

**Sōsh: Improving Social  
Skills with Children and  
Adolescents**

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*Edited by*

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The pronoun “he” is used throughout this book to avoid using “he or she,” however all information contained in this book was included with both females and males in mind.

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## **Chapter Three**

### **Relate: Connect with Others**

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## Relate: Connect with Others

Sarah, a 10-year-old girl, walked into my office and immediately began to pretend that she was a mythical creature. Her love for fantasy was quickly apparent and, as if to further illustrate this, she wore a t-shirt with the picture of a unicorn on the front. Her parents report that her peers are noticing that she is “different” with regard to her social interactions. Indeed, Sarah prefers, if not insists, that others focus on topics that she is comfortable discussing (e.g., Pokemon, Nintendo, medieval history). Her language is often “scripted” in nature and her parents question whether they are talking to Sarah or a cartoon character that she is mimicking. Her nonverbal gestures are caricatures of actors or cartoon figures from television or popular culture. She speaks to imaginary friends and engages in pretend play privately because she is concerned that her parents “will think it’s weird.”

Sarah talks loudly and has difficulty modulating her voice volume, rate, and tone. Her mother reports that she rarely cried when she was younger, but now she easily becomes upset over seemingly trivial events. Behaviorally, she is not aggressive but instead bottles things up. New and unfamiliar situations are stressful for her. Sarah would prefer to know in advance all of the details of her day so that she can anticipate situations.

Sarah is able to engage with others, provided they play with her the way she dictates. Sarah is essentially unaware of the feelings or thoughts of others. Thus, she is currently experiencing social difficulties due to her expectation that her peers should have the same interests.

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I really enjoyed working with Sarah. However, I also understood how her peer group may be frustrated with her because of her need to control play and the unusual content of her play (e.g., medieval themes). In the **Introduction** chapter of this book, the importance of practicing social interactions in the moment was discussed. The first of the “**5R**’s” of the Sōsh approach is **Relate** (Connect with Others). The purpose of **Relate** is to guide children, families, and teachers through a number of effective strategies and approaches to help with a child’s social development. To many, the ability to connect with others is the most important or certainly most identifiable area of social skills difficulties. The child’s difficulty connecting with others inhibits him from improving his skills in all areas of development and eventually affects mood, behavior, and even school performance. This chapter contains the strategies necessary to help a child begin to connect with others.

## Out and About

To experiment with the social world, people must be *out and about*. In other words, they have to go to social settings and interact. This is obviously difficult for kids who struggle socially. Therefore, this approach needs to be framed less about the event itself (e.g., play date, football game, after school activity) and more about the opportunity to be with people. Using a football game as an example, a child can attend the game and even just stand on, or next to, the bleachers with other kids cheering. This alone can be helpful. Perhaps the child can strike up a conversation with someone nearby or comment about something that happened on the field. He may not become friends with this person; indeed, the child may not have anything in common with this person, but he has now practiced social skills by making small talk--and that is an accomplishment. If the child is not comfortable socializing directly with

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others, then maybe he could volunteer to sell parking passes, take tickets, work as the team manager, help in the concessions stand, or dress as the team's mascot. There are numerous "jobs" that can help create opportunities for social interactions without the pressure of spontaneous interaction. All of these activities allow for practice of basic social skills (e.g., making eye contact while taking a ticket).

If the individual has sensory issues, he can still be in the stadium but seated away from the louder sections. A common treatment approach for auditory sensitivity is to desensitize the aversion to loud noises by gradual exposure to these noises over time. Sensory buffers such as earplugs (or even using a set of iPod headphones) can be useful. The idea is to use these headphones initially to involve the child in the activity and then encourage them to take the headphones off when he begins to feel more comfortable in the environment. Eventually, the child may not need them at all when entering the situation. As with most of the approaches in this book, it is important to walk the line between challenging the child and enabling them. The goal is to ensure that the child is comfortable enough to make progress, but also uncomfortable enough to make progress.

## Behavior Before Mood

A necessary social approach, provided that the child is not experiencing a clinically significant level of depression, is to coach the principle of the behavior occurring before the mood. An individual may not feel, for example, that they would *like* to go to a high school football game on Friday night, attend the Homecoming dance, or go to the birthday party, but going to the football game, dance, or birthday party may actually end up being tolerable if not fun.

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The behavior must come *before* the desired feeling. Specifically, individuals must attend the football game, even if it is uncomfortable, before they can experience the feelings of improved self-esteem or confidence, for example. Most children, although they object to this initially, will report that once they were at the event it was not so bad, and they actually enjoyed themselves. If a child is depressed, then a consultation with a mental health professional may be necessary to determine the child's current ability to put their behavior before their mood. In any other cases, though, a person is *able* to put the behavior before the mood, although they may not *want* to.

When implementing this exercise, keep the expectations reasonable. Just attend an event. **That's it, plain and simple: attend the event.** Get out of the house for an hour and then you can come back home. Remind the child that he is already able to do this each day when he attends school. When beginning this approach, it doesn't matter if the child talks to anyone. It doesn't matter if the child makes eye contact with anyone. There is plenty of time to work on these "skills." One of the biggest hurdles may be convincing the child to leave their home because they often do not "feel" like it. This is the time that we must remember that the behavior must come before the mood. Some families even

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schedule mandatory outings to accomplish this goal, such as going to the library every Wednesday evening from 5 p.m. to 6 p.m. to complete homework.

Children regularly return to my office and tell me that, although they were very upset with me and did not want to go to the specific event (e.g., school dance, Boy Scouts meeting, football game), they took a risk and it went okay. Although they felt “awful” prior to attending the event, once they were there they realized it wasn’t so bad. It certainly was not as bad as they predicted. Further, the strategy of simply being *in* the social environment paid off because there was no pressure to achieve any outcome other than attendance initially, so any interactions that occurred spontaneously were a bonus.

I generally recommend that a child participate in at least one structured activity away from the home each week. Preschool, kindergarten, and elementary school do not count toward this time. For younger children who are not yet attending school, these activities are often chosen by the parent and may include: play dates, Kindermusik, toddler gymnastics, dance classes, or library story times. School-aged children have more access to after-school clubs like chess, robotics, dramatic arts, or debate. Volunteer positions, community service, or even a part-time job meet this requirement for teens and young adults.

## **Managing Stress**

When trying to help younger children who may feel anxious in social situations, it can be more effective to focus on the specific task rather than the overall social picture. For example, telling the child, “We’re going over to Billy’s house for an hour to play Candyland and have a snack” will be met with much less anxiety than, “We’re going over

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to Billy's for a play date." The first directive is measurable and predictable. The child now knows explicitly what to expect, which helps to reduce stress and anxiety. The child also has a sense of when the play date will end. Indeed, once the hour is over we will go back to the car and drive home, end of story. However, with the open-ended play date scenario, what will take place and for how long are much less clear. Thus, the child may experience an increase in anxiety. Children like Sarah, who we met at the beginning of the chapter, can become anxious not knowing what to expect, which then causes some children to act out behaviorally, making it difficult to even get out of the house.

To help the child, prepare him for how long the visit will last, what will happen, and where it will take place (e.g., "We are going to Jill's house for an hour to play three games and have a snack"). If time is a confusing concept or not yet understood, use the completion of activities to signify when the play date will end (e.g., "We will play three games and then leave") or use a timer to show a countdown of the time remaining.

If you are going to meet on a playground, for example, try to focus the child's attention on the familiar elements of that setting to decrease the stress related to the play date. It will be easier for the younger child to focus on what playground equipment he will play on rather than what he will say or do with his play partner. Also, a familiar playground setting allows the child to anticipate the setting from memory, which always helps to alleviate anxiety. This is true with social events for older children as well (e.g., dance class, karate). Providing the child with concrete information (e.g., "Dance class lasts for one hour and you will practice ballet") will ease their anxiety.

The success of the strategies presented throughout this **Relate** chapter is dependant on the "Okay, now what?" principle that must be

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utilized by parents. Even the most well-intentioned and prepared parents must ask themselves this question each step of the way. In the playground example, the child has been prepared for the play visit at that location and has some activities that he is looking forward to once he arrives (e.g., he will swing and then go down the slide). However, the “Okay, now what?” moment arrives when the focus naturally shifts from the activity to the people who will also be there. While it is important for the child (and parent) to be “brave” and follow through with putting the behavior before mood, it is equally important to coach the child, initially, as they begin to interact more with other kids in the environment. So, how do you coach and ultimately facilitate the development of the peer relationship once you are out and about? You should first learn and review the ASSIST and *See One, Do One, Teach One* strategies described in the **Development** chapter before proceeding with the following strategies.

## **Facilitating Interactions: Young Child**

When trying to remediate social skills difficulties with a child, remember that he may be functioning a few years (or more in some instances) behind his chronological age with regard to his social abilities. Thus, you may have a 6-year-old child who responds to and interacts socially with the world much as a 4-year-old would. This gap is often difficult for society, and some parents, to comprehend or accept. When a 30-year-old man has the social skills of a 28-year-old, there is rarely any cause for alarm. In fact, most wives expect at least this much of a maturity gap in their husbands! However, the kindergarten student who acts, developmentally, like a 3-year-old is much more apparent.

It is essential to avoid comparing your child’s progress with that of his same-age peers. Try to remain flexible with your expectations

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rather than think, “He’s old enough and *should* be doing this on his own by now.” What I say to parents is, based on his age, he *should* be doing lots of things socially by now, but he’s not. There are certainly feelings of anger, frustration, and sadness that accompany this realization. However, continually pointing out your frustration and his delay doesn’t help the situation. In order to achieve social gains, the approach taken with children should be practical and realistic, and thus based on the child’s current level of development.

Parents and caregivers must act as coaches, teachers, and therapists for the child with social skills difficulties. What other children may be able to accomplish in the social domain with relative ease as a result of typical development may require explicit instruction for their socially delayed peer counterparts. This instruction can begin at home with parents and siblings as play partners, but it *must* eventually transition outside of the home (e.g., school, extracurricular activities, neighborhood gatherings) to include the peer group.

One reason I stress the importance of getting out and interacting with various peers is that the immediate family will always be a source of comfort and security for the child. Thus, performance is always at its best around those with whom the child is most familiar. This is initially a good thing, especially if the child feels anxious about interacting with unfamiliar kids. However, most of us want our children to go to school, make friends, graduate high school, go to college, get a job, and perhaps even settle down in a long-term relationship. To accomplish these goals, children need to begin at the most comfortable level that allows them to create a sound social foundation. It is essential, though, that the necessary exploration occurs and that comfort does not become debilitating. There is a “dance” of allowing a certain degree of comfort and relaxation while

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pushing for change, which is inherently uncomfortable. Remember from the **Development** chapter that the primary social unit for children seven years and younger is the family. However, when your child is school-age, the peer group must become an integral part of the child's social interactions.

The best way to facilitate social interactions with younger kids (typically 18 months through kindergarten), is: 1) Provide opportunities for the child to meet up with a play mate ("buddy" or "peer" for the older child, although the terms are synonymous), and 2) Be in the moment (at least initially) with the child as he attempts to navigate the situation and the relationship. The "in the moment" person should be the parent before the child is in school, and should help model and intervene using the *See One, Do One, Teach One* and ASSIST methods described in the **Development** chapter.

At the younger stages and ages of development the parents possess more motivation for the child to succeed socially. To reiterate, social functioning is enhanced and improved with exposure to social opportunities and in-the-moment guidance from parents during those interactions. If you don't believe this, try talking to your preschooler, while you drive him to a play group, about how you expect him to behave and then setting him loose in a room of toys and kids and see how much of that mini-lecture is retained. Instead, the child may take a toy from another child, for example, and you walk (or run!) over to him and troubleshoot accordingly. You may have to replay this intervention several or even dozens of times before learning takes effect, but you never give up on the child's ability to learn and thus you continue teaching. Children from birth through kindergarten age learn by *doing*, not by listening.

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Just because parents begin (and need) to involve others in their child's development as they grow older does not mean that parents stop teaching. This lifelong need for teaching reminds me of some dialogue from one of my favorite movies, *Parenthood*. Steve Martin's character, Gill, is talking to his father, played by Jason Robards. Gill's father explains the longevity of parenting this way: "There's no goal line in parenting, no end zone where you spike the ball, do your touchdown dance and that's it. Whether [the child is] 25 or 45 or 65. It never ends. Never." Thus, parents always remain involved, but must learn when to step up and when to back off, depending on the child's progress through development. I often refer to this as the "Kenny Rogers school of parenting": *Know when to hold 'em and know when to fold 'em*. It is much easier to facilitate play between two 3-year-olds than between two 9-year-olds or even two teenagers. Three-year-olds allow their parents to be more involved in their play and pay attention to feedback (provided it is given effectively). With older children, coaching must come in a well-timed comment in passing or while driving on an errand or even right before bed at night when reflecting on your day together. Parents typically have to be more creative in their teaching tactics as children grow older.

When implementing social skills strategies, it is important to remember that it will be difficult for the child to accept any new approach. The very idea that the child requires an "approach" to social skills underscores a deficit, which immediately sets off warning bells and puts him off. Therefore, a key component to success is increasing the amount of positive feedback given. Every social attempt should be reinforced. Just think of how many opportunities exist to engage socially each day, especially if the child enjoys going out to various places. For example, imagine that your child walks into the middle of a group of kids playing with trading cards, interrupts and says, "My favorite cartoon is

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Spongebob.” Instead of pulling the child aside and telling him how inappropriate his behavior or comment was, your feedback should start off with a positive statement. For example, “I’m glad you wanted to share something about yourself with those kids.” Then a corrective statement can be made: “I noticed they were playing with cards and were not talking about cartoons. I wonder what you could have done differently to join their game?” In this manner, the child learns that he did something right in the interaction (i.e., he initiated an interaction with the others) which helps build his self-esteem, but it also creates a teaching moment and an opportunity to problem solve. With that approach in mind, let’s consider who we can practice these skills with and when we should do so.

### Who is the Ideal Play Partner for a Young Child?

The decision of *who* to have a child interact with plays a role in the overall social development of the child. This choice of play partner and the context of the play are equally important to help a child with social skills difficulties.

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