

After the Buzz, social thinking ideas for parents and caregivers

From *What's the Buzz?* A social skills enrichment programme for primary students



Lesson 15: learning to 'fit in'

The focus of this lesson was to teach participants the skills required to 'fit in' with others more successfully. This hinges heavily on one's ability to watch, gauge what others are doing and use the information as a guide to pitch their own behaviour. As we explicitly teach children how to 'social reference' or 'fit in' we also offer them a design to stretch their self-awareness and improve relationships with family and community. Here are a few carefully selected ideas parents may wish to follow up on at home to strengthen their children's ability to social reference.

Expectations, structures and routines

Children who struggle to 'fit in' are advantaged by parents able to set up steady routines and sensible expectations. They depend on parents who give clear direction and provide ongoing feedback by catching the positive behaviours they value. This parenting style actively helps young people to tune in; to look, to listen, to remember, to follow instructions and actually get along with others. By maintaining consistency you offer your child a much greater chance to 'fit-in'. Here is a sample of the challenges that regularly crop up for young people who struggle with social referencing;

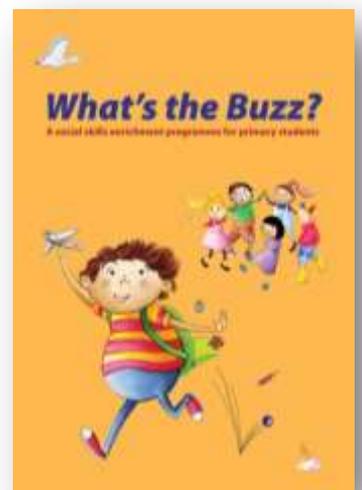
- "Mum, can I bring this drink and bag of crisps to the social skills group?"
- "Can I take my big teddy bear to school each day?"
- "Why can't I use my mobile phone at the dinner table?"
- "Why do I have to help with the dishes?"
- "Why can't I have a television in my bedroom?"
- "Why do I have to watch what everyone else wants?"
- "Why won't my teacher let me read my novel in class when I want to?"
- "Why do I have to do homework?"
- "Dad, why can't I take my pocket knife to school?"
- "What's wrong with playing my computer games when I want to?"

Family meetings

Ever thought of running a family meeting each fortnight? It does not have to be a formal arrangement, but simply a forum to provide praise and develop new expectations. The essence of a family meeting is to review what is happening in the family, what is working and what is not. This forum provides everyone with a voice to discuss, review and make changes. Family meetings are an excellent vehicle to build relationship, model respect and demonstrate compromise. So often it's not making the rule that provides an advantage, but more the act of asking and participating together. Simple ideas that are workable and generally acceptable can make a world of difference.

Be direct and help your child gather data

Deliberately pointing out what is happening and what is expected in particular situations is always helpful. For example, if your child has trouble being quiet in the library, then as you enter whisper, "Look, everyone is working quietly. Reading and researching is quiet work" or, "Libraries are quiet places. It makes it easier to



concentrate.” If, on the other hand, there was a child in the library running about and making a lot of noise, whisper to your child how that behaviour does not match what everyone else is doing. Such comments help your child gather useful data that they may not easily reference independently.

Always have a “marker”

Tune your child into observing the appropriate behaviours of others so they can ‘fit in’ in and give themselves the best chance to find social success. Do what you can to connect them to the “good guys”.

Example

Ten year old Sean had a reputation for losing things, forgetting and being dreadfully disorganised, but he stumbled across a simple solution worth sharing! Sean’s solution was to start copying what one of his closest friends did. He began to stack his locker the same way as Claire stacked hers. He placed the same books on his desk as Claire each morning. He mimicked what Claire did in the classroom; from note-taking and organising his folder, to filling out his diary at the end of the day and making sure he bagged the same homework books. It wasn’t a cure-all, but helped Sean to work at a functional level, and it felt so good! Engaging children to watch others with a view to imitating their strengths can be useful, even inspirational.

Observe the behaviours of others

Observation is a powerful learning tool. One idea to tune children into noticing whether their actions and behaviours are similar to others is by list making. It is quick and this light hearted approach is useful every so often. On a sheet of paper draw four columns. At the top of each column write headings as;

- ‘the friendliest kids in class’
- ‘the kids who just get on with their work’
- ‘the kids the teacher likes the most’
- ‘the helpful kids’

Then ask your child to rank the children in class with the first named being the best in the category, and continue until their name is inserted on to the list. Ask, “Is that where you want to be?” “What can you do to change this?” Every so often review and update the lists. This approach offers insights into fitting in, stretches self-awareness, allows for new goals to be set and connects them to the behaviours of the children who do it well.

Watch movies and sitcoms together

As mentioned earlier, film is a perfect means to coach children how to ‘fit in’ and get along with others. By observing what works and doesn’t work for others children receive a rich stream of information they can progressively apply to their own lives with your help. Try discussing some of these ideas with your child to help them identify ‘fitting-in’ type behaviours;

- why certain characters were funny, loved, odd, disliked, or unhappy.
- what did they do that helped them fit in to the group?
- what did they do that annoyed others in the group?
- who their favourite character was. Why?
- who their least favourite character was. Why?
- what helped you to make this judgment?

Observing the behaviour of others in this way offers children the opportunity to see how social referencing works. It is also a safe teaching vehicle as the spotlight is not directly on them.

The questionnaires; school challenges and family challenges

These should be in your child’s folder. The blank questionnaire, ‘School challenges’ can be completed by your son or daughter’s teacher (this is optional based on how they feel about their teacher’s input) and the other, ‘Family challenges’, can be completed by you. The idea is for students to compare their questionnaire responses with the responses of trusted others. There is no wrong or right here, this is a valuable opportunity for children to learn more about themselves through understanding how others see them. Use the differences as a basis for a constructive discussion. Perhaps there is something that can be targeted as a new goal to pursue at home or school.



*"Money might make you wealthy, but friends make you rich."
Anonymous*