Pro-Social Skills Prepare Children for Life-Long Success

Success in school and life depend on a person’s ability to interact with others in a positive manner. Social and emotional IQ are more important predictors for long term success than is intellectual IQ.

Every child needs to learn pro-social skills – people skills. Positive social skills are more likely to help kids stay in school, out of trouble and find success as adults. Parents want their child to be well-liked, have friends and find success in school.

However, teachers note the lack of pro-social skills in students of every age. Business leaders worry as they see increasing numbers of high school graduates who lack adequate social skills vital for entry-level jobs.

Negative and anti-social behaviors put children at risk for:
- Losing friends,
- Feeling isolated and sad,
- Losing control,
- Harming himself or others,
- Being punished at home and at school,
- Failing in school, and
- Developing emotional problems that may last a lifetime.

Busy parents feel the stress of jobs, chores, activities and their child’s school activities. It is easy to ignore their child’s negative behavior – hoping it will just go away. Instead, parents often see the behavior get worse.

In his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Successful Families*, Stephen Covey reminds parents to “begin with the end in mind.” Ask yourself, “How do I want my child to behave – now and as an adult?” Then, decide what you can teach your child in order to meet this vision.

Parents can change negative behaviors and teach skills for success. It requires time and commitment. The principles are quite simple. Lessons must be taught daily.

This booklet gives reasons, steps, activities and tips for teaching pro-social skills. Use other resources like the Skillstreaming books by Ellen McGinnis and Arnold Goldstein. Search the Internet for ideas on pro-social skill-building.

Children want good feelings, friendships and success — the results of pro-social skills. Start teaching your child the skills that will be useful throughout life.
Why Teach Social Skills

Pro-social behaviors are essential to a child’s health and well-being.

Students who fail to relate to peers and adapt to school routines cannot reach their full potential. It affects their ability to think and learn. Studies show that kids with poor social skills become adults with high-risk problems.

Prosocial behaviors help kids interact with others in effective ways. Everyday kids deal with peers, events and problems. Sharing, helping, cooperating, and empathy help children deal with day-to-day events in ways that are helpful, not harmful.

Children have a basic need to connect to others – parents, teachers, and peers. Positive social skills help them make and keep friends. Friends provide support during times of stress and are important part of being resilient.

Children with social challenges often feel rejection. Prosocial skills, like being helpful and willing to share, help them fit-in. Kids like other kids who are nice and kind.

Prosocial skills also enable children to be accepting of others - who are shy, mentally ill or have special needs. Empathy helps them consider how other children feel.

Children who are bullies, targets or bystanders benefit from learning pro-social skills. These positive skills help kids with words, gestures and the self-esteem needed to stop bullying behavior.

Pro-social skills must be taught. A preschooler’s social skills can actually predict grade school academic success. Children should first learn positive social skills in the home. Caregivers and educators also play a role as children watch, listen and learn.
A parent-child bond is the basis for teaching and learning pro-social skills.

Parents start building this bond at birth by meeting a child’s physical and emotional needs. Kids of all ages need food, sleep, safety, attention and loving care. This care earns a child’s love and trust. As a result, a child wants to please a parent or caregiver.

Bad behavior is often an attempt to get basic needs met. Other times, it is repeating what has been seen and heard. It can also be a lack of pro-social skills.

Children learn pro-social skills through:

- **Watching and listening.** Children do and say what they see and hear.
- **Chance teaching.** Adult use teachable moments to develop skills.
- **Experiences with social rules and peer responses.** Children develop skills, both good and bad, through play and by being with others.
- **Discipline.** Firm, fair and consistent rules and consequences – teach.
- **Pro-social skill lessons.** Parents can teach and help their child practice new, positive social skills.

Watching and Listening.

Adults model behavior — even when they think their children are not watching and listening. Do your words and actions convey love and respect? Do they teach behavior that you want your child to repeat? When you notice a problem behavior in your child, ask yourself, “Does my child see this behavior at home, in school or at daycare?”

Everyone can take steps to make positive changes. Make your home a place of love, respect and acceptance. Work on positive behavior changes until they become a habit.

**Chance Teaching.**

Use daily activities and events to teach. During play, TV time and story time — teach your child positive values and skills.

- Observe her with other children. Later, talk about actions and words that make friends and hurt people.
- Praise his positive behavior.
- Redirect her as you see bad behavior about to start.
- Ignore negative behavior if he and others are safe. Noting bad behavior rewards the child with attention.
- Teach through small talk instead of lectures. Make your point as you discuss sports, a book, TV show, or a current event. Keep it light and friendly.

Learning Social Rules Through Peer Responses.

Kids learn what pleases and hurts others through play.

- Find a play group for your toddler.
- Enroll your child in a pre-school program.
- Invite your child’s friends to play or hang-out in your home.
Discipline with Love

Discipline is from the Latin word disciple – to teach and train.

Firm, fair and consistent rules and consequences teach. Discipline should always be a teaching moment.

Think about your style of parenting. Are you strict or permissive? Do you provide limits? What happens if your child breaks rules? Is your discipline fair? Is your discipline consistent?

Discipline starts when your child becomes mobile – crawling and walking. Establish rules. Expect your child to follow them. Update rules as your child grows and develops.

Find a parenting style that trains and teaches — notpunishes the child. One such discipline is Parenting with Love and Logic by Faye and Cline.

Common Discipline Mistakes

- Correct a child in public.
- Criticize the child instead of the behavior.
- Bribe a child or make threats.
- Say “People won’t like you.”
- Discuss a child’s weaknesses.
- Exclude a child.
- React personally, feeling hurt or attacked when your child misbehaves.
- Withhold love and affection.
- Give in one time - punish another.
- Discuss past mistakes.

Discipline Actions That Teach

- Discuss the issue with him in private.
- Remember, the child is good; the behavior is bad.
- Teach a skill instead — how she should act.
- Tell him what behavior people like.
- Discuss her strengths.
- Let him learn by doing.
- Show empathy — say you are sorry your child is upset.
- Tell your child you love him and know he can do better.
- Be consistent.
- Focus on the present behavior.

In Parenting with Love and Logic:

- Outcomes of an action do the teaching. If a student fails a test, the grade and week off the basketball team teaches him to study harder the next time.
- Empathy, feeling bad for the child’s hurt, lets the child know you love her.

A teaching discipline avoids yelling and anger. Yelling stresses kids. It shuts down their ability to think and problem-solve a situation. Without thinking and problem-solving, a child cannot learn from his mistake.

When your child makes a mistake, support him as he learns from his mistake. Let him know that you believe he can do better next time.
Children who recognize their own feelings and the feelings of others are more likely to live content lives.

Empathy training helps a child learn to recognize feelings – hers and others. The ability to see situations from different points of view is an important life lesson. Parents help their child develop empathy.

Use daily events to teach your child to:

• Make eye contact with others. Look at the other person’s face when talking.

• Notice how people feel. Does this person look sad?

• Label feelings. Help your child put a name to his and others’ feelings – sad, angry, surprised.

• Calm herself and control her impulses. Let your soothing words be an example of positive self-talk. Be gentle and loving as you teach these skills.

• Respond to others. Teach him words like: “Thank you.” – “How are you?” – “I am great, thanks.”

Teach Kids to Care for Others

Be a good role model. Patiently teach by example using daily life events.

• Show caring and compassion – everyday. Be kind.

• Empathize with your child and family.

• Point out situations that call for empathy.

• Praise loving, caring behavior that your child shows others.

Use and Teach I Statements.

I-statements focus on the importance of feelings. They are a self-awareness tool.

Tell your child how you feel by using I-messages. For example, instead of yelling; “That’s it, you are grounded!” - tell him how you feel. “I was worried when I could not find you. Please tell me where you are going so I won’t worry.” With this statement, your child now knows that you worry about him.

Teach your child to use I-statements. Instead of hitting in anger, teach him to use words to express his feelings. For example, “I feel mad when you……...”

Empathy Training Tool — H.E.A.R.S.

H. Hold a strong body posture — stand tall. Respect others’ personal space.

E. Make Eye contact. Look at the other person’s face as you talk and listen.

A. Assess the other person’s feelings. Are they happy? Sad? Angry?

R. Respond to the other person’s feelings with your facial expression — scared, angry, happy or sad.

S. Say the person’s feelings in your own words. “You must be angry.”
Use Skill-Building to Stop Bad Behavior

Stress often leads to mishandling a child’s bad behavior.

People feel stress when they are unable to manage demands in their life. Some stress is normal. In small amounts, it helps us learn to manage and cope. When faced with the same situation again, we feel less stress because we know how to effectively act.

Chronic stress, however, impairs the body’s natural response to stress – to react and recover. It affects the way parents feel and react to situations. It can lead to yelling and negative actions – in the moment. Parents feel a loss of control.

Children who display negative behavior need new skills that help them deal with conflict and learn self-control. Parents and other adults in care giving roles can effectively teach these new skills that encourage a more positive behavior.

Parents who use and teach positive problem-solving skills generally experience less parental stress. Take action to change your child’s negative behavior through skill-building. Model and teach positive social and behavior skills.

Informal Skill-Building Lessons — Teachable Moments.

When your child exhibits bad behavior, use these 6 steps to teach your child another way to act.

1. Point out the bad behavior, in private, without judgement. “You hit Sally.”
2. Ask your child why he behaved badly. Ask if he can tell you how he feels. If he cannot explain his feelings, give him words that might explain how he feels. “You are mad because Sally took your truck.”
3. Validate his feelings. “I would be mad too.”
4. State your rule. “We do not hit.”
5. Teach empathy. “How do you think Sally felt after you hit her? Hitting hurts.”
6. Teach a different reaction – behavior. Ask what else he could have done to get his truck back. Give him some suggestions.

Formal Skill-Building Lessons – Role-Playing Pro-Social Skills

Give skill-building equal time with learning sports, dance, music and art. Find time to formally teach pro-social skills.

- Choose a skill that addresses a problem behavior or prepares your child for an upcoming event.
- Teach and model the skill or behavior you want your child to display. Keep the steps simple. Do not assume your child knows what to do.

Basic Skill Rehearsal Steps

1. Select the problem or skill you want to learn.
2. Think of several ways to handle the situation – how to speak or act. What are your choices?
3. Choose the best action or response to a situation.
How to Use Role-Playing to Teach Pro-Social Skills

Experts agree that there is a process by which children develop pro-social skills.

If children are to develop pro-social behavior they need the ability to:

1. Know that they can make things happen – both positive and negative,
2. Empathize with others, and
3. Perform a specific skill.

Role-playing and providing feedback are excellent ways to teach specific social skills. Role-playing can be done one-on-one or in a group setting. The steps are simple and can be used to teach the use of hundreds of pro-social skills.

Skill Steps for Role-Playing

Before beginning role playing, review the H.E.A.R.S. tool on page 5. Then:

1. Select the problem or skill you want to teach.
2. Assign roles. At first, you play the role of your child. Your child can play the other role.
3. Talk about several ways to handle a situation. Let your child choose the one he wants to try.
4. Role-play the skill steps.
5. Then, let your child do the role-lay.
6. Give one-on-one feedback, did it work or not work? You want to teach – not embarrass your child. Choose your words carefully. Try several role-plays. You and your child can pick the best option.

A Role-playing Example: How to Take Turns

In this role-play the teacher asks a question and your child knows the answer.

1. Think about the class rule for answering questions. What did the teacher tell you about answering questions?
2. Raise your hand.
3. Wait for the teacher to call on you. While you wait, think to yourself, “Everyone wants a turn to answer. It may not be my turn. I may need to wait.”
4. Answer the question if the teacher calls your name.
5. If your name is not called, put your hand down. Raise your hand if you know the answer to next question your teacher asks.

You can find many role-playing ideas in the Skillstreaming books by McGinnis and Goldstein as well as on Internet sites. You can also make your own Skill-Building Manual. Select the skills your child needs. Write the steps needed to teach the specific skill. Practice the skill using the Skill Steps for Role-Playing.

Role-Playing Ideas

- You are a new student at school.
- A student trips on your foot that is sticking out in the aisle.
- You want to go to a friend’s house to play.
- Your aunt gives you a birthday present.
- Someone says hurtful words to you.
- Your child’s friend broke your child’s toy.
- You are afraid to sing or speak in front of other people.
- Saying please and thank you.
- How to stay out of a fight.
- How to respond after losing a game.
Monitor Your Child’s Progress

You can monitor your child’s progress by using a Skill Chart like the one below. Teach one skill each week. Practice it until it becomes a habit. Once your child learns and uses the skill, place a check in the box. Start a new skill.

- Listening
- Taking turns.
- Asking for help.
- Introducing yourself.
- Saying thank you.
- Starting a conversation.
- Asking a question.
- Giving and following instructions.
- Cooperating.
- Sharing.
- Dealing with conflict.
- Understanding others’ feelings.
- Dealing with peer pressure.
- Dealing with fear.
- Asking permission.
- Being a good sport.
- Avoiding trouble with others.
- Using self-control.
- Dealing with failure.
- Setting a goal.
- Making decisions.
- Dealing with an accusation.
- Giving a compliment.
- Apologizing
- Dealing with anger – yours and others.
- Expressing affection.
- Dealing with embarrassment.
- Being patient.

Using a skill chart can be especially helpful as you teach new positive skills to replace negative skills. The chart allows your child to see progress. Keep skills fresh by reviewing skills your child has already mastered. When you notice bad behavior, review the skill steps that lead to a more positive outcome.

### Examples of Skills that Solve Problem Behaviors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem Behaviors</th>
<th>Skills to Learn</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Screaming when he cannot reach his favorite toy.</td>
<td>Use <em>please</em> and <em>thank you</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demanding — “give me”</td>
<td>Ask for help.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yelling — “that’s mine”</td>
<td>How to share.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whining — “I want a cookie before dinner.”</td>
<td>How to wait.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hurting someone.</td>
<td>How to deal with angry feelings. Say I am sorry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of control yelling.</td>
<td>Dealing with angry feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interrupting or insisting on doing it now.</td>
<td>Accept <em>no</em> as an answer.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Credits and Resources: *The PREPARE Curriculum* (Goldstein), *Parenting with Love and Logic* (Faye and Cline), *Skillstreaming* (McGinnis and Goldstein), *7 Habits of Highly Successful Families* (Covey), *The Forgotten HALF Revisited* (S. Halperin)