

Improving Social Skills in Children for Effective Team Players — An Action Research

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ABSTRACT

Children with social skills show consideration for the feelings and interests of their peers. They take responsibility for their actions, are able to control themselves, and assert themselves when needed. The present action research illuminates the importance of social behaviour among children and the development of social skills among them to create effective team players. The sample was twenty-five Grade II students (aged between seven and eight years) of an English medium school at Madhapur, Hyderabad. These students were having negative social behaviour and attitude which restricted their social interactions with other children of the classroom, leading to the feeling of groupism. The objective was to enable these children build good social skills to become effective team players. By the end of the academic session, the students demonstrated excellent social skills as team players and their ownership towards their class had improved remarkably.

Introduction

Social skills are those communication, problem-solving, decision-making, self-management and peer relations abilities that allow one to initiate, build and maintain positive social relationships with others. Deficits or excesses in social behaviour interfere with friendship, adult-child relationships, learning, teaching, and the classroom's adaptation and

climate. Children who have social skills can communicate clearly, calmly and respectfully. They show consideration for the feelings and interests of their peers. They take responsibility for their actions, are able to control themselves, and are able to assert themselves when needed. It is vital for children to use social skills because they are the route to creating and developing relationships. Social skills are needed

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for enriching social experiences, and they lessen the chance for negative interactions. Being the building blocks for friendships, social skills give children the chance to learn from their peers and learn how to be considerate with those they meet in the future. By having a positive impact on life experiences, social skills also give children a sense of confidence over their environment.

Social Skills Development and School Adjustment

A large body of evidence supports the role that children's social skills play in social and academic success. In general, children's interpersonal skills have been linked to social outcomes whereas learning-related skills have predicted academic success. Interpersonal skills are especially important for social adjustment in childhood and adolescence. For example, one study found that poor interpersonal skills (e.g., externalising problems) in childhood, predicted academic problems in adolescence, which in turn led to internalising problems in adulthood (Masten et al., 2005).

There is also strong evidence that learning-related skills predict early academic achievement. For example, one study found that pre-kindergarteners who had difficulty using learning-related skills to complete goal-directed activities scored lower on a standardised cognitive achievement measure. These children also exhibited more risk factors such as family problems, lower parental education

and behavioural or emotional problems (Bronson, Tivnan and Seppanen, 1995). Taken together, research suggests that promoting interpersonal skills and learning-related skills in young children and adolescents is one way to ensure strong social and academic skills.

A new 20-year study shows a link between children's social skills in kindergarten and their well-being in early adulthood, according to the findings published in the *American Journal of Public Health*. Children who were more likely to 'share' or 'be helpful' in kindergarten were also more likely to obtain higher education and hold full-time jobs nearly two decades later, the study found. Students who lacked these 'social competence' skills were more likely to face more negative outcomes by the age of 25, including substance abuse problems, challenges finding employment or arguments with the law. "This study shows that helping children develop social and emotional skills is one of the most important things we can do to prepare them for a healthy future," said Kristin Schubert, Program Director at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which funded the research. "From an early age, these skills can determine whether a child goes to college or prison, and whether they end up employed or addicted."

Effective Classroom Strategies

The teacher-child relationship plays a significant role in facilitating social skill development. Numerous studies have found that warm teacher-child

relationships are associated with high levels of cooperation, social competence and learning-related skills in early childhood and elementary school. Teacher-reported negativity, however, has been associated with social difficulties in children. In addition to teacher factors, the classroom environment can facilitate the development of social skills. Classrooms that best promote these skills are child-centred and provide a stimulating, organised environment with ample opportunity for interaction (Cameron, Connor and Morrison, 2005). Children demonstrate higher interpersonal and learning-related skills in classrooms where teachers provide organisation and guidance, such as modelling appropriate social behaviours and problem-solving skills. Teachers can facilitate social problem-solving by demonstrating how to talk through the steps of a problem and by creating opportunities for children to practice social skills.

Children with social skills deficits most often have difficulties with one or more of the areas like cooperation, communication, emotional understanding and regulation, aggression and problem-solving (Bierman and Erath, 2006). To effectively help children who have social skills deficits, teachers can provide instruction and modelling of appropriate behaviours and responses. In young children, teachers can also create opportunities for children to practice and generalise social skills through classroom interactions. As

children practice social skills, teachers should provide positive feedback to promote appropriate behaviours and redirect inappropriate behaviours.

Social skills are important for academic success and social well-being from early childhood through adolescence. Children without adequate social skills are at risk of peer rejection, behaviour problems and poor academic achievement. A combination of child, parent and environmental factors influence the development of social skills and it is therefore essential for teachers and researchers to consider a child's context and use multi-faceted strategies to effectively promote positive social skills development.

Problems Faced in Documentation

It is clear that social skills are lacking for some students in school today. This lack of social skills manifests itself as an increase in aggressive behaviours. The lack of social skills can be attributed to multiple causes. From least important to most important, the causes are class size, classroom dynamics, safety and security, transportation, exposure to peers, transition times, curriculum changes and exposure to families.

The present action research was conducted in one of the renowned English medium schools of Hyderabad, on children of Grade 2. As a class-teacher of Grade II the researcher had been observing, during the structured and unstructured classroom activities, that some students were manifesting

inadequate social behaviour and negative attitude. In a co-ed environment, irrespective of their gender, some students had a high opinion about themselves that they were better than the rest. Their body language, behaviour and interaction during group activities and in the class as a whole, were all manifesting arrogant behaviour. Some of these students were good in academics and extra-curricular activities, some were very confident and active and others were very gregarious. These children were able to attract the attention of all the teachers who came to the class. Getting extra attention of the teachers made them feel that they enjoyed celebrity status.

There were certain other internal and external factors affecting their behaviour which were manifested in this negative attitude. These students preferred the company of children and made partners who they thought were just like them. They manifested a kind of superiority and even looked down upon other students of the class on several occasions. In activities where the groups were made by the teacher and choice or option in the formation of the group was not given to them, these students did not make any attempt to bring all the members into the discussion or the activity. It was observed that they had difficulty in sharing and taking turns with their peers. It seemed to the researcher that the presence of shy and weak children did not matter to them at all. This led to groupism and lack of cohesiveness in the class; also a very downbeat impact on the other children

and the class environment as a whole. In short, children lacked social and emotional skills.

All these observations impelled the researcher to identify the causes that led to such behaviour (arrogance, aggression, boastfulness and lack of social interaction with students who were little introvert in the class and not confident about themselves), especially when these children had been together and knew each other over the years through previous grades.

Causes for Negative Behaviour and Attitude

With previous experience and observations, the researcher tried to study the causes or reasons that affected these children and made them manifest such negative behaviour and attitude.

1. The intelligent and socially active children, who were good in academics, co-curricular activities and were confident and outspoken, dominated other students. They felt that they were the 'celebrities' of the class and could easily dominate others.
2. Gregarious children made more friends and were able to form their own group to play and interact with other children in the class. They were confident and irrespective of their academic performance, they were accepted by other children in contrast to the silent and shy ones.
3. Teachers are role models for the students. When the teachers rebuke academically weak

students, other children get a reason to be rude and bully such students. Therefore, a prejudiced and biased approach of the teachers towards some students subsequently led to superiority attitude among other children.

4. Most of the times teachers select only the active and outgoing children to represent the class in various events and functions held in the school. They might do this unintentionally, but those who never get an opportunity to showcase their talent and burden some responsibility, feel detached and inferior to the rest.

Objectives

The strategy for building social skills in children was planned and followed with the following objectives in mind:

1. To enable the children shed their boastful behaviour and attitude towards their own classmates and facilitate them to mingle with each other to form good social rapport among themselves.
2. To help the children understand the importance of team spirit and develop the sense of responsibility and ownership among them, making them effective team players.
3. To provide opportunities to the children to showcase their talent and leadership ability, while being a part of a group.

Sample

The sample of this study was twenty-five Grade II children (of English medium school at Madhapur, Hyderabad), aged between 7–8 years.

Action Plan to Build Social Skills in Children

The aim of this research was to build social skills in children so that they could become better team players and develop social sensitivity. For this, some effective techniques and methodology were followed:

Declared Rules for the Classroom

As a class-teacher, the researcher strongly believed that it is very important to lay down certain ground rules for the classroom discipline. With the aim to make a good team and inculcate good mannerisms in the students, a chart was prepared for the classroom bulletin board. The chart clearly mentioned the following rules.

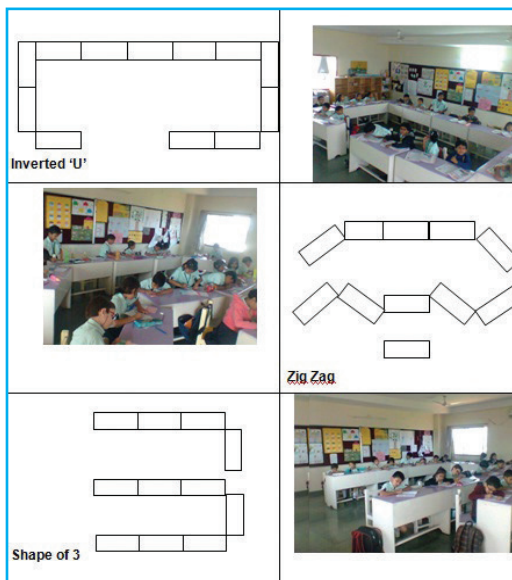
1. All the students of the class are friends.
2. We should not make fun of others.
3. Raise your hand to share your thoughts (instead of shouting to grab teacher's attention).
4. Wait for your turn.
5. Respect all teachers and elders (including the helpers or the *ayahs*).

Positive reinforcement was given by appreciating the children who followed the rules.

Seating Arrangement

To break the ice, the first step was to change the seating arrangement in the classroom. Students were excited to rearrange their chairs and tables. Every month the seating arrangement was changed and children eagerly awaited a new change. They even started giving ideas to arrange the chairs and tables. The entire idea behind this arrangement was to change the partners. They became preoccupied with the classroom arrangement and were eager to become the most creative class in seating arrangement in the school.

A few seating arrangements that were liked by the students:



This ice-breaking initiative was very encouraging as many students were quite satisfied with their new partners. But there were a few who were not happy and were more interested in

sitting with their own friends. Children got an opportunity to know each other one-to-one by rotating partners. Moreover, this exercise was utilised to develop a good relationship among students. Children who used to show negative behaviour and attitude were asked to help their partners on the completion of their own work. They were further discouraged to make fun of other children, the second rule of the class. Sensitivity towards their own classmates and a sense of ownership was encouraged.

Assigning Responsibilities

Every child is unique and has some talent—apparent or yet to be explored. The researcher firmly believes that given an opportunity each child nurtures an ambition to lead the class and get respect and attention of her/his classmates. Against the trend of selecting a few active and intelligent students and assigning them responsibilities, the researcher appointed each and every child of her class as a '*monitor*'. Everyone had their set of responsibilities and each of them was in-charge of the class at some point or another. Over a period of time, this helped them learn to share a responsibility and complete a task successfully by taking turns or doing it together. No matter how small the task is, the child gets a sense of self-worth and develops responsibility. Irrespective of their academic performance, assigning a responsibility enhanced the self-image and confidence of the students who

were little shy and introvert. The shy ones got a chance to demonstrate their talent, which they would have never taken up if left to themselves.

Circle Time



Circle time was an important session of the class routine. It was the time to increase our personal rapport, socialise and have fun. Circle time helped the entire class to learn to share views, accept other's opinions and most importantly taking turns.

Collaborative Learning through Work Cards



To inculcate and reinforce social skills in children along with the need to enhance the understanding of concepts

in various subjects, some work cards were prepared. Children were divided into groups by the teacher; each group had to solve the work card as per the instructions mentioned on it, within the given time. Since a collaborative effort was required to get the answers, the groups had to work as a team and it was the task of the group leader to involve all the members.



This planned classroom activity helped the students to understand the importance of a team work. They started developing a sense of 'ownership' towards their group and group members. Winning as a team was focused rather than individual work and this led to more cohesiveness in the class.

Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning was another important technique used by the researchers to enhance the social skills and social learning experience among the children. The class was divided into



small groups to complete the assigned group work. For example, group games, post-activity write-up and role-plays.

Such structured cooperative learning activity enabled the children to share their learning with their group mates; which not only strengthened their learning of complex topics but also helped the children to understand the concept and overcome their shyness.

These activities played an instrumental role in developing and enhancing the social skills, more so as each student was responsible for her/his own performance as well as of the team.

Conclusion

As the academic year approached its conclusion, it was observed and found that the children were successful in learning social skills and became good team players. Their sense of ownership and responsibility towards their class as a whole, upholding their individuality, was laudable. All the children became friends with each other; and though some might not have been very close, at least they did not have any negative attitude towards their classmates for sure.

Recommendations and Suggestions

At the end of the study it can be concluded that if children are taught social skills, then they will learn to discard their negative behaviour and attitudes and become better team players. It is therefore important for the teachers, facilitators and even parents to inculcate social skills in children from an early stage. Growing up with team spirit and discarding negative behaviour will boost their overall development and strengthen their personality.

In recent times due to technological advancements the world has become too small. Along with intelligence quotient (IQ) and emotional quotient (EQ), social quotient (SQ) has also become very prominent. It is scary to know that children missing on the social skills lead a secluded life and this has a very negative impact on their mental and physical health, also leading to some psychological and or personality disorders. With plenty of options to socialise virtually through the internet and smart phones, etc., it is important that the children inculcate social skills in real life early.

Hence, it is imperative for us to instill social skills in our children and help them grow into good and responsible human beings.

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