Ms. Renee is supporting three children in a block-building activity, playing alongside them and offering narration, reinforcement, and thoughtful questions. Jacob, a 3¼-year-old child with autism, runs excitedly into the block center, kicking the blocks in all directions. Latrice yells, “Jacob, you’re stupid!”

Maya is a younger preschooler in Ms. Leo’s classroom, with gross and fine motor limitations related to cerebral palsy. Four-year-old Destiny notices Maya making rainbows on the wall with a prism from the fine motor center. “Lemme see!” Destiny exclaims, grabbing the prism from Maya’s hand. Destiny fails to recognize this opportunity to explore a shared interest with her classmate.

Examples such as these illustrate typical conflicts that may occur in preschool classrooms. Like conflicts among all young children, those involving young children with special needs serve as windows into children’s social-emotional skills and needs. They also highlight teaching opportunities. Teachers play an essential role in showing preschoolers how to manage peer relationships successfully. Peer conflict is typical for young children but still requires teacher assessment. Paying special attention to children’s interactions in inclusive classrooms can allow teachers to take full advantage of opportunities to maximize the meaningful partici-
patition of children with special needs and encourage early friendships to blossom among all the children.

Teachers in inclusive classrooms strive to provide individualized education to young children with special needs alongside their peers who do not have special needs. For all children to learn and develop successfully, it is important for general and special education teachers to engage in extensive and meaningful collaboration with each other and with all other service providers who work with a child to target areas of need—including speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, and nurses. One of the primary goals of inclusive programs is to create an atmosphere in which positive peer relationships can flourish. In such programs, children with special needs have full access to all aspects of the learning environment, opportunities to participate actively, and adequate supports for success (DEC/NAEYC 2009).

Social skills and the importance of peer relationships for young children

Social skills and social competence are key areas of preschool teaching and learning. In the preschool years, most children learn to successfully navigate a complex world of friendships and adult relationships in environments with new rules, routines, and expectations for such behaviors as waiting, conversing, sharing small- and large-group spaces, and taking turns. Peer-related social competence can be thought of as the overall success of preschoolers in achieving social goals, interacting with others, and fitting in with their peers. Teachers of young children help all children to increase their competence—often by working on social skills during classroom activities and routines. Social skills include all of the behaviors children use with others as they gain social competence, including skills like cooperating, initiating conversations, and handling conflicts by managing their emotions and engaging in joint problem solving.

During the preschool years, children experience many new opportunities to use social skills and understand them with greater depth. They develop some of their first friendships, learn to follow a few classroom rules and routines, and develop ever stronger emotional control. Intentional teaching and teacher-supported peer interactions enhance children’s abilities to use social language and read other children’s social cues. These abilities help children increase the success of their social initiations and responses. Basic social skills both predict and pave the way for more complex ones (such as sharing, negotiating play roles, and dealing with conflict) and support learning-related social skills (such as remaining on-task and organizing materials for classwork) (McClelland & Morrison 2003).

One of the primary goals of inclusive programs is to create an atmosphere in which positive peer relationships can flourish.

Successful interactions with peers provide both opportunities for and a pathway to social-emotional development and readiness for learning in kindergarten and beyond. For example, young children can learn and practice perspective-taking and empathy, all within the context of group games and social play (McElwain & Volling 2005). These benefits reinforce cognitive development as well, as developmentally younger children reap the benefits of playing with classmates who have more advanced skills.

Preschool provides key opportunities to set in place the framework on which all of these sophisticated skills are built. Teachers in inclusive classrooms can strengthen this foundation by bringing social play and activities to the forefront during classroom planning. They accomplish this by

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making sure the classroom allows for as many social opportunities as possible and that teachers are actively involved in helping children to make sense and take advantage of these opportunities. While all classrooms are inherently social communities, inclusive classrooms require teachers to think beyond creating an environment where communication can simply happen. Teachers play a critical role in helping children understand how social interactions begin and end and how to sustain them in ways that the children find meaningful and enjoyable.

Social competence in young children with special needs

In inclusive classrooms with children who function at varied developmental levels and who have unique needs, teachers can observe the impact of disabilities and risk factors (such as social isolation or limited prior experience interacting with peers) on children's social interactions. For example, conflict may arise when a child enters play disruptively because she has not yet learned other ways to join in. Alternatively, children with motor delays might miss out on opportunities to engage in group play because they need additional time to move from place to place. Any special need (including autism, developmental delays, visual or hearing impairments) can have an impact on a young child's play and early friendships, so understanding each child's strengths and needs is essential.

Recognizing strengths and needs. Do not assume that all children with a particular special need will look and behave in the same ways. For example, a developmental delay might affect a young child's frequency of play with peers, his physical ability to join rough-and-tumble play, or the ways in which he reacts to frustration in play. For another child with a developmental delay, however, peer relationships might actually be an area of strength. Children with all types of special needs hold the potential to learn social skills, experience friendship, and grow in their social competence. Supportive social environments set the stage for strengths-based teaching and learning; the next step is to observe and collect information about the social interactions of all the children in the group.

Encouraging social interactions. A clear picture of the social world of the classroom allows teachers to identify those social situations in which children with special needs might need support to navigate successfully. One of these situations is social rejection, which has been consistently noted in research on preschoolers in inclusive programs (e.g., Webster-Stratton & Reid 2003; Odom et al. 2006). Young children with disabilities tend to play with others less frequently and have fewer conversations than their peers who do not have disabilities; they may also lose social skills more quickly if the skills they do have are not used consistently and successfully, reinforced by teachers, or acknowledged by peers. This means that children with special needs might have fewer natural opportunities to develop their social skills. Inclusive educators can open the door to early friendships that not only transcend special needs, but also endure beyond preschool by proactively addressing social readiness.

For example, Alexis is a 3-year-old with cognitive, motor, and communication delays associated with Down syndrome. In comparison to other children, Alexis needs significantly more peer interactions to learn an important skill (such as imitating and expanding on a peer's play). If

Use Observation to Determine . . .

- Each child's current social skills
- Areas of strength and growth for all children
- Children's individual interests
- Times when each child is most likely to interact with peers
- The level of inclusion for each child during play, especially the inclusion of children with special needs
- Each child's ability to initiate interactions and to respond to the initiations of others
- Where and when conflicts occur most frequently
- Whether any child is being socially rejected

Teachers Create Supportive Social Environments When They . . .

- Design learning centers that create small-group social environments
- Are socially competent play partners, modeling what play conversations sound like
- Model play that includes children with special needs
- Provide open-ended materials (blocks, clothing for dramatic play, natural materials) that stimulate conversation
- Encourage children to engage with each other and ask questions
- Keep a strong presence during center time, offering problem-solving assistance as necessary
- Assist with children's diverse ways of initiating play with one another
- Incorporate activities that allow children in inclusive classrooms to get to know each other—circle time songs and activities that emphasize friendship, children's names, and their similarities and differences
she has only half the opportunities because she is frequently in situations where she is isolated or rejected, then her social development may hit a roadblock. This scenario illustrates one example of why children with disabilities may have fewer friendships than their peers. Teachers can minimize roadblocks such as these by focusing attention on young children's interests, strengths, and typical interaction patterns. They then use this information to select themes, materials, and activities that are accessible to every child. Knowing a lot about Alexis’s disability provides little guidance; however, knowing that she likes to talk about dogs and spends most of her free time at the art center allows for thoughtful planning of interactive experiences in which teachers can positively guide play and conversation.

**Reviewing IEPs.** The answers to some questions may be found in a child’s Individualized Education Program (IEP). From preschool on, every child who has special needs must have an IEP, developed by a multidisciplinary team of professionals (including the teacher and caregivers) with input from the child’s family, that outlines the child’s current functioning across all developmental domains, as well as needs and strengths. The IEP also lays out individualized goals and strategies for achieving those goals (IDEA 2004). However, while a child’s IEP should identify any needed goals for development of social skills, young children may achieve those goals more quickly than anticipated. Furthermore, an IEP cannot always take into account all of the varied opportunities for a preschooler to work on social skills throughout the program day. Careful observation must focus on the here and now to identify areas of strength and difficulty, and document children’s progress toward achieving their goals. Peer relationships provide perhaps the best indicator of this progress (Odom et al. 2006).

**Teachers can minimize roadblocks by focusing attention on young children’s interests, strengths, and typical interaction patterns.**

**Seeking explanations.** When observing and assessing young children, it is helpful to look beyond social behaviors and seek explanations for what we see. Two children might use the same behavior—for example, failing to respond to other children’s play invitations—for very different reasons. As an illustration, Ms. Renee observes that Kenny takes several minutes to respond when Foster asks to share his blocks. Rather than stopping the observation to insist that he share, Ms. Renee continues to observe so she can collect
### Addressing Social Competence Concerns

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Social competence concerns</th>
<th>Some possible explanations</th>
<th>Things to keep in mind when assessing the situation</th>
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| Tari (age 4) tends to enter play disruptively, often bumping into other children and knocking over their toys. | Tari might not understand what’s expected when asking to join in other children’s play.  
She might need a high level of sensory stimulation in play to maintain her alertness and interest. | Behaviors such as these are not always signs of aggression. Sometimes they indicate that a child is not aware of the feelings and perspectives of other children. Is Tari at a developmental stage where she should be aware of the feelings and perspectives of others? |
| Marcus (age 3½) hesitates or fails to respond to most play invitations, although he appears interested. | Marcus might not understand or recognize these as invitations to play.  
He might not hear what other children are saying.  
He might need additional time to respond.  
He might be a child who is typically shy or slow to join in. | Try to observe Marcus in several situations with different play partners.  
Difficulties with hearing, understanding, and responding each require a different strategy. |
| Naomi (age 5) prefers solo, parallel play over cooperative play. She spends the majority of her choice time painting or molding with clay. | Naomi might be shy or anxious around peers.  
She may simply prefer solitary play.  
Some children may need an adult to bridge the gap between parallel and cooperative play and spark their interest in social activity. | Avoid jumping to conclusions. Solo play is developmentally appropriate for preschoolers. It can be purposeful, exploratory, and creative—in other words, not a concern at all. Concerns arise when play seems anxious, repetitive, or purposeless. For example, a child who shows consistent interest in art materials should raise no concern; however, if a child simply bangs markers on the table without ever exploring their possibilities, then a closer look is warranted. |
| Leo and Carmen (4-year-olds who do not have special needs) share the gross motor play space with their classmates, but seem to engage in few actual conversations with children who have language delays or impairments. | Children with language delays/impairments are likely to converse less.  
Some children are unfamiliar with play-related conversation. | Play opportunities should encourage ongoing conversation. It can help to offer open-ended materials and sufficient time in areas such as the sand table and building blocks. These will encourage a variety of types of exploratory play that may be observed, assessed, and supported. |
| JC (age 4½) tends to follow his friends in play, rather than taking on the role of leader. | Children who are developmentally advanced often make a strong impression as leaders and models for less advanced peers. The less advanced peer might not be motivated to or see a way to take the lead.  
How much is known about JC’s interests and play behaviors outside of school?  
Is JC comfortable and familiar with the classroom? | Not every child is a leader in play, and few children lead all of the time. Support children’s growing competence, comfort, and problem solving in play situations by acknowledging their emerging competence and building their self-esteem. This still does not necessarily mean that every child has to “take charge.” |
Teaching strategies to increase social competence

- Write and illustrate a Social Story™ to help Tari learn the steps, language, and feelings that may be involved in choosing and approaching other children to play with in a learning center.
- Schedule a planning time when children state their play ideas and choose partners before moving to learning centers.
- Model how to respond when invited to play; make sure to provide Marcus with other opportunities to play with his classmates throughout the day (such as supporting his conversations and interactions with playmates during mealtimes and exploration of centers).
- Consider the kind of language preschoolers must be able to use and understand in order to invite potential playmates and respond to their invitations.
- Practice communication skills with children. Do not assume they know how to initiate and sustain conversation on a shared topic.
- Use parallel play with Naomi’s preferred toys as a starting point for engaging her.
- Encourage peers across the spectrum of social competence to play together.
- Join children as a play partner; model the kinds of phrases and questions children can use during a conversation. Respond to and expand on children’s comments and questions.
- Ensure that the language needs of all children are addressed and that dual language learners are provided enough support. For example, label materials with multiple languages and images and help children communicate with one another during play.
- Offer a descriptive commentary that acknowledges when children do take a leadership role.
- Offer games and activities in response to a child’s interests so that he feels more comfortable and competent taking a leadership role in play.

Evidence-based preschool social competence interventions often involve teacher-led social skills activities followed by positive guidance during play. In other words, using a variety of strategies, teachers...
help children to learn and master the skills, including offering support during the times when children have natural opportunities to use them. In some cases, teachers may directly teach social behaviors (such as greetings or requests for toys) and then follow up with guidance during play. For example, at circle time Ms. Leon and the children sing a new song about inviting others to play. She then follows the children to the learning centers, watches and listens as some children try this new behavior, and supports children who are playing alone or who seem ready to learn to invite a friend to join them. Some children might respond to a prompt; others might need Ms. Leon to model what to say and do: “Hannah, when you finish your puzzle would you like to play a game with me?”

**Teachers must maintain an openness to learning about each child’s culture, key relationships, and life outside the classroom.**

Strategies for teaching children social skills can include direct lessons, songs, group activities, or simply joint play. Ms. Lynne, for instance, models skills such as requesting, questioning, commenting, and sharing while partnering with children in pretend play in the dramatic play area. She takes advantage of these natural opportunities, acknowledging children when they use these behaviors (“Marlee is sharing the pans with Tina very nicely”), and helping children with special needs to respond positively (“Anthony would like to eat with us. How can we find out what he would like to eat?”). Everyday routines such as meals and snack times also provide natural opportunities to address social skills. Children can practice social skills such as greeting, turn taking, questioning and responding, requesting, and saying thank you. In inclusive classrooms, teachers emphasize as many of these natural opportunities as possible, supplementing them with more explicit lessons or activities when needed (Sainato et al. 2008). The table titled “Addressing Social Competence Concerns” (pp. 22–23) provides several more examples of these activities as they relate to specific concerns teachers might have regarding young children with special needs.

**The big picture: Social competence and young children’s worlds**

Efforts to teach social skills and increase social competence may be more successful when teachers know how they relate to each child’s overall social-emotional development. Young children’s relationships extend far beyond the walls of the classroom, so it is essential to consider not only play-related social skills, but also cognitive and language capabilities, as well as individual personalities.

Cultural factors play an enormous role in social development. They may also explain many of the differences in children’s styles of interactions. Consider what social behaviors are valued and encouraged in each child’s family and community. What skills does the child need to succeed at home? On the playground? With playmates outside of school? Teachers must maintain an openness to learning about each child’s culture, key relationships, and life outside the classroom through collaboration with family members. These collaborations broaden the view of children’s strengths to include the unique assets of families and communities.

Families can be successfully included in social competence interventions. Keep them informed about work on social competence in the classroom and solicit their input, finding out how they address social skills at home. Consistency between home and school routines can be especially beneficial for children with special needs. Collaborating with families also represents an essential component of addressing the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse young children with special needs. Teachers use what they learn to better understand the meaning of children’s social behavior not only in the classroom but in light of each family’s perspectives, communication, and interaction style (Gonzalez-Mena 2008). This understanding, in turn, enhances the responsiveness of their teaching to each family’s and child’s needs.

**Stick with it**

To succeed in kindergarten, children need not only basic academic skills, but also well-developed social skills (Missall & Hojnoski 2007). Addressing the social competence and interaction skills of young children is an ongoing process that involves continuous planning, teaching, assessment, and reflection throughout the year. Implementing more targeted strategies might take a few days to a few weeks, but creating a positive inclusive environment requires teach...
ers to establish a foundation and then collaborate, plan, teach, observe, and reflect consistently throughout the year. Keep in mind that success in one area is not the end of the story! For instance, when a teacher is successful in getting children to initiate play more often, play initiations will increase but so might conflict. Problem solving then becomes the next focus of social skill learning. When these processes are in place, teachers are much more likely to create warm, nurturing, inclusive environments that lead to meaningful, long-lasting social and academic benefits for young children.

References


