

The Stop & Think Social Skills Program: Exploring its Research Base and Rationale¹

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Background

Research has consistently identified a number of critical factors as being most highly correlated with academic achievement (e.g., Berliner, 1988; Cawalti, 1995; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993-1994; Ysseldyke & Christenson, 2002). These factors include:

1. A Positive Classroom Climate that is Conducive to Learning
2. A Peer Culture that is Supportive of Academic Achievement
3. The Use of Cooperative Learning Strategies complemented by Positive and Productive Student and Teacher Interactions
4. Effective Classroom Management
5. High Levels of Academic Engaged Time coupled with a High Percentage of Teacher Time Focused on Instruction
6. Teaching Students to Understanding of the Underlying Processes of What They are Learning (Metacognitive Understanding)

In reviewing this list, it becomes clear that positive school and classroom climates and students' interpersonal ability to get along with teachers and peers significantly contribute to the learning environment. This, then, contributes to and enhances students' time-on-task and, relatedly, their academic success. Indeed, according to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2002):

“Improving the social and emotional climate of schools, and the social and emotional soundness of students, advances the academic mission of the schools in important ways....Satisfying the social and emotional needs of students does more than prepare them to learn. It actually increases their capacity to learn.” (p. 10)

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And others (Fraser, 1991; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; McNeely, Nonemaker, & Blum, 2002) have similarly concluded that students' progress in school occurs most in classrooms where students feel connected, supported, and interpersonally close to their peers.

All of this points to the need for and importance of social skills training in the school (Knoff, 2000a, 2000b). Significantly, when students demonstrate positive and appropriate interpersonal, problem solving, and conflict resolution skills, they can focus more on their work and less on the “disconnect” between teachers and peers.

In this brief overview, a brief summary of the research findings on the characteristics of successful social skills instruction and the corresponding components that form the foundation of the Stop & Think Social Skills Program are presented. The Stop & Think Social Skills Program is an evidence-based and national model prevention program as designated by both the U. S. Department of Health and Human Service's Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and the U. S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) (see also Quinn, Osher, Hoffman, & Hanley, 1998). The Stop & Think Social Skills Program is based on the ecological research of Bronfenbrenner (1977); the strategic planning approaches of Cook (1990), Valentine (1991), and Knoff (2002); the cognitive and social learning theory research of Meichenbaum (1977) and Bandura (1977); and the social skills research of Goldstein (1988) and Cartledge and Milburn (1995). The Stop & Think Social Skills Program also is the anchor of Project ACHIEVE's Positive Behavioral Self-Management System (Knoff, 2002, March) which is being implemented across Arkansas as part of its five-year Department of Education State Improvement Grant. Below, the research-based characteristics of effective social skills programs appear in **bold** followed by examples of how the Stop & Think Social Skills Program adheres to these characteristics.

The Characteristics of Effective Social Skills Programs

1. Social skills programs teach sensible and pragmatic interpersonal, problem solving, and conflict resolution skills that are needed by today's students and that can be applied, on a daily basis, by preschool through high school students.

Social skills are behaviors that students learn—just like they learn academic skills. While we often focus on what we don't want students to do ("don't fight," "don't talk back," "don't interrupt," "don't tease or taunt other students"), social skills focus on the behaviors that we want students to do. Significantly, when students perform desired behaviors, they rarely do inappropriate behaviors at the same time.

The Stop & Think Social Skills Program is organized in four age- and developmentally-sensitive levels: Preschool through Grade 1, Grades 2 and 3, Grades 4 and 5, and Middle School/Grades 6 through 8 (which is often adapted upwards to the high school level). As part of a school-wide Positive Behavioral Self-Management approach, Stop & Think social skills are designed to be taught in ALL regular classroom settings in a school by general education teachers. For students with greater need and more challenging behaviors, the social skills also can be taught in more targeted social skills training groups by special education teachers, related services, and mental health support professionals.

At each school-aged level, the Stop & Think process focuses on ten core skills and ten advanced skills. In addition, the Stop & Think process also helps educators to teach students classroom and building routine skills and other behaviors that increase students' self-management and academic engagement.

Some of the core and advanced Stop & Think social skills (some of these skills are taught at the different grade levels) include:

THE CORE SKILLS:

Listening
Following Directions
Asking for Help
Ignoring Distractions
Dealing to Teasing
Contributing to Discussions/
Answering Classroom Questions

Waiting for an Adult's Attention-
How to Interrupt
Dealing with Losing
Apologizing
Dealing with Consequences

THE ADVANCED SKILLS:

Deciding What to Do
Asking for Permission
Joining an Activity
Giving/Accepting a Compliment
Dealing with Accusations
Understanding Your/Others' Feelings

Avoiding Trouble
Dealing with Anger
Dealing with Being Rejected
or Left Out
Dealing with Peer Pressure

2. Social skills programs address problem situations, as identified by both adults and students, that occur in classrooms and common areas of the school on an almost every day basis (Kerr & Nelson, 2002).

The Stop & Think Social Skills Program also provides skills to teach classroom and building routines. In the classroom, these routines help students to be prepared and ready to participate in academic activities. Across the common areas of a school, these routines help students to interact positively and safely, and to manage their behavior more responsibly and independently. Some of the classroom and building routines in the Stop & Think Social Skills Program include:

Entering class
Hanging coats and backpacks
Walking in line
Bathroom behavior
Getting on the bus
Contributing to discussions
Completing seatwork or independent assignments

Bringing the right materials to class
Lining up to leave school
The Dismissal skill
Walking safely in the hall
Riding on the bus
Answering questions during lessons
Knowing when to tell an adult about a school safety issue

3. Social skills programs provide a defined, progressive, yet flexible, sequence of social skills that recognizes that some prerequisite skills must be mastered before other, more complex skills are taught. The program also must plan for ongoing social skills practice and reinforcement that occurs throughout the school year (Cartledge & Milburn, 1995).

As shown above, the Stop & Think Social Skills Program does have a preferred sequence of ten core skills and ten advanced skills that are field-tested and teacher-friendly. While this sequence is preferred, it is not absolute. As long as teachers are mindful that some social skills prerequisite to later skills, they can re-sequence skills to respond to specific behavioral goals, challenging classroom problems, or desired curricular or character education themes.

Beyond this, the Stop & Think Social Skills Program integrates the learning principles of “massed” and “distributed” practice into its process by reviewing and revisiting many social skills at the preschool to elementary to middle school levels. In doing this, the Program is able to teach the “same” skill with higher, more developmentally appropriate expectations over time, and ensure that the skills are applied in situationally appropriate ways.

4. Social skills programs use a universal language that is easy for students to learn, facilitates cognitive scripting and mediation, and facilitates the conditioning or reconditioning of prosocial behaviors and choices leading to more and more automatic behavior (Ladd & Mize, 1983; Meichenbaum, 1977).

Social skills in the Stop & Think Social Skills Program are taught using two essential processes: (a) a universal language or set of steps that facilitate the cognitive and physical conditioning of new behavior, and (b) a pedagogical approach that uses behavioral/social learning theory strategies to guide effective instruction.

(a) The Stop & Think Social Skills Program uses a universal five-step language whenever a social skill is taught, reinforced, or implemented. The five steps are:

- Stop and Think!
- Are you going to make a Good Choice or Bad Choice?
- What are your Choices or Steps?
- Do It!
- Good Job!

The Stop and Think! step is a self-control, impulse-control, and/or self-management step designed to classically condition students to take the time necessary to calm down and think about how they want to handle a situation.

The Good Choice or Bad Choice? step is an operant conditioning step that motivates students toward the choices they make and the behaviors they exhibit. Typically, teachers prompt students as to the positive outcome(s) or reinforcement(s) that will result when they make a Good Choice. Conversely, students are guided to consider the negative outcome(s) or consequence(s) that will occur if they make a Bad Choice. These potential positive or negative reinforcements are designed to motivate students to “Make a Good Choice.”

The What are your Choices or Steps? step uses cognitive behavioral psychology and mediational learning strategies to help organize, prepare, and guide students to think about appropriate behavior before enacting it. This is where teachers teach the specific “skills scripts” for each Stop & Think skill so that students learn and are able to demonstrate (in the next step of the process) their “Good Choices”—that is, their prosocial skills. There are two types of skill scripts—scripts that teach social skills in a step-by-step sequential fashion (“Step” skills), and scripts where students consider and select one of a number of possible good choices (“Choice” skills). For example, the Following Directions skill script below is an example of Step skill because there is only one correct sequence that will result in successful behavior:

1. Listen to the Direction.
2. Ask yourself if you Understand the Direction (if not, Ask a question).
3. Repeat the steps of the Direction silently to yourself.
4. Get ready to Follow the Direction.

The Dealing with Teasing skill script below demonstrates the elements of a Choice skill where students learn to evaluate different interpersonal situations so that they can strategically choose the best choice:

1. Take deep breaths and count to five.
2. Think about your good choices. You can:
 - a. Ignore the teasing.
 - b. Ask the person to stop.
 - c. Walk away.
 - d. Find an adult for help.
3. Choose and Act Out your best choice.

Once students have thought about the good social skill choices or steps needed for a particular situation, they then are prepared to behaviorally demonstrate them.

Thus, in the Do It! step, students behaviorally carry out their plan, implement the social skill chosen, and evaluate whether or not it has worked. With younger elementary school-aged students, teachers may need to repeat the skill steps as their students follow them, and they might even need to physically guide students through some skills. Older students, with prompting, will repeat the Stop & Think steps silently to themselves, performing the prosocial behaviors more independently and automatically.

If the Do It! step works, students then are ready to go on to the last step. If a Step Skill doesn't work, students simply go back over the scripts in Step 3 and practice them more carefully. If a Choice Skill doesn't work, students are prompted to identify another possible social skill or to move to another good choice option. For example, if Ignoring does not stop a peer's teasing, then a student might decide to directly ask the peer to stop the teasing, telling how the teasing is making him or her feel. Once successful, it's on to the last step.

The Good Job! step uses the cognitive/behavioral skill of self-reinforcement such that students reinforce themselves for successfully using a social skill, responding appropriately to a situation or request. This step is important because students do not always reinforce each other for making good choices and doing a good job, and thus, they need to learn how to self-reinforce. Indeed, over time, students need to learn how to recognize when they are successful and how to reinforce themselves for a job well done. This is an essential step in the self-management process.

5. Social skills programs systematically use a social learning theory model that includes teaching, modeling, role-playing, and providing performance feedback as part of the instructional process (Bandura, 1977; Goldstein, 1988). Such programs overtly plan and transfer students' use of social skills into different settings, with different people, at different times, and across different situations and circumstances (Stokes & Baer, 1988).

The evidence-based behavioral/social learning teaching process used by the Stop & Think Social Skills Program involves the following five components:

- Teaching the steps of the desired social skill.
- Modeling the steps and the social skills language (or script).
- Roleplaying the steps and the script with students.
- Providing Performance Feedback to the students relative to how accurately they are verbalizing the skill script and how successfully they are behaviorally demonstrating the new skill.
- Applying the skill and its steps as much as possible during the day to reinforce the teaching over time, in different settings, with different people, and in different situations.

When Teaching the steps of a desired social skill, teachers use the Stop & Think Program's universal language. As noted earlier, when they get to the What are your Choices or Steps? step, students are taught the specific choices or steps for the skill they are focusing on.

When Modeling a social skill, teachers verbalize the steps to a particular social skill while showing their students how to perform the associated behavior(s). Typically, this is done by having teachers re-create an actual classroom or school situation where the particular social skill is needed. For example, in modeling the Dealing with Teasing social skill, a teacher would have a student “tease” the teacher in front of the class. The teacher then would “talk through” the “script”—the universal Stop & Think language with the skill steps of the Dealing with Teasing social skill—while performing the appropriate behavior. Thus, during Teaching, teachers provide a context for and instruction in performing social skill behaviors. During Modeling, teachers show how to implement the skill, verbally and behaviorally, in a simulated situation.

After a teacher models a specific social skill, students are given opportunities to Roleplay or act out the social skill in re-created situations that are both relevant to the classroom and the social skill. Roleplays may be done in front of the class or in small or controlled group settings. Similar to directing a scene from a school play, the teacher focuses on having students accurately verbalize the social skill “script” that is being taught and performing the corresponding behavior(s) during every roleplay.

While students are roleplaying their social skills, teachers provide Performance Feedback. This feedback positively reinforces students when they correctly (a) verbalize the social skills steps, (b) demonstrate the appropriate skill or behavior, and (c) review their performance after the roleplay or practice session is over. This feedback also occurs when roleplays get “off script.” Here, the teacher may “freeze” the actors, provide corrective feedback to bring students back “on script,” and resume the “scene” so that students practice only accurate and appropriate behavior.

After the modeling and roleplay (with performance feedback) steps, teachers provide as many practice (or application) opportunities for students in the classroom so that they transfer the

training and master the skill under more realistic circumstances. This occurs as teachers set up situations in the classroom that require students to apply, under controlled and supervised conditions, their new social skills. It also occurs as teachers prompt the use of different social skills as much as possible from day-to-day, hour-to-hour, and minute-to-minute in the classroom. Over time, all of this teaching, practice, application, and infusion help students to understand the importance of using specific social skills, and to master and use their prosocial skills more quickly and independently.

In summary:

When Teaching and Modeling: Teachers need to make sure that students:

- have the prerequisite skills to be successful
- are taught using language that they can understand
- are taught in simple steps that ensure success
- hear the social skills script as the social skills behavior is demonstrated

When Practicing or Roleplaying: Teachers need to make sure that students:

- verbalize (or repeat or hear) the steps to a particular social skill as they demonstrate its appropriate behavior
- practice only the positive or appropriate social skill behavior
- receive ongoing and consistent practice opportunities
- use relevant practice situations that simulate the “emotional” intensity of the real situations so that they can fully master the social skill and be able to demonstrate it under conditions of emotionality
- practice the skills at a developmental level that they can handle

When Giving Performance Feedback: Teachers need to make sure that the feedback is:

- specific and descriptive
- focused on reinforcing students’ successful use of the social skill, or on correcting an inaccurate or incomplete social skills demonstration
- positive--emphasizing what was done well and what can be done well (or better) next time

When Transferring or Applying Social Skills after Instruction: Teachers need to make sure that they reinforce students’ prosocial skills steps and behavior when students:

- have successfully demonstrated an appropriate social skill
- have made a “bad” choice, demonstrating an inappropriate social skill
- are faced with a problem or situation but have not committed to, nor demonstrated, a prosocial skill
- must use the skill in situations that are somewhat different from those used when the skill was originally taught and practiced

6. Social skills training is an integral part of a building- or grade-level positive discipline and behavior management system that holds students accountable for their behavior and provides for consistency and implementation integrity (Dwyer, Osher, & Warger, 1998; Kerr & Nelson, 2002; Knoff, 2000a).

The Stop & Think Social Skills Program is the anchor of Project ACHIEVE's comprehensive School-wide Positive Behavioral Self-Management System (SPBSMS; Knoff, 2002, March). The SPBSMS, one of seven Project ACHIEVE components (see www.projectachieve.info for more information), focuses on the organizational requirements and processes that result in effective building-wide prosocial behavior management processes and positive, skills-oriented student discipline procedures (Dwyer & Osher, 2000; Dwyer, Osher, & Warger, 1998; Knoff, 2000b). At a functional level, the desired outcomes of this school-wide approach include: maximizing students' academic achievement, creating safe school environments and positive school climates, building effective teaching and problem solving teams that speed successful interventions to challenging students, increasing and sustaining effective classroom instruction, increasing and sustaining strong parent involvement, developing and implementing effective strategic plans, organizing building committees and student learning clusters, and developing effective data management systems for outcome evaluations.

While research has addressed many of these issues in a somewhat independent fashion, rarely have these factors been integrated into a unified, multi-dimensional process. When implemented effectively, three levels of self-management are addressed: (a) students are taught the self-management skills (at appropriate developmental levels) that they need for self-control and independent learning, (b) school staff are taught the self-management skills that they need to run positive, effective classrooms that result in student learning and behavioral growth, and (c)

school buildings or districts are taught the self-management skills that allow them to identify resources and build capacity such that they can independently sustain a successful building-wide system of prevention, strategic intervention, and intensive needs services for all students and, especially, those with behavioral and mental health concerns.

In total, there are six primary areas needed for any successful SPBSMS: (a) the implementation of the Stop and Think Social Skills Program; (b) the development of teacher, grade-level, and building-wide **accountability** processes that provide students meaningful incentives and consequences that motivate the use of their social skills; and (c) the development of staff and administrative **consistency** such that student behavior is reinforced and responded to (when inappropriate) in a constant fashion. Beyond this, an effective SPBSMS moves beyond student-focused and classroom-oriented concerns to include (d) analyses of setting-specific (e.g., cafeteria, buses, playground) and peer-specific (e.g., teasing, taunting, bullying, harassment, and fighting) “special situations;” (e) crisis prevention, intervention, and response management; and (g) family and community outreach. Collectively, these six areas help schools to accomplish the three self-management levels noted above. Critically, all six of these areas are needed to maximize the benefits of the SPBSMS.

7. Social skills programs teach specific behaviorally-oriented skills (not constructs of behavior) in explicit and developmentally appropriate ways, and they are able to flexibly adapt to student differences in language, culture, socioeconomic level, and behavioral need (Cartledge & Milburn, 1996).

The Stop & Think Social Skills Program has been successfully implemented in rural, urban, and suburban schools elementary through high schools across the country. It has been implemented in schools with diverse, multi-cultural and multi-national groups of students; in a range of communities with students from severe levels of poverty to high levels of affluence; and

in schools with significant numbers of students who do not have English as their primary language. In addition, the Program has been used in schools with students who come from largely Native American backgrounds (e.g., Navajo, Shoshoni, Arapaho, Alaskan native); and in schools with students with African-American, African, Asian, and Hispanic backgrounds.

In contrast with character education programs (Knoff, 2003), social skills programs directly teach interpersonal, problem solving, and conflict resolution behaviors using a social learning theory approach. As social skills are taught, they are developmentally and cognitively matched to the age and maturity level of the student. And, they are taught within the context of a positive behavioral support approach that is school wide and continually evaluated. Most character education programs, in contrast, talk about (rather than teach and practice) skills, they discuss constructs of behavior (e.g., respect, responsibility, cooperation) at times (e.g., preschool and at the elementary school level) when students do not have the higher order thinking skills to understand either the constructs or their associated behaviors, and they are not able to vary their “instruction” for diverse learners or learners from diverse backgrounds.

Summary

All school-based programs need to be evidence- or research-based. This article has described the empirical principles that make social skills programs work, and used the Stop & Think Social Skills Program to demonstrate how these principles and programs can be integrated resulting in meaningful outcomes for children and adolescents. In the end, it is critical to begin the journey with an evidence-based program. But, it is more important to demonstrate, with evidence, that the journey was successful, reaching its intended destination.

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