

# Activities to promote social skills in the classroom

Good social skills are essential for every day life. In order to succeed in life we need to be able to talk appropriately to others, understand social boundaries and use appropriate gestures. All children need opportunities and experiences to help develop appropriate social skills, but pupils with ADHD and other specific learning difficulties, may need more opportunities. It may be useful to specifically teach and discuss appropriate social skills with these children.

Below are five quick games that help promote good social skills.

## Standing at the appropriate distance

We all have personal boundaries that we stick to and like others to stick to. If someone stands too close to us when talking, we feel uncomfortable as our personal space has been invaded. It is very likely that a child who does this will be rejected without realising why. This quick whole-class activity will help you address these issues.

- In a large classroom, free of obstacles, encourage pupils to line up along with their backs to one wall.
- On the other side of the classroom, mark squares opposite pupils. There should be no more than four children to each square.
- Pupils are then asked to imagine that the square opposite is a imaginary person who they will have a conversation with.
- For each person dictated by the teacher, pupils should walk towards the person (square) and then stop at the point they feel is an appropriate distance to stand to have the conversation.
- Examples of people include: your parents, your best friend, a stranger who is the same age and sex as you, your form tutor, a school teacher who is a stranger to you, a stranger who is ten years older than you, the Prime Minister, a stranger who is five years younger than you, your boyfriend or girlfriend.
- After pupils have moved to each person (square), ask pupils to look around and see if they are at the same position as others.
- Pupils can be asked to describe their reasons for their position and any distances that may seem inappropriate can be discussed with pupils.

## Recognising and expressing facial expressions

We have the ability to express a wide range of emotions with our eyes, mouth or facial muscles. There may however be an inconsistency between what pupils with ADHD and other specific learning difficulties say and what their face says. These children may not only need help with expressing their emotions but also with recognising and interpreting the emotions of

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others. There are some excellent emotion cards available online [try the resources section of the SEAL programme [nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/primary/publications/banda/seal](http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/primary/publications/banda/seal) which can be used to conduct a range of small-group emotion games such as those below:

## Game 1

- Create a circle of chairs for a small group of pupils to sit on.
- Under each chair, place an emotion card face down.
- Ask the pupils to sit on a chair, retrieve an emotion card and keep it a secret
- Pupils should then take it in turns to act out the emotion shown on the card, whilst other pupils guess which emotion they are trying to convey.
- If a number of pupils struggle to display the appropriate emotion, try demonstrating what the facial expression looks like using the emotion cards. Start by asking pupils to look at the forehead, is it relaxed or tense? Then move to the eyes, are they open wide or more closed? Gradually work down the face, focussing on each feature with the child. Allowing the child to focus on each feature and replicate it with their own face will give the child a better understanding of what different facial expressions 'feel' like.

## Game 2

- Give each pupil in the class/group an emotion card. This activity works fine if more than one pupil has the same emotion card.
- Think of some scenarios that the pupils are likely to encounter regularly. Some examples include 'John has a test tomorrow and he doesn't feel ready'; or 'It's Ahmed's birthday tomorrow, he's getting that computer game he's been after for ages'.
- Ask pupils to think about how the person in each example feels.
- If they have that emotion card, they should hold it up.
- Ask pupils to look around the classroom to see if others are holding the same emotion card. Discuss any differences with children.

## Considering non-verbal language

Parents and schools spend a lot of time and effort teaching children appropriate verbal communication. Non-verbal communication is often overlooked, but gestures and posture can carry a lot of meaning. An anxious person may fidget a lot; a surprised person may open their mouth

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and appear wide eyed. Confusion may arise when a child's body language conflicts with what they're saying. This quick activity will allow children to recognise and discuss different patterns of body language.

- Choose a film or TV programme that pupils are unlikely to be familiar with.
- Select some clips from it that show characters expressing different emotions such as anger, sadness or joy. This is easy to achieve now using a DVD as you can easily skip to different scenes
- Turn the TV to mute so that the pupils can not hear the dialogue of the film/programme.
- Pupils should watch each clip carefully and think about two questions; (a) what is happening, and (b) what emotion are the characters feeling.
- After each clip, allow pupils to discuss the answers to the question and then restart the clip with the volume turned up. This time pupils should be encouraged to listen to the dialogue and watch character's body language.
- Discuss with pupils whether they were right or wrong. Which aspect of the character's body language led them to reach their conclusion? You may like to ask pupils to imitate different body languages shown in the clips so they know what the different body languages 'feel' like.

## Introducing ourselves and finding common interests

Small talk when meeting people for the first time is easy for most people and we can soon find common interests. During the first few days of Secondary School, most pupils will have managed to talk to other pupils and find some new friends. For children with ADHD and other specific learning difficulties, this may be more difficult. Find someone who is a quick, fun activity which encourages new classmates to approach others and discuss common interests.

- Print the sheet below and allow pupils to read through the questions. Make sure they all understand the questions.
- The aim of the game is to fill each of the 16 squares with a classmate's name as quickly as possible, and learn about everyone in the process.
- Encourage pupils to mingle and ask each other the questions on the sheet in order to find someone who has that characteristic.
- When they find that person, they should write their name in the answer square, before moving onto the next person to see if they meet one of the characteristic questions.
- Circulate around the classroom as pupils are mingling, encouraging them to ask further questions if similar interests are found.
- The time limit can be decided on by the activity leader. Consider a time limit that will allow pupils to chat as well as ask questions.

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- Consider limiting the maximum times a name can be answered to two, this will ensure that pupils continue to mingle around the classroom and don't just stick to the people they know.
- If pupils have difficulty writing, consider providing name stickers to limit writing time.
- After most pupils have filled the squares, encourage an informal discussion of things that lots of pupils have in common.

## Tone of voice

Tone of voice is a key indicator of emotion. It can be very confusing if a child tells you about something s/he is very happy about in a sad tone. The ability to effectively recognise tone of voice may be just as important as the ability to recognise emotion and body language. Sarcasm, in particular can be a very difficult concept for children to understand. The following is a fun whole class activity to practice tone of voice:

- Produce a variety of different bingo grids as in figure 2 below. Each grid should contain different emotions in different orders. Give each child a grid.
- Read different sentences out in different emotional tones. At times, the tone of voice may conflict with the content of the sentence. For example; you may read 'my dog died yesterday' in an upset voice or say 'It's my birthday tomorrow' in a sad voice. Encourage pupils to close their eyes and concentrate on listening to the tone of your voice, rather than looking at your facial expression.
- For each sentence, pupils must guess what emotion has been portrayed in your voice. They must then look to see whether that emotion is displayed on their bingo grid, and if so should place a cross through it.
- The aim of the game is to win each of the bingo squares.
- In order to simplify the game, you may like to display a list of the possible emotions in the classroom for pupils to refer to if unsure.

## Some things to remember:

1. Describe aims clearly – Pupils will often be asked to complete tasks with no explanation of why they are doing them and no understanding of how the task will benefit them. Explain clearly what the task will achieve and how it will directly benefit the child.
2. Clearly describe instructions and roles– Pupils are far more likely to misbehave if they don't know what they are meant to do. Clearly introduce and explain instructions one by one, checking for understanding after each one. Explain roles clearly to pupils so that everyone knows what they are doing. Consider completing a few examples with pupils so they have time to become comfortable with the task and ask any questions.

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3. Keep pupils informed about boundaries – All school staff have boundaries that they expect pupils to obey, these may concern language used, appropriate gestures or general classroom behaviour such as raising hands to answer a question. However, these boundaries may differ from teacher to teacher or may change unexpectedly. Consider setting classroom rules at the start of term; discuss proposed rules with pupils and the reasons behind them. Try to reinforce the rules consistently and prepare pupils in advance for any potential rule changes.
4. Start with small groups – Starting social activities or tasks with small groups may allow pupils to become comfortable interacting with others. Once pupils are comfortable, group sizes can then be increased. Try to create an atmosphere where social failures are overlooked and successes are reinforced. Don't rush the process; some pupils will take longer than others to feel comfortable.

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Figure 1



FIND SOMEONE WHO.....

Gets the bus to school	Likes the same music as you	Doesn't like sports	Likes the same TV or films as you
Has a pet	Doesn't like cauliflower	Has eaten something really strange	Wears a watch
Doesn't mind going to school	Likes eating at McDonalds	Was born in August	Ate toast for breakfast
Has brown eyes	Has been abroad	Has a brother	Has broken a bone

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Figure 2

## EXAMPLE BINGO GRIDS

Excited	Surprised	Angry
Sad	Worried	Suspicious

### Example sentences

My dog died yesterday

It's my birthday tomorrow

I haven't studied for my test tomorrow

I'm going on holiday on Tuesday

I told him not to do that

I left £10 here before, you haven't taken it have you?