

Teaching Social Skills and Assertiveness to Students With Disabilities

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Juan, Lisa, and Jamal each have a physical disability and use a wheelchair or a walker for mobility. They participate in an inclusive physical education class with peers who do not have disabilities. Sometimes they are asked to do skills that are very difficult for them, such as kicking a soccer ball a certain distance. However, Juan, Lisa, and Jamal vary with respect to the life skills they have learned and use to succeed in their daily lives, and thus they view these challenges differently. Juan is very optimistic and trusts that with hard work he can overcome many obstacles. He has developed a strong social support network and is assertive about asking his teacher and other students to make necessary accommodations so that he can succeed in physical education class. In contrast, Jamal and Lisa have less effective life skills. Jamal berates himself for his physical disability, and becomes aggressive with his classmates whenever he cannot do what the other students can do. Lisa is very passive, exhibits learned helplessness, and is socially immature. When she cannot complete a task, she shuts down and does not try any more. Jamal and Lisa, like many other children with disabilities, would benefit from education in life skills to improve their education and quality of life.

Similar to students who do not have disabilities, students with disabilities need to practice their social and assertiveness skills. The National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) content standards for physical education emphasize teaching responsible personal and social behaviors to students of all abilities to help them develop an understanding of and respect for differences among people (NASPE, 2004). Social skills and assertiveness are also frequently emphasized in individualized education plans (IEP) and individual transition plans (ITP) for students with disabilities. Thus, teachers need to understand social skills and assertiveness, why these life skills are important, how to teach such life skills, and how to evaluate the development of these skills.

Many students with and without disabilities learn about socialization indirectly without teacher instruction that focuses on social skills and assertiveness. However,



sometimes children learn inappropriate social behaviors, such as misbehaving to gain attention. Also, some children with disabilities, especially those with autism spectrum disorder or Asperger's syndrome, have difficulty learning and understanding social cues when they are not explicitly expressed. Thus, teachers should explicitly focus on teaching appropriate social and assertiveness skills.

Physical activity is an effective setting in which to teach life skills as a means of enhancing positive youth development in children with disabilities. If a teacher provides a safe and successful environment, physical activity can be a visible outlet where students with disabilities see the benefits of their attempts at using their social and assertiveness skills. Physical activity can also be a fun way to learn life skills and provides a visible context for success in a domain where other people, and frequently children with disabilities themselves, have low expectations. If children with disabilities have fun successfully using their social skills and assertiveness in a physical activity environment, they may be more likely to participate in physical activities and attain the benefits of an active lifestyle.

Establishing an Enabling Environment

Physical education teachers must establish a safe and successful learning environment for learning life skills. For instance, at the beginning of our after-school programs (Moffett, 2005), we ask students about trying to do something new or difficult. Children often talk about their frustration of not being as good as their classmates without disabilities. We then ask students if they would like help from a classmate who is good at the skill. After a minute of discussion about this solution, the children usually say that they want to set a rule about helping each other when someone is struggling with a task. This rule is most likely to be effective if all students, including students with and without disabilities, are recognized for skills they can do and can teach to others. Students with disabilities also frequently talk about being teased. Discussion of this situation typically leads to making a rule for the class that there will be only positive comments. Teachers who facilitate such discussions about problems and solutions often find that students are able to develop their own cooperative environment where they feel safe to try new physical education and social skills. Discussions about expectations for students are most effective at the beginning of a school year or unit of instruction, and when teachers post and reinforce the expectations on a regular basis.

Teaching Social Skills

Social skills facilitate positive interactions with other people and help the student to create strong networks of social support. Social skills are valuable because they help students develop friendships and a sense of belonging within a group. Once students have developed friendships, they can use their social support for help in the classroom, gym, or home.

Students with disabilities may have a greater need for social skills education because they do not participate in as many activities or programs as children without disabilities; thus they have fewer opportunities for social interaction. Additionally, as previously mentioned, disabilities such as autism and Asperger's syndrome may hinder the development of social skills or the ability to understand social cues.

When we teach social skills to our students with disabilities (see box—partner tag activity), we like to start with a quote by Wilson Mizner (n.d): "A good listener is not only popular everywhere, but after a while he knows something." We explain to the students that it is important to listen to other people so they can identify common interests with classmates and learn how to be supportive of their friends. For instance, when we did the partner tag activity in one of our programs, a student who usually did not receive much attention from classmates

Sample Social Skills Activity

Partner Tag

Objectives

- Students will be able to present one common interest that they have with two other classmates.
- Students will be able to listen attentively to their classmates when their partner is discussing one of their interests.
- Students will be able to maintain their heart rate in the training zone

Equipment needed: none

Description of activity: Discuss Wilson Mizner's quote about listening and friendship and make sure students talk about how this quote means they need to listen to learn what their friends like and dislike and so that they can help someone when they need it. Then, introduce partner tag. Students will pair themselves up with someone that they do not know as well as other students. The students will then face each other and bow to their partner. The students then talk to their partner about some of the activities that they like and dislike and decide who will be the tagger and who will be chased. Students then try to tag each other as they run in general space. When a student has been tagged, the student has to tell the partner another interesting fact about him/herself. The roles are then switched and the students play again. Students need to be careful not to run into each other or other students.

became fairly popular because he told everyone about his huge dog at home. Other students used this information to start a conversation with the child and quickly developed new friendships.

In new situations, both the student with a disability and classmates may be uncomfortable initiating conversations. The student with a disability may feel uncomfortable and self-conscious in a new situation, especially given past experiences of being ignored or teased, and may lack strategies for conversing with others. Classmates may be uncomfortable about the disability and thus do not want to socially interact with the student with a disability. In this situation, we use the tactic of teaching students to find common interests by listening and observing and then talk to classmates about the common interests. We teach students to notice what classmates are wearing, doing, or discussing, and then start a conversation based on this information. For instance, if another student was wearing a Michigan State basketball t-shirt, the student could talk about Michigan State or basketball or both with the classmate. We practice this skill by playing partner tag or incorporating the same concept into passing drills for various ball sports. This may seem like an easy skill, but for children, especially those with poor social skills, the task of finding common interests

and starting conversations is difficult and will need to be practiced frequently.

Finally, because all students need help or social support during difficult times, we teach students how to be supportive friends. We talk to the students about who helps them the most when they have a problem and why. The students usually talk about family members and friends because these people love them and will help them in various ways. We then talk about how we, as a class, are a team and need to help each other through peer teaching. We want the students to know that it is important to identify a problem and determine different ways to possibly fix the problem. We do an activity in which students are grouped together and have to identify a problem (i.e., how to do a skill such as kick a soccer ball from a seated position in a wheelchair) and help each other determine at least two ways to resolve the problem. The students then implement their problem-solving strategies using peer teaching. Such peer teaching can be reciprocal, with one student knowing more about the disability and mobility equipment and another student knowing more about the skill to be learned.

There are several ways to ensure that students learn intended social skills. First, a teacher could establish measurable objectives to evaluate students' use of social skills. If students are reaching the stated objectives, they should be increasing their social skills. Teachers should also define expected behaviors, preferably in collaboration with their students. For example, students should demonstrate responsible personal and social behaviors (e.g., helping each other, encouraging classmates, acting as peer teachers) in the physical education environment. Finally, teachers should provide positive reinforcement to students who have more friends and social interactions with more students than they did before social skills instruction.

Teaching Assertiveness

NASPE (2004) Standards 5 and 6 emphasize teaching students to be assertive in using their social skills and taking personal responsibility for their physical activity and actions overall. Assertiveness refers to communicating feelings about what you want or need, or taking action to change a situation. Assertiveness exists on a continuum that ranges from passive to assertive to aggressive behaviors, with the goal being "middle-of-the-road" assertive. Assertiveness helps students with disabilities to become independent instead of always relying on parents or authority figures to fix situations. Assertiveness helps students become optimistic and believe that they can change a situation for the better. Taking action to change a situation is also a positive way to cope with adversity. Physical educators can focus on three different ways to teach assertiveness to children with disabilities: (a) present challenges in which students are encouraged to make decisions and honor their decisions; (b) teach



Regular punch (Taekwondo).
Athlete strikes object with fist closed and figures facing the ground.



Upper block (Taekwondo).
Athlete blocks object with forearm in upward motion.

differences between passive, assertive, and aggressive behaviors and establish a goal of socially appropriate assertive behaviors; and (c) teach specific ways for students to be assertive.

Many times children with disabilities are limited in their choices of activities or how they participate in different activities. This may lead children with disabilities to be quiet, passive, or even learned helpless, instead of assertive. In this situation, physical educators should provide opportunities for children to make choices, first for easy challenges and subsequently for more difficult situations. For example, the physical educator might: (a) permit children to choose their warm-up activities from a list of several activities; (b) have students who use mobility equipment provide hints and directions to classmates who push their wheelchairs or help in other ways; or (c) encourage students to ask for accommodations or set-up their own equipment. For instance, in our programs, there are many participants who use wheelchairs and need footrests removed so that they can kick a ball or kick in taekwondo. The teacher does not remove the footrests until the student asks for the accommodation. Typically, when the students first start one of our programs, children sit quietly and wait for someone to help them, but by the end of the program they are assertive and express their needs immediately.

Sometimes, student behaviors are at the other extreme of the assertiveness continuum. They act aggressively, perhaps because they do not know how to express their needs appropriately. Teachers should describe differences between passive, assertive, and aggressive behaviors and should teach appropriate ways to be assertive. In our programs, we define each of these words and have students give examples of how people may act in each of these ways. For instance, when teaching taekwondo and assertiveness, we indicate that hitting another person or making mean comments is being aggressive. Allowing others to hurt us or not telling anyone what we want is being passive. We encourage students to use "middle-of-

**Front kick (Taekwondo).
Athlete kicks object
with front of the foot.**



**Double-leg front kick
(Taekwondo). Athlete kicks
object with front of both feet.**

the-road" assertive behaviors by using self-defense techniques or telling others what they need or want. We then focus the lesson on self-defense techniques while reminding students of the differences between being passive, aggressive, and assertive. We conclude the lesson with the children talking about how they are passive, aggressive, or assertive in various situations and how it is best to be assertive to change a situation for the better.

We use the DEAL technique (Connelly, & Rotella, 1991; Gillham et al., 2003) to teach students to be assertive and to change a situation for the better. DEAL stands for (a) describe the problem, (b) explain your feelings (c) ask for a change, and (d) list how that change will fix the problem. This acronym DEAL helps students to remem-

ber assertiveness strategies. After teaching DEAL, we purposely present hypothetical scenarios (Burt is being teased by Mariah because of his disability) and real-life challenges (I need help removing the footrest to my wheelchair) in which students can be more successful if they DEAL. Table 1 provides an example of DEAL in the context of soccer instruction. In our experience, students learn the DEAL strategy quickly and use it in a variety of contexts. They soon realize that it is easy to be assertive in a safe non-threatening way.

It is important for teachers to recognize that some students, especially those with cognitive disabilities, may have difficulty generalizing assertiveness behaviors to different situations. For example, we had one student who was typically very quiet and passive, but started misbehaving and acting aggressively with her parents when we started teaching assertiveness. She had trouble learning how to implement assertiveness in a positive, polite way. We talked to the parents about the goal of instruction, and they supported the lesson. With help from the parents, we reminded the student of the differences between appropriate and inappropriate assertiveness.

Teachers should consider using these strategies: (a) establish specific objectives for assertiveness, such as doing certain tasks independently or asking a teacher or classmate for help with wheelchair transfers; (b) discuss expectations for students in the physical education environment such as using DEAL to express wants and needs; (c) work with classroom teachers and parents to encourage generalization of assertiveness behaviors to other settings; and (d) provide positive reinforcement to students who demonstrate greater independence and socially appropriate assertiveness. Teachers who implement these strategies can help students with and without disabilities to develop greater confidence, independence, and quality of life.

TABLE 1—An Example of a Situation That Teachers Can Use in the Classroom to Practice DEAL

Definition	Example
D Describe the problem.	You only passed the soccer ball to me once today.
E Explain your feelings.	I am frustrated because I am not getting many chances to learn and practice.
A Ask for a change.	Pass the soccer ball to me at least three times each class.
L List how that change will fix the problem.	That will help me improve my skills.

TABLE 2—Strategies to Teach Social Skills and Assertiveness

Life Skill	Teach students to . . .
Socialization	Listen to and observe classmates to find common interests. Start conversations by talking about what others are saying, doing, or wearing. Recognize how they like to be helped so they can help others in the same way.
Assertiveness	Make decisions in controlled situations in the physical education class. Understand the difference between passive, assertive, and aggressive behaviors. Use DEAL to be assertive in a positive way.

Conclusion

Students with disabilities need direct instruction and practice in social skills and assertiveness because (a) they often have fewer opportunities to learn and practice life skills than their peers, and (b) they often face difficult challenges coping with disability in inclusive settings. Students who do not have disabilities also have need for instruction in life skills, as demonstrated by NASPE standards related to responsible personal and social behaviors. Physical education is an effective environment for teaching and learning life skills because of the frequent use of activities that require cooperation and collaboration, and because personal accomplishments are highly visible in the physical activity setting. Teachers should focus on developing a positive, safe environment where students reap the rewards of their efforts and behaviors. Students can learn how to develop their social skills when teachers teach them how to introduce themselves, find common interests with peers, and be supportive to others (Table 2). Students can become more assertive by learning the difference between passive, assertive, and aggressive behaviors, as well as how to DEAL with problems and situations (Table 1). From our experiences teaching life skills, the students will not only benefit greatly from developing these skills, but they will also have a lot of fun practicing the skills.

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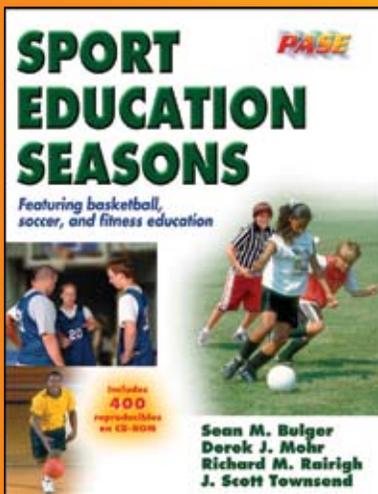
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