

# “Will You Be My Friend?”:

The Necessity of Teaching a Student to Understand Social Cues to Navigate Effective Interactions

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## Developmental Differences & Social Communication

Students with developmental differences often experience skill deficits in:

- Social interaction
- Nonverbal communication
- Interpreting emotions
- Understanding social expectations

These differences impact daily social functioning and community participation.

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# Why Social Cue/Skills Instruction Matters



Social understanding influences:

- Friendship development
- Classroom collaboration
- Emotional well-being
- Bullying vulnerability
- Reciprocal communication
- Safety in public environments

Without direct instruction, students may experience social isolation and misunderstanding by others.

# Social Cues as a Component of Social Skills

Social skills are learned behaviors used to interact successfully with others:

- Starting conversations
- Taking turns speaking
- Respecting personal space
- Reading emotional responses
- Joining group activities
- Resolving disagreements

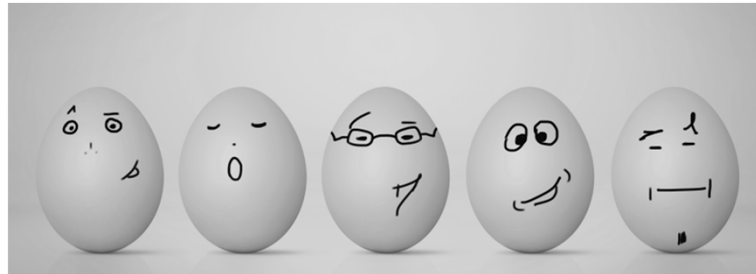


# What are social cues?

Social cues are signals that help us understand how to respond in social situations.

Examples:

- Facial expressions
- Tone of voice
- Body language
- Personal space
- Conversational timing



## Social Cues



These cues are *implicitly* learned as part of typical development but often must be explicitly taught for students with developmental differences.





## Theory of Mind and Social Understanding

Difficulty interpreting social cues is often related to differences in "Theory of Mind."

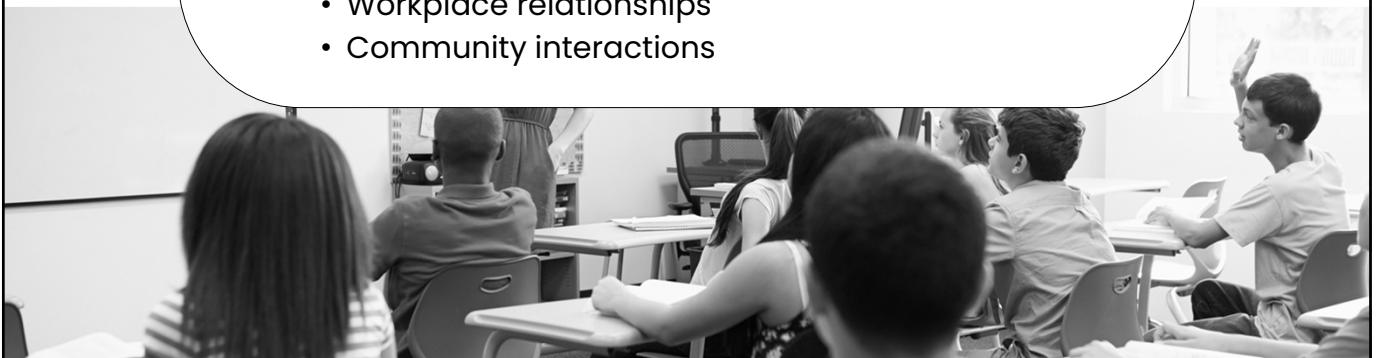
Theory of Mind refers to the ability to understand:

- Others have different thoughts
- Others have different feelings
- Our behavior affects how others respond to us

## Social Skills and Healthy Relationships

Social skills support:

- Friendships
- Dating relationships
- Workplace relationships
- Community interactions



# Social Skills and Healthy Relationships

Students who lack these skills may struggle with:

- Boundary recognition
- Conflict resolution
- Understanding social expectations



## Social Understanding & Personal Safety



Teaching social awareness also supports personal safety and community functioning.

Students must learn:

- Appropriate ways to approach strangers
- Respecting personal boundaries
- Recognizing authority figures
- Responding appropriately in stressful interactions

These skills are critical for adolescents and adults.



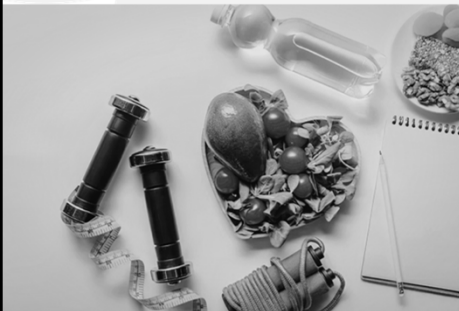


# Did you School name Know?

## Health TEKS

### • K-3 - Five strands:

- Physical health & hygiene
- Mental health & wellness
- Healthy eating and physical activity
- Injury & violence prevention and safety
- Alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs



## Health TEKS

### • 4-12 - Six strands:

- Physical health & hygiene
- Mental health & wellness
- Healthy eating and physical activity
- Injury & violence prevention and safety
- Alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs
- Reproductive and sexual health

# Why does this matter?



## The facts are alarming....



Under IDEA discipline monitoring:

- Students with developmental disabilities represent
  - ~13% of enrollment
  - but ~25-30% of suspensions and expulsions

*(TEA, 2024; U.S. DOE OCR, 2021)*

## The facts are alarming...



- **In-school suspension** – most common
- **Out-of-school suspension** – highest frequency
- **DAEP** – most consequential
- **Expulsions/JAEP** – less frequent, but disproportionately high relative to enrollment

\*\*Significantly disproportionate representation of males & racial disparity

*(U.S. DOE, OCR, 2021)*

## Police contact and arrest:



Ages 6-12

~ 5-7% police contact

Ages 13-17

~ 15-25% police contact

~ 5-8% arrest rate

Ages 18-21

~20-30% police contact

~ 7-10% arrested at least once

*(Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2024)*

## Incarceration & DD population



Studies of correctional populations show:  
10-20% have developmental disabilities

Youth justice settings show even higher rates:

- Up to **30-50% of detained youth** have developmental disabilities

*(Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2024)*



Focus on **prevention....**  
and  
start with the end in mind

Ask – “What skills are essential for becoming a thriving member of the family, community, and workplace?”



## Core principles

Across research in Special Education and Applied Behavior Analysis, the most effective social skills interventions:

- are **explicitly taught** (not assumed)
- include **modeling + practice + feedback**
- occur in **natural settings** (not just pull-out groups or individual instruction)
- include **generalization across environments**
- are tied to **real social outcomes** (friendship, conflict resolution, safety)

*(Sugai, G., & Horner, R., 2020)*

## Tier 1 – Universal Supports



These reduce discipline referrals and build a foundation.

### A. Direct social skills instruction in the classroom

- Teach skills like:
  - greeting others
  - turn-taking
  - perspective taking
  - handling disagreement
- Use:
  - modeling
  - role play
  - visual anchors

## Tier 1 – Universal Supports



### B. Visual supports and expectations

- Visual rules (e.g., “how to join a group”)
- Social scripts posted in the classroom
- Cue cards

These reduce:

- anxiety
- misinterpretation of expectations

## Tier 1 - Universal Supports



### C. Structured cooperative learning

- Assign clear roles in group work
- Teach how to:
  - Ask for help
  - Give feedback

Prevents social breakdowns that often lead to discipline incidents

## Tier 2 - Targeted interventions



### A. Small-group social skills instruction

- 2-4 students
- 2-3 times per week
- structured lessons + practice

Areas of focus:

- Conversation skills
- Reading social cues
- Problem-solving
- Conflict resolution
- Perspective-taking



## Tier 2 – Targeted interventions

### B. Social narratives/Social stories

Used to:

- Teach expected behaviors in specific situations
- Reduce anxiety and behavioral incidents

Sample topics:

- What to do when frustrated
- How to handle losing a game
- Taking turns and sharing
- Accepting “no”
- Making mistakes



## Tier 2 – Targeted interventions

### 1. Video modeling

- Show short videos of:
  - Appropriate social behavior
  - Expected responses

Research shows strong generalization when paired with practice



## Tier 2 – Targeted interventions

### 1. Peer-mediated Interventions

- Train peers to:
  - Initiate interaction
  - Prompt responses
  - Reinforce prosocial behavior

Increases social engagement & reduces isolation

## Tier 3 – Intensive & Individualized Supports

### A. Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) + Social skills replacement



- Conduct a FBA to identify why the behavior is occurring and under what conditions
- Then teach a replacement skill, such as:

**Behavior**  
aggression  
elopement  
refusal

**Replacement skill**  
requesting a break  
asking for help  
negotiating

## Tier 3 – Intensive & Individualized Supports



### B. Social Thinking

Focus:

- Perspective taking
- Understanding others' thoughts
- Expected vs. unexpected behavior

Key concept: Behavior is tied to how others feel and respond, not just rules.

*(Michelle Garcia Winner)*

## Tier 3 – Intensive & Individualized Supports



### C. Cognitive behavioral strategies

For students with sufficient language and cognition:

- identify thoughts > feelings > behaviors

Teach:

- flexible thinking
- coping strategies



## Tier 3 – Intensive & Individualized Supports

### D. Structured teaching strategies

- visual schedules
- structured environments
- predictable routines

Reduces social confusion and behavioral escalation

## Critical skills to target by developmental sequence:

Social/emotional development follows a developmental sequence



### Early skills

- joint attention
- imitation
- responding to name

### Foundational interaction

- turn-taking
- sharing
- requesting



## Critical skills to target by developmental sequence:

### Intermediate skills

- conversation basics
- recognizing emotions
- group participation

### Advanced skills

- perspective-taking
- conflict resolution
- understanding sarcasm/hidden rules



## Connecting social competence to successful outcomes

Many discipline incidents are actually skill deficits not volitional or willful behavior

Building prosocial behavior repertoire:

- reduces escalation and maladaptive responses
- reduces disciplinary actions and removals
- reduces the potential for law enforcement involvement



## Key takeaways...

Remember....  
Students with developmental differences are at a higher risk for adverse disciplinary actions, removals, and law enforcement involvement than peers.

This is often due to a lack of social understanding and social skills deficits, not motivation. Social expectations are implicit.



The most effective intervention is the **explicit, repeated teaching and practice of social skills in real contexts with feedback**



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