

# Social interactions

## Supporting students' diverse needs

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**The support teachers provide is crucial to ensure that all students have the opportunity to engage in learning in safe, supportive and well-managed learning environments. Students may require varying supports depending on their strengths and needs. This practice guide is part of a suite of resources developed in partnership with MultiLit and the Institute of Special Educators to help teachers refine or refresh their understanding and practice of supporting students with diverse needs.**

Not all students who require additional support will have a diagnosis of disability or a health condition, and some students may have a combination of needs. Teachers and school leaders must reasonably support all students to access and participate in education. This may require making reasonable adjustments to the learning environment, teaching or the curriculum in collaboration with students and parents/primary caregivers, specialist and support staff, and medical and allied health professionals.<sup>1</sup>

This practice guide will assist you to support the social inclusion and connections of students by supporting their social interactions. It has been designed to complement, not replace, existing school and system policies, procedures and guidance.

### Understanding social interactions

Social interaction involves communication and joint activity between individuals and typically involves reciprocity, turn-taking and sharing.<sup>2</sup> Social interaction may occur through conversation, games, sport or classroom activities.

<sup>1</sup> Alice Springs [Mparntwe] Education Declaration, 2020; Disability Discrimination Act 1992, 2015; 2020 Review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Petrina et al., 2014.

Social connections are important for quality of life.<sup>3</sup> Social interaction forms the foundation for the development of friendships, which can influence success at school, and social and emotional development.<sup>4</sup>

Positive social interactions assist the development and sustainment of long-term and continuing relationships for all participants. Students who experience difficulties interacting with others and who express a desire to interact and develop friendships with peers may benefit from learning strategies to ensure interactions are mutually beneficial. However, students may have difficulty making social connections due to communication difficulties, social anxiety, differences in interests, cultural differences, language barriers or difficulties with emotional or behavioural regulation.

Students may need support with:

- interacting with others in a positive way
- making friends and maintaining friendships
- developing shared understanding during social and academic activities
- minimising feelings of loneliness.<sup>5</sup>

The [General Capability: Personal and Social capability](#) in the Australian Curriculum (Version 9.0) includes a range of capabilities students should develop, that relate to and support their social interactions with others.

## Practices to support positive social interactions

This guide outlines the following practices to support students' social interactions:

- Identify students' preferences, strengths and needs.
- Model and explicitly teach skills to support positive social interactions.
- Teach students to support each other to build positive social connections.

It is also important to consider how you [collaborate with students' support networks](#) and [plan to support students' diverse needs](#), including students' [communication needs](#), [emotional regulation](#), [physical needs](#) and [sensory differences](#).

Support for students' social interactions is strengthened when:

- positive, collaborative [connections](#) and relationships with students and their [support networks](#) are established and maintained
- [culturally safe](#) and inclusive learning environments are created
- all students are taught and encouraged to understand and support each other's strengths and differences.

Always display calm, consistent and well-managed emotions and behaviour. This models safe emotional expression and behaviours and helps to create a supportive learning environment.

3 Pillay et al., 2022.

4 Watkins et al., 2015.

5 Watkins et al., 2015.

## Identify students' preferences, strengths and needs

Identifying students' preferences, strengths and needs will provide initial information to assist in developing objectives and monitoring skill development.

To identify students' preferences, strengths and needs:

- Start by discussing with students how they feel about their social connections (e.g., 'Do you like talking to other students in the class? Do you need help knowing what to say to other students?'). Support students to identify and understand their preferences, strengths and needs so that they can self-advocate by asking for help when needed.
- Use information provided by parents/primary caregivers and other professionals about how, when and where support can be provided for students' social skills.
- Observe students' social interactions in a range of settings and activities to identify the skills they already have and those that need to be taught or strengthened.
- Identify why difficulties with social connections may exist (e.g., due to feeling anxious, experiencing communication difficulties, cultural misunderstandings and/or feelings of being unsafe in the learning environment).
- Identify the social interaction skills required by students (e.g., making a request, initiating a conversation, taking turns or sharing). These will differ depending on age, developmental level and whether assistive technology is needed for communication.
- Recognise actions that are barriers to social interaction (e.g., teasing, bullying or abruptly interrupting) and teach strategies to promote improved interactions (e.g., speaking kindly to others, starting a conversation or verbally or non-verbally asking to join a game). It is important for teachers to assess students' social interactions in all school settings and reassess them on an ongoing basis.

To help assess social interaction across settings and the sufficient availability of resources for this activity:

- Observe and record the number of times students interact with adults and/or peers, the person they are interacting with and the quality of the interaction (mostly positive or needs support).
- Record attempted or actual non-verbal, verbal and physical interactions *with* an adult or peer or *by* an adult or peer and record the response.

## Model and explicitly teach skills to support positive social interactions

The way teachers respond to students' diverse needs in the classroom and other school settings will influence how students feel and are accepted by their peers. Positive adult–peer interactions provide an important model of acceptance, inclusion and support. When teachers' actions show that they value all students in their classes, they set a standard that all students can aim to follow.

Modelling social interactions can be beneficial for all students. To model positive social interactions:

- Greet students by name and use their name when interacting with them.
- Maintain a calm and respectful manner when interacting with all students.

- Use respectful language when addressing students, colleagues and parents/primary caregivers.
- Provide instructions and feedback in a clear, constructive and supportive manner.
- Model skills such as respectful listening and turn-taking for students before they take part in group work.
- Acknowledge positive social behaviours. Depending on students' preferences, this might include public praise or private acknowledgement of success.
- Recognise and celebrate students' efforts to help and support one another.
- Demonstrate how to handle conflicts calmly and respectfully.
- Use role-play scenarios to model positive social interactions and effective communication and problem-solving skills.

Like academic skills, teachers can explicitly teach social skills and support their practice. Once the skills needed for positive social interactions have been identified, you might do the following:

- Explicitly teach each part using clear explanation and demonstration. For example, you might say 'If you want to join an activity with classmates, you need to ask them if this is alright. You might say "Can I work with you?"' A more sophisticated example might involve teaching a student to respond to a friend who is upset. You might say 'If a friend looks sad or worried, you could say "You seem upset. Do you want to talk about it?"' In secondary schools, this explicit teaching of social skills may be predominantly done by the homeroom teacher. They should communicate what has been taught to all other teachers so they can remind and support the student as required.
- Provide guided practice using adult and/or peer partners. For example, when teaching a student to respond to a friend who is upset, the student would role play with a peer with guidance and feedback from the teacher. At the beginning of the role play guided practice, you might say 'Remember to ask a question and listen to the answer.' As the student's proficiency develops, this reminder can be withdrawn.
- Provide clear feedback. For example, you might say 'Well done [Name]. You saw that your friend was upset, asked them a question and listened to their answer.'

## Teach students to support each other to build positive social connections

Social interactions with peers in the classroom, the playground and other settings, such as school social clubs and sporting activities, can provide important learning opportunities for all students and support student wellbeing.

All students benefit from understanding differences in communication styles and preferences so they can adapt communication and support each other's success. For example, students may need to:

- recognise that some students' communication can be misinterpreted – for example:
  - direct communication may not be meant as rude
  - not making eye contact or misinterpreting humour or sarcasm may be due to differing communication styles, cultural practices or experiences
- understand that some students may show emotions differently – for example, some students may not smile when they are happy and conversely may grin when they experience stress

- understand that students using a communication board with picture symbols can use these symbols to interact socially. Students can adjust their interaction style to accommodate a student using a communication board, such as allowing more time for messages to be composed and not pre-empting communication.

## Peer-mediated interventions

Peers can also demonstrate or model skills and help students requiring additional support to practise those skills. These 'peer-mediated interventions' can have positive social, and sometimes academic, outcomes for the students being supported,<sup>6</sup> with benefits also found for the peers providing support.<sup>7</sup>

Important steps in peer-mediated interventions include:

- peer selection
- teaching peers strategies to facilitate interaction
- selecting activities for peer support
- monitoring peers' support and providing them with constructive feedback.

Students might be selected to support a classmate with additional needs if they:

- are preferred by the student
- are interested in supporting the student
- have good social skills themselves
- have good school attendance
- might themselves benefit from supporting others
- share a common interest.

Once peers have been identified, use developmentally appropriate strategies to teach students to support each other to develop positive social connections:

- Where relevant and appropriate, provide students with information about how others communicate (e.g., how to use a picture-based communication board). Students may also like to share how they communicate with others, and you can support them to do this.
- Suggest conversation starters to students based on their strengths and interests. For example, for a student who has indicated a particular interest in trains, you might suggest their peer asks 'I hear that you know a lot about trains and train travel', 'What are your favourite trains?' or 'What is the longest train trip that you have taken?'
- Provide examples of how students might discuss shared interests and activities. For example, for a student interested in football, you might suggest that their peer asks, 'What team do you support?', 'Do you go to watch your team play?' or 'Do you play football on the weekend?'

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6 Bowman-Perrottet et al., 2023; Chang & Locke, 2016; Crompton et al., 2023; Jenkins et al., 2018.

7 Brock & Huber, 2017; Chan et al., 2009.

- Explicitly teach and model strategies for providing encouragement and feedback. For example, you might suggest that students make a point of commenting on each other's successes.
- Explicitly teach and model strategies for encouraging interactions with other students. For example, you might suggest that students try to include others in conversations during group problem-solving activities.
- Suggest how students might provide choices to each other in group activities. For example, you might suggest that where there are tasks to allocate within a group activity, one student might suggest a choice of tasks that their peer is able to do and allow them to select their preferred task.
- Suggest how students might introduce a friend in the playground. You might suggest they say, 'This is [Name]. He's in the same class as me and is also interested in joining the robotics/chess group.'
- Explicitly teach and model how to provide additional guided practice for academic skills not mastered. For example, a student could help a peer to practise saying the letter sounds for letters targeted in the peer's individual program or practise spelling words yet to be mastered. For older students, the student providing guided practice could provide additional examples of arithmetic or algebraic equations yet to be mastered by reviewing the procedural process and assisting their peer to solve the equations. Before asking a student to provide guided practice, you should be confident they have already achieved mastery of the skills to be covered.

Teachers can plan activities for implementing peer-mediated interventions throughout the day or week. These activities could include:

- small-group instruction
- turn-taking games
- physical education or sporting activities
- lunch clubs and school extra curricular activities (e.g., robotics, Lego, chess)
- role play.

## Reflection questions

- How have you considered your students' social goals in planning to support social interactions?
- How have you considered your students' preferences, strengths and needs and how these may be used to enhance social interactions?
- In what settings have you assessed social interactions? Are there any other settings that are relevant for supporting students' social interactions?
- How have you modelled positive social interactions and, where necessary, explicitly taught social skills?
- How could you use student-to-student support to build social interactions and connections?

## Further reading

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