on successfully identifying areas that need support through social skills assessments. Although preparing to teach such a diverse and unfamiliar group of students within the realm of a short and intense program can be overwhelming, familiarity with the social skills assessments discussed briefly in this paper can help teachers identify their students' needs to develop. Therefore, it can facilitate students to have a positive and successful experience.

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