3

Socializing with Support

Using Social Coaches

Social skills might be best understood as access and navigation skills . . . they are how we acquire desirables and avoid negatives by successfully navigating (and manipulating) the world around us. They are complex, multilayered skills that are bound by both content and context.

Peter Gerhardt (2008)

Social coaches provide the experiential opportunities to produce improved generalization of skills as well as individualized feedback and support. They initiate the practice activities and provide a social role model. In addition, coaches create a feeling of peer acceptance, which is a critical element in improving self-esteem in this population.

Prior to the implementation of coaches in this program in 2005, participants were given homework to reinforce the skills discussed in class. Activities such as initiating conversations and observing nonverbal communication occurred outside the classroom. However, many of the participants were unable to complete these assignments for various reasons. Some participants had difficulty with initiation and tended to avoid the discomfort of a social interaction. Other participants were very fearful of any social activity and needed support to reduce their anxiety. For these individuals, the class was not effective in providing the generalization of skills to the outside world.

To solve these problems, the program looked to the social coaching model (Oden & Asher, 1977) that had been used with children and adolescents in a school setting. This intervention uses direct individual instruction in social skills. The peer mentoring model (McGee, Almeida, Sulzer-Azaroff, & Feldman, 1992) and the peer buddy model (see Copeland et al., 2004; Hughes et al., 2000) have been used to facilitate social interaction in school settings between typically developing children and students with and without disabilities. Therefore, the social learning disorder program decided to recruit coaches who were peers (e.g., similar in age, life stage) of the class participants.

23

Selection of Coaches

Potential coaches are not difficult to locate in a university environment. Graduate students in psychology, social work, education, and medicine often express interest in the program. Most colleges and university departments have electronic mailing lists of students; initial recruitment of potential coaches can occur through online postings. The screening process should be done by personal interview. Personal qualities of integrity, maturity, and commitment to the program are essential when selecting individuals for social coaching. Some of the coaches may have previous experience working with children or adults with ASDs or other developmental disabilities. These volunteers often want to expand their knowledge of social learning disorders and gain experience working on an individual basis with this population. Many of the coaches may be pursuing careers in medicine, special education, or psychology and welcome the opportunity to get hands-on experience. They can usually use the hours they volunteer to the program to fulfill externship or practicum requirements. All of the coaches selected should be relatively close in age to the participants to serve as peer mentors.

It is important for the coach to have a nonjudgmental and supportive attitude. Most participants will not have previously experienced a feeling of peer acceptance, so the coaching relationship can be helpful in improving their self-esteem. The coaches should be instructed in techniques to reduce anxiety and develop a positive rapport with the participants. All of the coaches should receive a training session on social learning disorders (see the Social Coach Training slides on the accompanying CD-ROM) and 3 hours of continuing supervision as a group.

Being a Social Coach

The role of social coach requires a personal commitment of patience, perseverance, and time. Coaches should be encouraged to attend the social skills class on a regular basis to become familiar with the skills taught, as well as with the participant they are assigned to coach. Coaches who invest this time will find that they have more insights into the social needs of their participants. It is also important that the coaches define the coaching relationship with the participant and set parameters as necessary. Female coaches may work with male participants and vice versa, which could be problematic if the professional nature of the relationship is not defined. For example, one participant tested this parameter by inviting his female coach out to dinner. She responded by informing him that their relationship was a helping relationship, not a personal relationship. He accepted this and was able to benefit from seeing her as a resource to better understand and relate to female peers.

Coaches may be asked to accompany the participants on outings, such as to a restaurant or music club, on their own time. They also should attend the end-of-program party and bring friends for the participants to interact with. One young man who attended this party as a friend of a coach commented that he had difficulty determining who was a participant and who was a coach because the participants were blending in so well.

The Importance of Reliability

Individuals who are chosen as social coaches should be reliable in their attendance to classes and outside activities. Many people with social learning disorders have had very negative experiences with their peers not being reliable or rejecting them by failing to show up for planned social activities. As a result of their negative social history, participants may interpret the unreliable attendance of a social coach as a form of rejection. This hypersensitivity requires that coaches be

committed to the program and make every effort to attend. When illness or other reasonable exceptions occur, the coach should contact the participant (by e-mail or telephone) and explain the circumstances. If possible, it is best to make the student aware in advance if time conflicts exist so that the student can be paired with another coach temporarily. Most coaches do not realize how important the coaching relationship is to their student. This relationship may be one of the few positive experiences that a participant has with a peer and therefore it is highly valued. Social coaches are the key element in the program's success.

Individualized Instruction

Because social coaches work on a one-to-one basis with participants, they are able to tailor their instruction to meet the specific needs of the participant to whom they are assigned. At the beginning of the coaching relationship, participants should develop individual social goals with their coaches. The goals can be specific (e.g., improving eye contact) or general (e.g., decreasing social anxiety). The goal should be mutually agreed upon, and it is important that participants identify their areas of need. It is usually advisable to begin working on smaller behaviors and then move to more difficult situations. For example, a participant working on social anxiety may begin by learning to tolerate being in groups of people before moving on to conversation. Participants must learn to stop their avoidance behaviors before any other type of progress is possible.

At times, a coach may use relaxation techniques or guided imagery with the individual before engaging in a social exercise to produce feelings of calm and reduce negative self-talk. The coach's approach must be positive and express hope to combat the internalized negative self-image of many of the participants. Coaches have used exercises from *The Shyness and Social Anxiety Workbook* (Antony & Swinson, 2000b) to address participants' social fears and negative predictions. In particular, it is helpful to identify situations that trigger fearful thoughts. These thoughts (e.g., "People will think I'm nervous") can be challenged with countering strategies (e.g., "What is the worst that can happen?"). These types of questions illustrate that even if these beliefs are true, they are manageable (Antony & Swinson, 2000b).

Changes in social behavior can only be brought about through repeated social exposure. The social coaches are motivators who take the initiative when their participants are struggling. Sometimes it is necessary to model a behavior (e.g., initiating a conversation with a stranger) during an exercise before the participant can follow through.

Training Social Coaches

The Social Coach Training slides (see accompanying CD-ROM) includes a quote from Sean Barron, an individual with Asperger syndrome, who emphasizes the importance of letting go of past negative social experiences in order to be open to establishing new social relationships. This quote is a reminder that people with social learning disorders have to work to become free of their pasts and the unhappy memories that are often revived when they encounter similar social situations. They are often stuck in negative behavioral loops and the associated feelings of failure and low self-esteem.

The opening slides list characteristics of individuals with social learning disorders and the effects of social learning disorders on the quality of life. Knowledge of characteristics such as negative bias and mindblindness are essential in learning to work effectively with participants. Most participants will exhibit some of these characteristics in their approach to learning new social behaviors. Coaches must be prepared to deal with issues such as rigidity and slow rate of processing when working with their assigned participants. It is also important to recognize the life expe-

riences that many participants bring to class, including social isolation, dependency, and mistrust because of bullying by their peers. The coaches must understand the negative mind-set that many of the participants have entering the program.

The next slides present the demographics of past participants and discuss the development of the class over time. The program has added more hours to adequately cover the topics and has used several types of outcome measures to explore the class effect on students' motivation to socialize (Friendship Questionnaire), ability for perspective-taking (Empathy Quotient), and level of social anxiety (Social Interaction Anxiety Scale). The philosophy underlying the development of the program is described by the following ideas:

1. Social behavior can be learned.

2. Experiential activities are the keys to generalization.

3. Individuals with social learning disorders need explicit social guidelines.

4. CBT is used to modify negative bias.

5. Many individuals with social learning disorders need intellectually stimulating materials.

Next, the research on mirror neurons and its theorized relation to the development of empathy is briefly mentioned. The neuroscientist Ramachandran (2000) said that mirror neurons promise to do for neuroscience what DNA did for biology. It is a widely held belief that this groundbreaking discovery is the basis for most human (and primate) social behavior and was essential to the "great leap forward in human evolution" (Ramachandran, 2000). The theory of mirror neurons provides an explanation for complex forms of human interaction and helps us to understand the intentions of others (Iacoboni, 2009). This is the reason for the program's emphasis on role playing and observation to strengthen social cognition and help participants develop the ability to understand other people's actions and mental states.

The goals of social coaching are described in the next slide. The social coaches are providing the missing component of many social skills training programs: facilitated practice of skills and a chance for experiential learning. The role of the social coach is to encourage, guide, and act as a role model for age-appropriate social behavior. Coaching provides an opportunity to tailor skill development to the varying needs of individual participants. The coaching relationship is important to many participants, who feel peer acceptance and improved self-esteem during the course of the program. Coaches also help to calm participants during exercises and are a source of support during more difficult exercises or community experiences (e.g., approaching a stranger to initiate conversation). It is a highly significant relationship for many participants. Therefore, the coach must strive to be nonjudgmental, consistent, reliable, and professional in demeanor.

The components of social awareness proposed by Grandin and Barron (2005) are presented next. Improved self-esteem and social motivation are the main goals of the 12-week course; other aspects of social awareness (e.g., perspective taking, flexible thinking) may take much longer to improve. For some participants, perspective taking will remain very difficult. The goal is for the participant to develop awareness that other people have different experiences of situations and different emotional states as a result.

The next slide provides examples of measurement tools to assess social skill levels prior to and after the course. The Social Responsiveness Scale requires a family member or parent to provide a third-party assessment of a participant's social behavior and therefore involves contacting family members. The Interpersonal Perception Task-15 is used in the first class to provide a quick assessment of the class level of social perception and is then used as a teaching tool.

The 12-week curriculum topics are presented next. Coaches should familiarize themselves with the sequence of the course, which builds upon those topics covered previously. Coaches are also asked to read the article *Better Strangers* (Ramsay et al., 2005) to understand how cognitive

behavior techniques are used to reshape negative thoughts and how some of these techniques can be applied to the coaching relationship.

The final slides provide examples of social coaching activities that may be done in class or during the social coaching period at the final hour of class. These examples provide an overview of how the coaching activities reinforce skills learned in class and provide opportunities for self-exploration by participants (e.g., generating an interests list with the coach).

Evaluation of Coaches by Participants

Participants are asked to evaluate their coaches after the 12-week program, using a form loosely based on the California Psychotherapy Alliance Scales (Gaston & Marmar, 1994), a measure used for therapist evaluation (see the Coaches Evaluation handout that follows). The participants should consistently rate their coaches highly in the areas of respect and acceptance, understanding, and dedication to the program. An initial evaluation of the impact of social coaches revealed that participants reported an increase in motivation to socialize, as well as increased social activities at the end of the program, as a direct result of contact with social coaches (Cohen, Rostain, Brodkin, & Sankoorikal, 2006).

▮▮▮▮▮ Coaches Evaluation

Directions: Below is a list of questions that describes attitudes a person might have about his or her social coach. Think about the course you just completed. Circle the number indicating the degree to which each question best describes your experience.

		Not at all	Somewhat	Moderately	Often	Very much
1.	Did you find yourself tempted to stop an activity when you were upset or frustrated?	1	2	3	4	5
2.	Did you feel pressured by your coach to make changes before you were ready?	1	2	3	4	5
3.	When your social coach commented about one situation, did it bring to mind other related situations in your life?	1	2	3	4	5
4.	Did you feel that even if you might have moments of doubt or confusion, overall the experience was worthwhile?	1	2	3	4	5
5.	Did your social coach's comments lead you to believe that your social coach placed his or her needs before your own?	1	2	3	4	5
6.	When important things came to mind, how often did you find you kept them to yourself rather than sharing them with your social coach?	1	2	3	4	5
7.	Did you feel accepted and respected by your social coach for who you are?	1	2	3	4	5
8.	Did you find your social coach's comments unhelpful, confusing, mistaken, or not really applying to you?	1	2	3	4	5
9.	Did you feel that you were working together with with your social coach to overcome your problems?	1	2	3	4	5
10.	How free were you to discuss personal matters that you are ordinarily ashamed to reveal?	1	2	3	4	5
11.	During this course, how dedicated was your social coach to helping you overcome your difficulties?	1	2	3	4	5
12.	Did you feel that your social coach understood what you hoped to get out of the course?	1	2	3	4	5
13.	Did you feel you were working at cross purposes with your social coach or that you did not share the same sense of how to proceed so that you could get the help you want?	1	2	3	4	5

Source: Gaston & Marmar (1994).

(continued)

▮▮▮▮ Coaches Evaluation *(continued)*

14.	Did you have the impression that you were unable to deepen your understanding of your social difficulties?	1	2	3	4	5
15.	How much did you disagree with your social coach about what issues were most important to work on during this course?	1	2	3	4	5
16.	How much did your social coach help you gain a deeper understanding of your social difficulties?	1	2	3	4	5

Source: Gaston & Marmar (1994).

Order Form

ABOUT YOU (write in your specialty and check one field that best applies)

Specialty
_____

❍ Birth to Five   ❍ K–12   ❍ Clinical/Medical Personnel   ❍ 4-year College/Grad.   ❍ Comm. College/Vocational   ❍ Association/Foundation   ❍ Comm. Services

Name
_____

Address
_____

❍ residential   ❍ commercial

City _____   State _____

ZIP _____   Country _____

E-mail
_____

❍ Yes! I want to receive e-mail about new titles and special offers. (Your e-mail address will not be shared with any other party.)

We auto-confirm all orders by mail; please provide an email address to receive confirmation of order and shipping.

Qty	Stock #	Title	Price

PAYMENT METHOD

❍ Check enclosed (payable to Brookes Publishing Co.)

❍ Purchase Order attached (bill my institution)
  *Add 2% to product total for P.O. handling fee

❍ American Express (15 digits)

❍ Discover (16 digits)

❍ MasterCard (16 digits)

❍ Visa (13 or 16 digits)

Subtotal	_____
6% sales tax, MD only	_____
5% business tax (GST), CAN only	_____
P.O. customers: 2% of subtotal	_____
Shipping (see chart below)	_____
Total (in U.S. dollars)	_____

Credit card account number __ __ __ __ __ __ __ __ __ __ __ __ __ __ __ __

Security code (3 or 4 digit code on back of card): __ __ __ __

Expiration date __ __ / __ __   Signature _____

Convenient ways to order:

CALL toll-free 1-800-638-3775 M-F, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. ET.; **FAX** 410-337-8539;
MAIL order form to: Brookes Publishing Co., P.O. Box 10624, Baltimore, MD 21285-0624:
ON-LINE www.brookespublishing.com

Money-back guarantee! Ordering with Brookes is risk-free. If you are not completely satisfied, you may return books and videotapes within 30 days for a full credit of the purchase price (unless otherwise indicated). Refunds will be issued for prepaid orders. Items must be returned in resalable condition. All prices in U.S.A. dollars. Policies and prices subject to change without notice. Prices may be higher outside the U.S.A.

STANDARD GROUND SHIPPING & HANDLING
(For other shipping options and rates, call 1-800-638-3775, in the U.S.A. and Canada, and 410-337-9580, worldwide.)

Continental U.S.A. territories & protectorates†; AK, HI & PR‡

For subtotal of	Add*
US$55.00 and under	$6.49
US$55.01 and over	12%

Canada

For subtotal of	Add*
US$67.00 and under	$9.99
US$67.01 and over	15%

**Continental U.S.A. orders ship via UPS Ground Delivery.
†U.S.A. territories & protectorates orders ship via USPS.
‡AK, HI, and PR please add an additional US$12.00. Orders ship via UPS Air.
Please call or email for expedited shipping options and rates.*

Orders for Canada are consolidated for shipping twice each month. For minimum shipping time, please place your orders by the 9th or 24th of each month.

**calculate percentage on subtotal*