

NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER

CHANGING THE FACE OF CHILD MENTAL HEALTH

JANUARY 2006

This monthly newsletter provides parenting and mental health information, as well as upcoming events and programs by the NYU Child Study Center.

ASK THE EXPERT: SOCIAL SKILLS

By: Jessica Masty, M.A., and Yoni Schwab, M.S.

Q: What are social skills?

A: Social skills refer to how we get along with others – family and friends. Navigating social interactions is one of the most complex tasks that human beings do, involving many psychological systems, such as visual and auditory perception, language and problem-solving. These systems develop throughout childhood (and adulthood) based on both nature and nurture. When these systems do not function properly, social exchanges do not go smoothly. For example, a child with a language deficit has difficulty making sense of verbal social cues and communicating desires and opinions. Impulsive children often make snap decisions ending up in quarrels. Good social skills include things such as cooperating, compromising, and respecting the personal space of others.

Q: What do social skill deficits look like?

A: There are many different types of social skills deficits. Children with Autism and Asperger's Disorder tend to have deficits in understanding another person's perspectives. Children with the hyperactive and impulsive subtypes of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) tend to have poor impulse control and social problem-solving skills. Socially anxious children are overly cautious, in part due to fears of how others will think of their actions, which leads them to avoid social situations. Each of these patterns results in a vicious cycle where negative social interactions continue to foster a belief by the child, peers, and teachers that they can't get along well with others. Research shows that bad reputations are quick to be established and, unfortunately, are slow to change even after the social skills improve.

Q: What types of treatments are available for children with social skills deficits?

A: Social skills training has been used with children and adolescents in groups and on an individual basis, but the research showing significant and sustained positive changes in social skills is weak, especially in areas like ADHD. Although some children show improvements in the clinic, gains often

don't carry over to other settings like school or home.

Treatments work best when applied in real-life settings, like in the school, or when administered to the entire family. Treatments focus on communication, assertiveness, anger management, and step-by-step problem-solving, with the goal of demonstrating these skills in real-life situations. In family treatments, parents are taught to help children maintain their skills by using behavioral techniques at home, such as rewards, to reinforce getting along with others.

Q: What can you do to help your child improve his or her social skills?

A: Parents can do a lot to help their children develop good social skills, from the first year of life to adulthood:

- Model positive relationships within their own families. Kids learn a lot from what they see – with their friends, on TV, and, most of all, from their parents.
- Encourage children to identify and share their emotions – and to recognize others' emotions.
- Teach children to communicate desires assertively and without anger or whining. One way to do this is to respond to requests only if they are made in a friendly tone of voice – and to ignore them if they're not, making sure to praise the specific behaviors you like.
- Teach children how to listen to others and help them to see things from others' perspectives.
- Help practice problem-solving by reflecting on everyday social conflicts. Kids often come up with their own solutions by exploring alternatives with an adult. The parent's job is to help the child think through potential consequences of each choice, not to solve the problem for him or her!
- Help develop friendship skills by discussing ways to be a good friend and by giving children lots of practice – through play dates and other social activities.
- Be available and supportive.
- If you think your child needs additional help, speak to a mental health professional or call the Child Study Center for an evaluation at (212) 263-8916.



In addition to our clinical services for children and adolescents, the Center offers a variety of programs and services for parents, educators and mental health professionals:

- **ADHD Institute Family Education Series**
This series of workshops is designed to help parents and other family members better understand their child's diagnosis of ADHD and learn more about the most current, evidence-based treatments and interventions. For more information, call (212) 263-8915, or e-mail ADHD@AboutOurKids.org.
- **The Sunny and Abe Rosenberg Foundation Lecture Series: *Advanced Seminars for School Professionals***
This series of free professional development seminars will provide school-based practitioners updates on recent advances in children's mental health. To register, e-mail nyuschoolpartnership@med.nyu.edu or call (212) 263-2744. Upcoming lecture: Autism Spectrum Disorder, January 11, 2006.
- **About Our Kids: Parenting Workshops for parents of anxious children with tics or Tourette's Disorder.**
The goal of the workshop is to teach parents of children with tics and Tourette's to help their children cope effectively in situations that trigger anxiety. Over time, children will learn to manage and overcome their worries independently, and will no longer avoid the things that previously worried them. For more information, contact (212) 263-8916.

Current Clinical Studies:

- We are recruiting **teenagers, between 12-18 years of age, who are currently experiencing symptoms of depression** and who have attempted suicide within the past 90 days. The immediate and long-lasting benefits of three treatments are being evaluated to determine which is most effective in reducing suicidal behaviors and depressive symptoms. All study visits, evaluations, and therapy sessions are provided at **no cost**. For more information, please contact Dr. Barbara Coffey at (212) 263-3926, or Dr. Lori Evans at (212) 263-3661.
- The NYU Child Study Center is currently evaluating **children and adolescents ages 7-18 with tic disorders or Tourette's Disorder** to determine if they qualify to participate in a research study and receive specialized, professional care at **no cost**. For more information please call Rachel Shechter at (212) 263-3654.
- **Omega-3 Fatty Acids in Adolescents with Depression**
Adolescents, ages 12-17 (inclusive) with depression, are being evaluated for participation in a new NCCAM/NIH-funded study conducted by Vilma Gabbay, M.D. This study examines the efficacy of fish oil (omega-3 fatty acids) in the treatment of adolescent Major Depressive Disorder (MDD). For more information, please contact Beth Rabinovitz at (212) 263-3654, or email beth.rabinovitz@med.nyu.edu.

Events Calendar

New Mothers: New Lives

*Educational Support Group for New Mothers
Open to mothers and babies, 0-9months*

When: Thursdays

Continuous Open Enrollment

Where: NYU Child Study Center

577 First Avenue

Multipurpose Room

Time: 1:00-2:15 pm

Contact: (212) 263-3927

ADHD Parenting Workshops

*ADHD's "relatives": Oppositional Defiant Disorder
and Anxiety*

When: January 12, 2006

Where: NYU Child Study Center

577 First Avenue

Time: 6:00-7:30 pm

Cost: \$15 per family

Contact: (212) 263-8696

Sunny and Abe Rosenberg Foundation Lecture Series

Autism Spectrum Disorder

When: Wednesday, January 11, 2006

Where: NYU Child Study Center

215 Lexington Avenue

Time: 4:15 pm-6:30 pm

Cost: Free

Contact: (212) 263-2744

Sunny and Abe Rosenberg Foundation Lecture Series

Classroom Interventions for Children with ADHD

When: Wednesday, February 8, 2006

Where: The Dalton School

108 East 89th Street

Time: 4:15 pm -6:30 pm

Cost: Free

Contact: (212) 263-2744

For more information on Child Study Center events, please visit AboutOurKids.org