

# ***TReaching® Tips***



***by Educational Support Services, Inc.***

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## **Junior Normalizers Outdo Adults**

**THE ISSUE:** Large groups, as well as small groups of children are naturally diverse. Diversity can come in various forms, including language, cultural background, religion, or social behavior. When diversity visits a classroom, the teacher may be saddled with quite a challenge, especially when teachers try to individualize for each child. Proper accommodation for some social behaviors goes beyond standard teaching skills. Take autism for instance. How many teachers are professionally prepared to support children with the social complications that prominently define autism alongside their other teaching responsibilities? Their limited social awareness, communication, and personal interaction capabilities can be significant. If we believe that a mainstream classroom is the ideal setting for a child with autism, what is the most effective way to keep these children in mainstream classrooms and to give them the support that they deserve, without jeopardizing the quality of education due their classmates?

**THE WOW FACTOR:** For very young children, approximately 100 preschools across the United States have turned to the Learning Experiences Alternative Program for Preschoolers and their Parents (LEAP). This is a program that places children with autism within mainstream preschool classrooms, while keeping the children with autism as the minority population within each classroom. In LEAP settings, these needy

children are surrounded by peers who do not share their social challenges.

Teachers in these classrooms are provided with scripted materials and training about how to guide regular children socially so that they can helpfully interact with those with social deficits. Normally adjusted children learn precisely what to say or what not to say to their autistic peers. Children teach children, and it works. Read comments voiced by teachers who have implemented the LEAP program, and you will see how effective this program is.

**OUR TAKE ON THIS ISSUE:** LEAP is successful because it has applied a tried and true method to the social skills training of children with autism by surrounding them with socially adept peers. Be impressed by the outcome of this application, but do not limit the method's success to children with autism or to social skills training in general. Don't be afraid to apply this good stuff to other settings in order to benefit children with other types of needs. The model described above calls for surrounding needy kids with healthy kids, or underdeveloped kids with well-developed kids. Fact: this formula applies universally to all learning.

**NOW THAT YOU UNDERSTAND THE ISSUE AND OUR VIEW, TURN THE PAGE TO LEARN SPECIFIC STEPS TO FOLLOW.**

**OUR PROFESSIONAL ADVICE:** *The following ideas stem from our professional training and decades of personal experience, helping more than 1000 children. We assure you that these ideas work.*

Would you like to set up an ideal “surround the needy kid” environment? Then a *measured* surrounding of needy children by others who serve as natural mentors is required. The word “measured” is the key. The “who” and the “how” in this environment need to be carefully fitted for each situation in order to ensure success.

**START WITH THE WHO.** Who are the best candidates for the job of helping by surrounding our child in need? Answer: The surrounding group should be composed of a mix of reliably well-adjusted peers along with a few other children who are less than perfect.

*Although a 100 percent perfectly socially adept group of peers for this task sounds ideal, it isn't.*

Such an arrangement might be fine for a clinical setting, which demonstrates extremes, but not for a reality setting, and people's best growth takes place in reality settings. A reality setting has a realistic blend of children in it: some who are fully competent vis-à-vis the target skill along with others who are still evolving. A blended group will surround the child/ren who need the specialized guidance.

Whereas you might prefer a strictly controlled environment in which every movement and statement is scripted by the adult in charge as he guides the child who needs to learn social skills, for instance, we value “misfirings” for realistic instructional purposes. Highly scripted programs dictate exactly how an adult should guide children. Some even prescribe the exact wording that a teacher should use. We disagree with this approach because we believe that children with social deficits need to see more than how angelic children act and react around others who may socially offend them. Children with social deficits benefit from seeing common occurrences of offensive behavior perpetrated by their peers and from noting how the offender was redirected by the adults and fellow peers who are present. Our point is that children benefit from observing others, not just from personal experience. The adult's responsibility is to be an eagle-eyed observer and to bring all instructionally worthwhile occurrences to the attention of the child in need. “Look, Billy, see how Johnny reacted to what Davy did to him. Did you hear what Johnny said to Billy?” A teaching moment that happens naturally is what we are after.

difficulties. Following a whole-child approach, they evaluate educational abilities, serve as advocates, teach students privately, guide teachers, support parents, and coordinate all involved parties through effective communication and teamwork.

*Therefore it is up to the teacher to turn each similar episode into that valuable teaching moment. That's what teachers are for.*

**NOW FOR THE HOW.** The next step is to store each teaching moment in “the standards vault.” Examples of *naturally occurring* proper behavior are stored in the standards vault for future reference. Reality will contribute a variety of examples that go beyond a formal social skills instructional program engineer's list. Teachers record reality episodes in writing and save them in a file. When something objectionable arises later in the day or week, teachers can refer to the collection of past examples in the standards vault.

Sample episodes in the vault need to be refreshed, so that they do not get stale. Let's say that one particular episode, like our Billy and Johnny example, gets referred to over and over. The parameters of that example will also get stuck in the minds of our social skills learners.

Children need to see parameters stretch to fit new situations. They need to witness and experience diverse examples and then learn how to extrapolate from what they had witnessed. This will avoid the programming syndrome, a casualty of over-scripting, that we warned against earlier. We want kids to think through social experiences and to make healthy decisions. That will happen if they have more than one frame of reference in their repertoire of proper social examples to draw from. Obviously, going to the opposite extreme and providing too many diverse examples will prevent memory of any of them. Teachers need to determine the best dosage for each student.

That brings us to our final point. Scripted programs tend to treat all children in a given category alike. That is also not realistic. Each child is a world unto himself, and each lesson needs to fit that world. Teachers need to be adept at pulling the best lesson from the standards vault for each child individually.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** Children do learn best from children. Adults help most as facilitators. Reality is the best learning environment, albeit guided by professionals. Our goal is to put children in the driver's seat and to learn from what they observe around them and personally experience. Then we help them graduate toward independent competence. That is the theme for *“helping children to help themselves.”*



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