

SPECIAL EDUCATION UPDATE

December was a very busy month in the Pupil Personnel Services office! I am pleased to announce that we have three new hires in the special education department: Ms. Susan Ryder, Special Educator for 8th grade; Ms. Ashley Sliwa, Special Educator for 4th and 6th grades, and Mr. Stephen Nappi, Behavior Intervention Classroom Teacher. We are very excited to have them join us as they bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to our district!



We are also pleased to announce that the Full Day Preschool Classroom at Quarry Hill Community School will be starting on Monday, January 23, 2017. Ms. Samantha Mangano will be the classroom teacher for the Full Day Preschool Classroom. We look forward to meeting our new preschool students!



MONSON SPECIAL EDUCATION PARENT ADVISORY COUNCIL (MSEPAC)

The MSEPAC will be meeting on March 7th from 6:00-8:00 pm in the School Committee Room at Quarry Hill Community School. Linda Surprenant, Western Regional Parent Coordinator from Family TIES of Massachusetts, will be providing a workshop for parents called, "Let's Get Organized." Parents will receive the tools to organize their child's medical and school records, prepare for emergencies, participate in community programs, and network with other parents.

Seats are limited for this event. If you are interested in attending, please RSVP to Holly Lynch, PAC President, at monsonpac@gmail.com by Friday, Tuesday, January 31, 2017.

TOPIC OF THE MONTH: LEARNING DIFFICULTIES AND SOCIAL SKILLS: WHAT'S THE CONNECTION?

Kristin Stanberry, the writer and editor specializing in parenting, education, and consumer health/wellness issues, wrote the following article. Her areas of expertise include learning disabilities and AD/HD, which she wrote about extensively for Schwab Learning and Great Schools.

Learning disabilities affect more than academics. From reading to relationships, LD can create challenges.

Most of us understand that kids who have learning difficulties struggle with academics. What many parents and educators don't realize is that having a learning problem can also impair a child's social skills and prevent him from having successful relationships with family members, peers, and other adults. The extent and impact on social skills varies with the child, depending on his basic [temperament](#) and the nature of his learning problem. Getting along with others is as important as getting along in school, so it's critical for kids with learning issues to develop good social skills (social competence).

What is social competence?

[Social competence](#) refers to a person's interpersonal skills with family, friends, acquaintances, and authority figures, such as teachers and coaches. Here's how two noted learning experts describe social competence:

"Social competence refers to those skills necessary for effective interpersonal functioning. They include both verbal and nonverbal behaviors that are socially valued and are likely to elicit a positive response from others."

- Betty Osman, Ph.D.

"Social skills are all the things that we should say and do when we interact with people. They are specific abilities that allow a person to perform competently at particular social tasks."

- Michele Novatni, Ph.D.

How do learning difficulties affect social competence?

If a child has a learning problem, such as a language processing disorder, he may have difficulty understanding what another person says or means. He might also have trouble expressing his ideas in speech. Either of these problems can interfere with interpersonal communication.

A child who has Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD) may be inattentive, impulsive, hyperactive - or any combination of these. If he's inattentive, he may have a hard time paying close attention to other people's speech and behavior; his mind may wander, or his attention will be drawn to something else going on nearby. If he's impulsive and/or hyperactive, he may interrupt others when they're speaking and may find it difficult to wait his turn. While such a child doesn't behave this way on purpose, others will likely be frustrated or offended by his behavior.

The three elements of social interaction

Before you assess your own child's social skills, it's helpful to think of social interaction as consisting of three basic elements:

- **Social Intake** - noticing and understanding other people's speech, vocal inflection, body language, eye contact, and even cultural behaviors.
- **Internal Process** - interpreting what others communicate to you as well as recognizing and managing your own emotions and reactions.
- **Social Output** - how a person communicates with and reacts to others, through speech, gestures, and body language.

Social intake: Reading social cues

Social interactions require a child to interpret, or "read," what other people communicate. Picking up on spoken and unspoken cues is a complex process. A child with learning problems may misread the meaning or moods of others. Janet Giler, Ph.D., outlines three potential problem areas for such kids:

- Inability to read facial expressions or body language (kinesics)
- Misinterpreting the use and meaning of pitch (vocalics)
- Misunderstanding the use of personal space (proxemics)

If your child struggles with these issues, ask yourself if his particular learning difficulty could be causing the problem. Is he inattentive or easily distracted when dealing with others? Does he have a hard time grasping what other people say to him?

Internal process: Making sense of it all

Having read another person's social cues, a child must next process the information, extract meaning, and decide how to respond effectively. Thomas Brown, Ph.D., calls this ability "emotional intelligence" which he explains "is a form of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor feelings and emotions in self and others; discriminate among feelings; and use this information to guide thinking and action."

If your child misses or misinterprets another person's words, meaning, or mood, he'll end up processing incorrect or incomplete information. This can lead him to inaccurate conclusions and inappropriate reactions. And if your child is impulsive, he may react before processing all the social cues and deciding on an appropriate response.

It's difficult to observe exactly how your own child processes social cues internally. But if you're concerned about how his internal "gears" process social data, you might gently probe by asking him how and why he decided to respond to someone in a particular manner.

Social output: Responding to others

After a child interprets and internalizes social cues from other people, he then responds. This behavior, social output, is easy to observe. But it can be painful or frustrating to watch if the child's response isn't appropriate.

Inappropriate responses can take many forms. If the child didn't understand a question or comment, his response may seem silly (such as nervous giggling) or unintelligent (an irrelevant answer). Another child may overreact with **angry words** or actions. Finally, if a child has really tuned out, he might not react at all, even when a response is required or expected from him. Understandably, such responses can cause problems and confusion with family members, friends, classmates, and teachers.

Teaching social skills: How parents can help

If you realize your child's learning difficulty is **hampering his social interactions**, there are many ways you can guide him toward better social skills. Try practicing the three R's: Provide social skills instruction that is **relevant**, deals with **real-life**, and delivered in **real-time**. That means watching for teachable moments to coach your child in his interactions with others and doing so right away (or soon after). **Focus on specific behaviors. Offer prompts before your child acts, and praise him for positive interactions.** Additional suggestions:

- **Model appropriate behavior** when you interact with your child and other people.
- **Encourage role playing.** Help your child rehearse his behavior in "pretend" situations. With your guidance, he can practice and improve specific social skills. He'll then be better prepared to apply those skills in real-life situations.
- **Promote generalization.** Help your child learn how and when to apply specific social skills to different situations. For example, once he learns to take turns playing a game with his sister, help him relate that to waiting his turn in line at the ice cream store.

Social competence builds confidence

Kids with learning problems are at risk for low self-esteem. Helping them become socially competent can go a long way to bolster their self-confidence. Furthermore, a child with good social skills will have an easier time advocating for himself - whether he's asking a teacher for specific help or deflecting teasing from a classmate. We all face social situations around the clock - at home, school, and in other settings. Helping your child overcome his social challenges is a gift he will benefit from throughout his life.

Other resources on social competence:

<http://www.healthofchildren.com/S/Social-Competence.html>

<http://www.ldonline.org/article/6169/>

<http://www.pbs.org/wholechild/parents/getting.html>

Wishing you and your family a Happy New Year!

Sincerely,

Suzanne Morneau

Director of Pupil Personnel Services