Lights, Camera, Interaction!

Focus on Video Modeling Techniques for Inexpensive, Fast and Customized Solutions for Improving Social Skills

By Laurie Jacobs

When my sister and I began Social Skill Builder in 1999, we were looking for a way to bridge the social language gap to help kids with ASD, Asperger's and other learning disabilities achieve success in social situations. Social Skill Builder has created a series of learning tools that use videos of real kids in computer assisted programs to help teach social understanding. As the video scenarios unfold, the child or adolescent user steps inside familiar social situations to make choices, predict outcomes and problem-solve. With the attraction of the computer, motivating reinforcements and games, the task of learning social skills becomes fun and entertaining. This unique training software provides a reference for language, behaviors and interactions that the children learn to carry into their natural environments.

Users of Social Skill Builder software have exhibited increased confidence and acceptance of transitions in different social scenarios, increased expressive language skills, and decreased anxiety and negative behaviors in situations that once caused problems. Often, social learning opportunities occur so quickly that the teachable moments of body language or a glance are gone before they can be identified, but with Social Skill Builder software, each scenario can be paused, with the opportunity to replay scenarios and study the different layers of social cues for greater understanding. Such practice provides children with more intuitive insight into social interactions and increases their confidence as they try out new skills in their real-world environments.

WHY SOCIAL SKILLS TRAINING?

A 1992 Duke, Emory University study showed that nearly 93 percent of communication is nonverbal, requiring acknowledgement of gestures, body language and facial expressions. Unlike their peers, children who struggle with pragmatic language do not acquire basic social skills through general experience and observation, usually because of the complexity of the interaction and all of the "unwritten" and situational-dependent rules. Social skills training uses problem-solving techniques to actively teach children the skills they need to be successful and to cope with challenging situations in their social environment. Research has demonstrated that video social skill training using real peer subjects (as opposed to drawings or cartoons) is one of the most effective treatments for helping children with ASDs and other learning disabilities succeed in their interpersonal and social awareness.

Additionally, research has established that many students with pragmatic learning disabilities, particularly those with ASDs, are drawn to visual stimulation and are often visual learners. Because of this visual inclination, video modeling of social skills meets these students where they learn best. As Dr. Temple Grandin, a professor, author and researcher with autism explains, "I think in pictures. I do not think in language. All my thoughts are like videotapes running in my imagination. Pictures are my first language, and words are my second language" (Grandin 2002).

We have found great success and seen lasting improvement using teaching strategies that capitalize on the visual learning strengths of

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children on the spectrum and allow for repeated evaluation of targeted social behaviors. Social Skill Builder products provide a great outline and guide to start you on your way to using video training techniques by providing the foundational social videos of situations typically seen in a preschool, elementary school or middle school or out in the community and pairing them with systematic levels of understanding, question probes and scoring.

Purchasing Social Skill Builder products to kick start your video modeling library is beneficial to familiarize the parent/professional and student with how simplistic to complex videos and questions should fit into a hierarchy of social learning. Once the parent or instructor is comfortable with the structure of the programs, they can begin to fill in with customized videos that they have created for their particular child or facility. The following levels of skill progression are incorporated into our software and provide an outline for dissection and discussion of the video scenarios that lead to social awareness and integration:

Level 1, build vocabulary. Treat the video footage like a picture book, describing what the children are doing. "The children are standing in a line."

Level 2, use vocabulary to introduce choices. As the videos become stories, begin to offer choices that encourage your student to engage in the scenario. Choices build options for those struggling with the knowledge or language to elicit their own response. "When we stand in line, what should we do? (Pause for response.) Should we stand still or push each other? Should we wait our turn or run to the front of the line?"

Level 3, use vocabulary to expose feelings. This level assumes a solid use of basic vocabulary and provides a building block toward the critical social skill of predicting outcomes. At this level, focus on feelings through the video subject's words or body language. Focus on telling the story through emotions. "What would you do if you saw your teacher crossing her arms and clearing her throat? (Pause for response.) 'Pay attention' is correct. Do you think your teacher is frustrated or angry? You're right. When someone crosses their arms it means they are upset."

Level 4, feelings and body language lead to inferences. It is important to discuss contextual cues in the video subject's body language, behavior and emotions. While

this seems similar to Level 3, it is critical to teach and reinforce because so many ASD learners struggle with nonverbal communication cues and making inference. Take the discussion further: "What is the girl in the video doing with her body to show that she is sad?"

Level 5, expand upon choices. This level introduces the social nuances that allow one to compare and contrast similar scenarios to determine the most acceptable pragmatic language and behavior in any given situation. Because social awareness is so subjective, this allows the person with whom you're working to make a detailed analysis of the better versus the best outcome. "That boy was yelling in the store because they did not have his favorite ice cream. What is your favorite ice cream? Do you like other kinds of ice cream? What are some other things you could do if the store did not have your favorite flavor?"

BEYOND THE BASICS: MAKING YOUR OWN VIDEOS

I sometimes liken Social Skill Builder software to the solid basics of a good wardrobe: we have the jeans, the shoes, the socks, the sweaters. We've already covered standing in line without cutting, talking or pushing, eating quietly and politely in the cafeteria,

taking turns on the playground, bully awareness and hundreds of daily, basic scenarios. The software contains graduated levels of learning as skills are mastered, so use our products to cover the behavioral basics and as a model of the different ways to address targeted behaviors. Then, add to the "wardrobe" with your own custom videos on specific behaviors, otherwise known as "do-it-yourself" (DIY) video modeling. You don't need to reinvent the wheel, just build on what is readily available to get the best possible outcome for your student.

DIY VIDEO MODELING IS ECONOMICAL AND FEASIBLE

The technology available now is perfect for DIY video modeling because it is economical, readily available and easy to use. It is no longer necessary to rent or purchase complicated AV equipment because most of us already have mobile phones with cameras or digital cameras, and small video cameras can be very economical, plus the technology is convenient and easy to manage. One of my favorites is a FLIP video camera that plugs straight into a computer USB port. The camera contains all the software needed for editing, compressing, organizing and even adding narration or music.

VIDEO MODELING GUIDELINES

The primary rule of video modeling is to present real people in real scenarios, rather than cartoons or drawn images. It is critical to focus on facial and body expressions to convey both verbal and nonverbal cues and to use same-age peers whenever possible.

When you begin planning your DIY video modeling project, first evaluate your student – what are their challenges and needs? Each video should focus on one concrete skill. Keep the video very short – no more than 30 seconds. Don't overload the student with too much action or too many choices that will cause them to lose focus. It is important to eliminate even small distractions, such as a t-shirt with words or pictures, or background noises or activity that can cause the student to fixate on something other than the task at hand.

Communication between parents, therapists and teachers is essential to key in to specific behaviors to target together. Refer to the video during daily situations that arise, and ask the student about the video they

watched when they are in the situation themselves. Get the student into the habit of using the videos that they store so well in their memory as a guide to make better social guesses and make the video learning experience an integrated part of their daily life.

Keep things positive! Show the correct way to do something first, and then encourage the student to predict the positive outcome of a correct behavior with the goal of gradually introducing the consequences of negative behavior. Always keep in mind the objective of meeting the student's pragmatic needs and goals.

Think about how to maximize every part of your videos to extract the full learning value, as well as the time and money that have been invested. For example, pull a still photo from a video and discuss it with the student. Point out posture, facial expression, eye contact, personal space, etc. You can use a still photo or a small clip from a video to stop the action and break down a skill into smaller steps in order to ensure learning. That's what a lot of therapists do with Social Skill Builder products; they break down the lessons into more basic chunks and ultimately build the skills up to the full level.

For portable cuing of social situations, I often take a screen shot of a video or picture to take into a student's own environment. For example, if a student is having trouble waiting in line, I will play the video with him and then print off the screen shots and take them with us to practice when he is standing in line at school. This will help carry over the concepts and consequences learned in the program to his own waiting behavior, and it makes use of a video that you already have.

It is very important, with any DIY video project, that you obtain proper permission to take photos and videos of children. Many schools have signed photo waivers on file, and parents should be included in the decision and give authorization to take photos and videos of their children and the future uses of these projects.

FREE SOCIAL VIDEOS ONLINE

In addition to available pragmatic language software and DIY video modeling, a wealth of free tools for teaching social skills can be found by a simple Internet search on social language videos. YouTube and TeacherTube are fantastic sources of social videos. Subscribe, upload and join groups! Remember, you are looking for short videos using real pictures and succinct narration to show the skill you are focusing on.

Try these sorts of free video social stories in conjunction with Social Skill Builder's teaching software for even more versatility and application. For example, if you are working with a student on what to do when they go to the movies, use your DIY video or an online video as a basic overview, then dig deeper with the detailed analysis of our My Community CD's movie theater series of videos. As the student gains understanding and mastery of the skills through the software, use the still pictures from the YouTube video to have them create their own "social story" of going to the movies. This activity allows the student to carry skills over into another context, taking them closer to the goal of incorporating the skills into their natural environment.
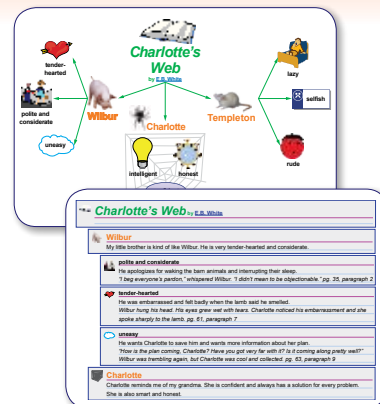
Social Skill Builder has several instructive YouTube videos on DIY video modeling. Visit www.youtube.com/socialskillbuilder, and click on uploads to see the available videos. Some clips give tips specifically applicable to Social Skill Builder software, and some give more generic video modeling tips.

CONTACT US

Would you like to learn more about using video modeling to teach social skills? E-mail us at info@socialskillbuilder.com or call 866-278-1452 for more information. Visit www.socialskillbuilder.com for product information and demos of our software. Click on Products, then Choosing the Right Tool to see which programs target the specific skills you are looking for. Our social skills product line includes:

• Preschool Playtime Volumes 1 and 2: behavioral expectations outside of the home, social relationships, peer conflicts, sensory issues, playground, preschool, park and outing. $69.95 each

• My School Day, cognitive age 6-12: rituals of recess, peer relations, appropriate classroom behavior, lunchtime interactions. $89.95

• My Community, cognitive age 5+: social expectations, safety precautions, social behavior, community setting – doctor's office, grocery store, neighborhood and more. $89.95

• School Rules! Volumes 1 and 2, cognitive age 8 – 18: social interpretation skills, personal awareness, conflict resolution, organization. Scenarios include: getting lunch, eating, talking to friends, hanging out, using schedules and time management. $89.95 each. ■