

# Teach friendship skills

## Practice brief

### The practice

Teachers build friendship skills by providing systematic instruction in play and social skills coupled with multiple opportunities for practice.

### How does it help?

Some students on the autism spectrum may benefit from systematic instruction in the play and social skills required to initiate, build, and maintain friendships with their peers. Teachers can build friendship skills by providing systematic instruction in targeted play and social skills and by providing multiple opportunities for practice across activities, routines, and transitions. This use of embedded instruction enables teachers to both explicitly teach as well as provide opportunities for students to learn and practice friendship skills. Embedding also reduces the stigma associated with individualised instruction, as the strategy can be used with all students in the classroom. Social skills training (SST) is an established and effective practice when used with students on the spectrum. SST usually includes instruction on basic concepts, role-playing or practice, and feedback, to help students acquire and practice communication, play, or social skills which promote positive interactions with peers. SST fosters social skills in all students, including those with strengths in this area.

### What is it?

- Friendship skills are skills used by individuals to initiate and maintain social interactions.
- Embedded instruction is a strategy that can be used to scaffold and support student interactions. It comprises multiple, brief teaching interactions between a teacher and student during everyday classroom activities.

### How does it work?

Teachers explicitly teach play and social skills to students using SST, by embedding opportunities for practicing social interaction within a wide variety of activities, routines, and transitions. Student's strengths and interests are taken into consideration when teaching friendship skills. For example, if a student has a passion for trains they are more likely to engage with an activity and other students. Teachers embed opportunities within routines to enable transitions. For example, students have opportunities to interact with peers when handing out resources. When developing a SST program teachers should begin by collecting data on their students about their current level of play and social skills. This data is then used to inform planning to develop a learning sequence which builds student play and social skills. Teachers do this by providing instruction on basic concepts, facilitating role-playing or practice, and providing instructional feedback. The aim of SST programs is to develop the communication, play, and social skills that will enable students to interact more effectively with their peers.



## How do I do it?

- Establish which play and social skills students already have, and the ones that they need to develop, by collecting data.
- Develop a learning sequence which systematically teaches the identified play and social skills.
- Provide instruction and opportunities for practice in relation to these identified skills across activities, routines, and transitions.

## It works better if:

- social skill instruction is personalised, targeted, and useful to individual students
- wherever possible skills are practiced in both home and school environments in order to foster generalisation of skills.

## It doesn't work if:

- the play and social skills selected for teaching and limited to those the teacher considers important
- instruction does not provide opportunities for generalisation.

## How will I know if it's working?

- The frequency of student interactions increases.

## Where can I go to find out more?

- Tony Attwood: "Understanding and Teaching Friendship Skills" <http://bit.ly/2tgzeb7>
- Indiana Resource Center for Autism: "Making (and Keeping) Friends: A Model for Social Skills Instruction" <http://bit.ly/2ufqGkx>
- Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center: "Systematic Instruction Practices" [http://ectacenter.org/~pdfs/decrp/PG\\_Ins\\_SystematicInstr\\_practitioners\\_print.pdf](http://ectacenter.org/~pdfs/decrp/PG_Ins_SystematicInstr_practitioners_print.pdf)

## Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST)

Implementing this practice will meet the following Australian Professional Standards for Teachers:

- 1.6 - Strategies to support full participation of students with disability
- 3.2 - Plan, structure and sequence learning programs
- 4.1 - Support student participation

