

Social Skills Groups: Help for Children Struggling With Peer Relationships — Clinical Psychologist Dr. Carly Orenstein Provides Tips for Parents

March 21, 2014

According to clinical psychologist Dr. Carly Orenstein of Morris Psychological Group, social skills can be developed with coaching in small group sessions of children with similar issues, where children have a safe, structured environment in which they can learn and practice new skills.

The ability to make and keep friends is vital to a child's emotional health and well-being. Children who have difficult peer relationships or who are rejected by peers are likely to suffer from a wide range of long-term problems, including low self-esteem, academic failure, depression, and feelings of isolation and loneliness.

“Most of us have a natural social instinct that enables us to read other people's emotional cues and respond appropriately,” says clinical psychologist [Dr. Carly Orenstein](#) of [Morris Psychological Group](#). “But many children have trouble communicating with peers. They fail to recognize verbal and non-verbal cues and fail to show empathy for others. Fortunately, social skills can be developed with coaching. One of the most effective ways of doing this is in small group sessions of children with similar issues, where children have a safe, structured environment in which they can learn and practice new skills.”

Social skills groups aim to help youngsters learn how to behave in social situations, how to initiate and maintain conversations, how to read body language and verbal cues and understand what others are feeling, how to express emotions, how to resolve conflicts, how to cope with teasing and bullying, and how to make and keep friendships.

Children who struggle with peer relationships may have a diagnosis such as autistic spectrum disorder, learning disability, ADHD, anxiety, speech or developmental disorder, or they may simply be socially awkward and have difficulty finding common interests and sustaining a conversation. “There are common characteristics that parents and teachers can spot to identify youngsters who would benefit from a

social skills group,” says Dr. Orenstein. “They often don't recognize personal space boundaries, want to be in charge, and are self-involved rather than interested in others.”

Children who consistently exhibit these behaviors may benefit from the coaching and practice they would get in a social skills group. Groups are run by experts in child development and may include specialists specific to the needs of a particular group in areas such as language skills, learning disabilities or autistic spectrum disorder. Activities include group and individual games and exercises, role-playing scenarios and practice assignments. “Children learn best from other children,” says Dr. Orenstein. “The group provides an environment that reduces the fear of rejection or teasing and provides immediate feedback from peers as youngsters practice new skills.”

“Techniques vary for different groups,” Dr. Orenstein continues. “For example, for children with autistic spectrum disorder, we focus on rote memorization of what to say or do in specific circumstances – when initiating a conversation, when a friend is upset, when someone is hurt. In other groups, we emphasize skills like finding common interests, compromising and sharing, and dealing with feelings like anger and sadness.” All children are comprehensively evaluated to ensure placement in the appropriate group.

Good peer relationships provide important support throughout our lives. Children who lack instinctive social skills can be helped before their deficit has long-term repercussions. A social skills group enables them to learn with and from other children in a comfortable setting and practice new skills in the real world as their confidence increases.

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