



Getting Started with a Social Skills Group

A few tips and suggestions:

Limit the number of sessions. If it goes well, you can always do another series or extend the group. Think about six meetings of an hour or less.

Don't include children who have problems with aggression. For those kids, work on the aggression until they have learned to be gentle with their bodies. Your job is to keep the kids feeling safe and provide an experience of success having fun with other kids their age. This will increase the likelihood that they will work harder to modify their behavior and be an effective player/group member in the future.

Go over the rules and make sure they can demonstrate to you that they remember and understand the rules first. Mine are Be gentle with your words and body, Do what I say, One person talks at a time, and Sit on your mat. The last rule is just for younger children who have trouble keeping their body in the group. See my video of six group sessions from start to finish at icyouvideo.com to get more specifics.

Create an agenda that is posted and reviewed at the beginning. Start with "Hello, how are you?" or for older kids "Hey, what's up?" Always have back up activities ready to go in case your plans are not working out that day for that group, or include more on the agenda than you can get done so you have options. Sometimes the kids may not be into something you try out with them. If it isn't working at all and you've given it a little time, take it up and bring out something new. I end with "Prize and Goodbye" for younger kids or snacks for older kids. Gatorades go over well. Popcorn can be put in bowls or bags and is really cheap. Make sure you know if they have any food allergies or dietary restrictions first!

If you are doing the group after school, make sure you have the parents cell phone numbers and an emergency contact just in case. One of the kids could run off or get hurt or something. So far, after 17 years and maybe a thousand kids, it has never happened to me. I have had a kid left with me and was unable to locate the parents and was glad to have a number for a grandparent who could come and get them.

For an ice-breaker at the beginning sometimes I use the "Ball-toss name-game." Make sure you have a smaller soft lightweight ball. Some of these kids have poor aim and won't grade how hard they throw well. Getting beamed in the eye by a prospective "friend" is not a good start. Also have some softer balls or other funny items ready but hidden. Tell the kids the game is starting and they say the person's name and then toss not throw the ball to them. Teach them they should make sure the target makes eye contact with them before tossing the ball. Let them go around so they all know everybody's name, then juice it up. Toss in another ball. I like to add in some goofy things like a doll and a piggy puppet. Once you get three or more objects in play, it gets really silly and disorganized, everybody laughing, objects flying everywhere, three people tossing the object to one person at the same time. Gather the objects back



before it gets too crazy, and now everybody shared a laugh and relaxed, and they know everybody's name. Look at your agenda taped to the wall or door and point to what is next as you announce the transition.

If they ever as a group want to play a game they came up with, or start having a conversation they are all engaged in that they want to have, I recommend you shut up and let them. You can save your agenda for next time.

Younger children, ages 3-8

Limit the group size to four, or if the kids are really young or disorganized, start with a dyad. Three can be awkward because when there is a choice or conflict it's two against one sometimes. Use my document "Games" to give a ready structure for success. Plan to use a behavior management system and offer prizes for appropriate effort at participation and compliance. If one of the kids withdraws, don't try to coerce or "make" them participate, focus on the kids who are trying and playing. The Superflex curriculum is also great for structuring group activity.

Board games are fine, but remember it needs to be pretty simple and for these guys moving parts are really attractive. Hi-Ho Cherry-O and some of the old school games, Don't Break the Ice, Cooties, Twister, Mouse Trap, these usually work. Newer games with batteries and sounds and movement can be fun. Especially if things fly or they get to throw something. Toss Across. Reading cards, answering questions about feelings or social skills, well, those are great but may not engage your members successfully. See the "Resources" document for more social-skill specific games, books, and curricula. You better make it fun or you're missing the point.

Older kids

9-12 These kids are usually easier to work with, require less structure, can do outside sports-type games like tag, hide 'n seek, kickball. They can usually read so a lot more board games and therapeutic games can work. Often they are not too self-conscious like pre-teens and teens, and will enjoy doing role plays and skits on video and then watching themselves, which is a great way to help them understand feedback about behavior and how they may be perceived by others. Sometimes they see it on the video, and even though adults have been telling them for years, they suddenly get it.

13-18

You never know what's going to happen with these guys. Sometimes they mesh and they just start talking and asking each other questions, and you can just sit back and let it run more like an encounter group. I think it's great when this happens. The less you say, structure, and help in a group the more they get the freedom to be themselves and be okay, explore, and learn for themselves.

Other times you get a group where nobody has anything to say, they aren't interested in anything, don't know the answers to anything, and everything is stupid. Ugh. These are tough, and can make for a long hour. I'd rather have nervous, giddy, and goofy any day. Consider that some of these kids may have had a lot of rejection in the past, and may



be used to being alone and free to play their video games all the time, and could have very low self-esteem and high discomfort being around other people. It may not have been their idea to be part of the group at all. One time I had a group like this, so I asked their parents if I could walk them to the exotic candy store seven blocks away in downtown Georgetown next time. This got their interest, I gave them money to spend, they started talking as we were walking, we had a community outing, they had to deal with the clerk and other customers in the store, they shared candy with one another and their parents. Desperate times call for desperate measures. You do what you can.

I've also showed groups like this some video clips of provocative and edgy situations in currently popular movies and then paused to ask questions that were relevant to reading, interpreting, and predicting social and emotional situations and reactions. Often you can put more kids in a group as they get older, up to eight is great. Some games will work with them like Apples to Apples, Cranium Games, Charades, Imaginiff, Moods.

The first time I wanted to do a group with older teens in private practice, I had some kids who just didn't want to come- but their parents were on board. I had the grumbling teens come in anyway and showed them the graphics and dungeon master guides that went with an old basic Dungeons and Dragons set, which you can still buy. The content was appealing enough to them that I tricked them into working and talking together, and wanting to come to group. Naturally I created foes and puzzles for them they could not possibly defeat by themselves so they had to work together, communicate, problem-solve, and cooperate to survive and get the experience points, spells, potions, gold, weapons, etc. This went so well that we just kept on meeting. The parents became friends, and eventually the two single parents married so two of the kids in the group became brothers. How about that?

Near or at the end of the group, suggest to the kids and parents that they exchange numbers for play dates. With older kids I've seen them have pizza and video games at someone's house on a friday, or meet up for paintball, younger kids a splash park or one-on-one playdate, fun stuff like that. Some of the kids may have never had someone over or didn't have anyone to invite to a birthday party before.