

Finding the key

Márianna Csóti explains how teachers can help children find social and academic success

Two qualities vastly improve children's likelihood of enjoying school and making a success of it, whatever their talents. These are having good social skills and having high self-esteem. Teachers can help children achieve both of these.

Why is it important to have good social skills? Well, children's perception of school vastly depends on their social success. Popular children will probably enjoy school, whereas children who have few or no friends are less likely to. Academic success alone does not make children happy and, with unpopular children, may lead to bullying - these children may be called 'swots' or be shunned because of jealousy. Every child would like to have good friends who seek their company and include them in their games and private chats: being liked and respected by peers is essential for high self-esteem.

Why is it important for children to have high self-esteem? Children with Learning Difficulties experience academic failure and may be considered to have low-status within the class by their peers and, perhaps, by their teachers. They may be perceived as less important or worthy of their peers' and teachers' attention. Long term school failure demoralises children, destroys self-esteem, and undermines confidence, distancing children from their teachers, parents and school, and the values they promote. Children can lose hope and cease to believe that their efforts will make a difference to their achievements.

Since children's view of themselves is largely dependent on how others behave towards them, any negative messages they get will directly affect their self-esteem. As they spend so much time in school and most, if not all, their friends are likely to attend the same institution, it is vital they find school attendance a positive experience.

Once children recognise their low-status they may be reluctant to interact with others, fearing more social failure. This can make them feel more rejected and isolated than before. If this downward spiral were to continue, low-status children may become low-status adults, having few or no friends, feeling very unworthy and unable to effectively socially communicate at a level sufficient for the work environment.

Reversing the negative effects of social and academic failure Protection and nurturing help a child find social and academic success. The advice below can be carried out for all classes – not just classes where there are identifiable children with Special Needs – as many children are vulnerable and sensitive and respond well to thoughtful approaches.

General classroom tips

Be warm and enthusiastic about the lesson: show the children you enjoy being with them by smiling at them, walking round the class and checking that they understand what to do and praising them for their progress. Try to value each individual in some way.

Give praise whenever possible so that the children are taught in a positive and rewarding environment.

Avoid asking children to pick their own teams or groups if it is obvious that some will be rejected. This avoids a child always being the last, or nearly last, to be picked. Another reason to pair off children or form them into groups yourself is to achieve well balanced teams with a good mix of abilities within each.

Pair off the less able and less socially skilled children with the more able and more socially skilled, so that children with deficits are helped and are given more opportunity to pick up communication skills from the socially confident.

Avoid allowing the know-alls to always answer questions you put to the class. Wait to see who else might put up their hand. If a child were to put up her hand for the very first time, ask her to answer. If the answer is incorrect, don't just say no and go on to the next child. Explain to the whole class why the answer might have been feasible, or why it is a common mistake to make, to protect the child from giggles and put-downs from her peers. This will help raise her self-esteem and show her that you valued her contribution. If the answer is correct, openly praise the child in front of her peers to encourage the class to see the child in a better light and boost her self-esteem.

If you think there is a good chance a child might know an answer you have put to the class but is too afraid to put up his hand, gently ask him the question. Be ready to withdraw your attention if he cannot give an answer so that he is not humiliated. If he does answer but it is incorrect and a common mistake to make, ask the rest of the class if they agree with him before telling them whether he is right. Then, if half the class have made the same mistake, he might not feel so alone. If the answer is correct, lavish praise on him.

Ensure that you have the class's attention before giving instructions. ('I want you to stop what you're doing and listen. I need to see you all looking at me so that I know I have your attention. Good...') A way of ensuring that pupils do listen attentively is to regularly ask a member of the class to repeat your instruction to the others. This gives an opportunity for those who are inattentive to hear the instruction a second time without you making it obvious – you would be perceived as merely checking that another child has been listening. From time to time, ask the inattentive child to repeat the instruction when you are sure

he was listening and would have a good chance of succeeding to make him feel important and experience a small success. This will also help children get used to addressing the whole class, aiding social confidence.

Reward acceptable behaviour to reduce disruptive or aggressive behaviour. Keep reminding the class what you expect and be consistent.

Keep instructions brief and be prepared to repeat them.

Separate deviant children in class so that they do not strongly identify with one another and if miscreant children are grouped together for punishment there may be group approval of deviant behaviour and a greater chance of further anti-social behaviour due to social inclusion in this small group.

Helping individual children with difficulties

If the child has a particular difficulty, explain it to the others in the class so that they become more understanding and tolerant. This may help the child be socially accepted as the other children see the difficulty as a recognised medical condition. Ask the child's permission first and explain why you think it may help. However, this may not be helpful to secondary school children as they may be too self-conscious to feel comfortable about their peers knowing their difficulties. But many would appreciate a close friend being told or the person they mainly sit with in class.

Encourage the child to ask for help when needed.

However, try to lead him into answering the question for himself where possible so that he experiences the pride of having worked it out.

Provide opportunities for the child to bond with you and with other socially competent children so that she identifies with people who are socially skilled and will therefore be more likely to adopt socially acceptable behaviour. This also reduces the risk of the child bonding with deviant children and adopting deviant behaviour. Group activities help children develop relationships within the group and adopt the group's prosocial (positive social) behaviour.

Recognise all positive behaviour to provide an incentive for the child to continue with that behaviour and increase the bonding already in progress.

Give the child responsibilities such as handing out or collecting textbooks, so that he has a role to play while interacting with his peers. Use every opportunity like this to get him in a role that makes his peers dependent on him. Ask the child to take messages to other teachers, or to the school secretary, to give him practice in communicating with people in authority.

Always show respect for the child and demand that her peers do likewise. If you see or hear bullying behaviour, stop it immediately and explain to all concerned that such behaviour is unacceptable. Offer an alternative for the person to do or say. ('Instead of hitting out because someone accidentally tripped you up, explain what he has done and ask for an apology.'))

Give specific instructions on how to relate to other people. For example, 'If someone talks to you, stop what you are doing. Look the person in the face and listen to what he has to say. When he has finished speaking you can reply.'

Discover any hidden talents or interests, such as being good at drawing or being involved in an interesting hobby. Then show the child's work to the rest of the class or ask her to talk about her hobby. In publicly praising a child, you raise her status within the whole class. Remind the child of her talents and what she is good at from time to time so that she sees herself as a person able to do certain things rather than as someone who fails at everything. If the child has particular talents such as in music or athletics, use these lessons to lavish the praise that may be absent elsewhere.

Closely supervise a child with difficulties so that you can keep him on track when he starts to deviate from expectations rather than after the event when he has shown himself to have 'failed'. Encourage and nurture rather than be critical and angry.

Introduce situations where a child with difficulties can succeed rather than fail. If you know a particular task is beyond the child, break it up into more manageable steps so that the child can be rewarded at each small stage rather than feeling swamped by a huge task she thinks is insurmountable.

Never make a joke at the expense of a child. She will feel humiliated and the joke may well be continued in the playground and get out of hand.

Give warning before the lesson is to end so that the child does not feel cheated by not having the information. He can then apply himself if his concentration has drifted. ('Fifteen minutes left'... 'Ten minutes...' etc.)

Other practices that promote the transfer of prosocial behaviour and beliefs to children are the creation of a consistent system of expectations, reinforcement, and recognition to shape the child's behaviour.

Suggested teacher expectations

It is good practice to have a clear idea in your own mind what you expect from pupils. It is vital to impart this to all the children in your care so that they know what is expected of them. If all the class social rules are clear to all pupils, eventually they should adopt them. The following are some examples of class social rules.

- No one is to talk when you are addressing the whole class.
- When you ask the children to stop what they are doing and listen, you expect them to show respect and do as they have been asked.
- No one should interrupt a child answering a question. Nor should anyone answer the question for that child. They should allow the child time to think about it. If another child wishes to answer instead, she must put up her hand and wait to be invited to answer.

- No one should call out an answer without being invited to, unless it is a more casual discussion type lesson and you have explained the change of expectation.
- When the children are asked to work as a team, they must fairly share out the tasks and apparatus/materials and treat each member equally and with respect. They should listen to the ideas the others in the team have and consider them. If they reject the ideas, they should be able to explain to the person why.
- There must be no pushing, shoving or snatching. No shouting or screaming.
- When a child speaks to you, or others, he must look you, or others, in the eye.
- When a child enters the class late, she must apologise to you and give an explanation.
- If a child comes in when the door is shut, he must close it again afterwards.
- The children should praise their fellow classmates when they have done something of note or something they have found hard to achieve.

Of course, it would be inappropriate to rattle off all of the above in one go: each point could be introduced when appropriate. Once it has been introduced, the class should be reminded whenever necessary.

Parental help

If a child's social skills are very poor, with the help of the Head of Pastoral Care, you could talk to the child's parents or carers and give them a list of things to work on to help their child. They needn't tackle the whole list in one go – you could work out a plan of stages so that the subsequent stage is not attempted until the child has succeeded at the first. If this were to be done, it would be important to prioritise the skills with the most essential first. Parents need to be told to praise their child however slight the progress. All effort should be praised too.

Involving the child's parents also helps bond the teacher to the child's family and with teacher, parents and child working towards a common goal, it is more likely that the child will adopt socially acceptable behaviour – and have raised self-esteem.

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