

The ACT Game

ACT: Assertive Communication Training

**A Social Skills Training Program
for Children in Grades 3 - 6**

Prepared by:

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TEACHER'S MANUAL

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INTRODUCTION

RATIONALE

Children are confronted with numerous challenging interpersonal situations such as making demands on other people, refusing the requests of others, coping with their own feelings and those of others, giving and receiving compliments, making friends, coping with criticism, and managing stress. Children who are socially skilled in resolving these problems are more likely to be well adjusted in many areas in their lives. A number of studies with both socially isolated, unpopular children and aggressive, rejected children have suggested that increasing children's social competence can enhance their adjustment. The research also suggests that healthy, well-adjusted children benefit from receiving social skills training. Thus, learning to be socially competent is important.

Training can increase children's social competence. As Rotheram (1988) has stated, "This model is based on the assumption that assertive and non-assertive behaviors are learned. Therefore, through an active, rewarding, educational experience, children can acquire new skills and can reduce maladaptive behavior patterns." Skill learning requires considerable practice, adequate information, good modeling, facilitative attitudes, and supportive response to children's feelings.

Children are better off when they have choices in how to act. This program attempts to expand the ways children can meet their needs effectively in interpersonal interactions that will make the child, the child's peers, and adults happy. Assertiveness is one means to please oneself and others. However, some situations require either aggressive or passive behavior. Avoiding a stranger who is trying to get the child into his car may require aggressive behavior. Being passive may save your life in a robbery. Not only is flexibility desired, but also the capacity to think about and evaluate options and contexts.

Social competence is multi-dimensional. It consists of many skills that children use and adjust depending on the social setting and their individual goals. There are various components that make up social competence.

THE COMPONENTS OF SOCIAL COMPETENCE

1. Cognitive factors

- a. Problem-solving ability emphasizing alternative generation and means-end thinking
 - b. Discrimination of socially desirable behaviors
 - c. Self-monitoring through self-reinforcement and self-punishment
2. Behavioral factors
- a. Verbal behaviors such as positive statements to self and others, friendship initiation, and feedback
 - b. Nonverbal behaviors such as posture, voice tone, latency, gestures, and eye contact
 - c. Integrated assertiveness behaviors such as making and refusing requests
3. Emotional factors
- a. Monitoring and assessing positive and negative emotional states
 - b. Methods of relaxing or controlling negative emotional states
 - c. Expanding the universe of positive feelings

These components make an integrated whole. To effectively reach their goals, children must be able to determine how others are thinking and feeling, as well as know their own feelings.

TRAINING TECHNIQUES

Social competence training is based on social-learning theory (Bandura, 1969, 1977, 1986).

Emphasize and reward strengths.

Rather than punish inappropriate behavior, we recommend that teachers reward students frequently to enhance learning, build peer support for appropriate behavior, and inform students of desired behavior. Teachers can use verbal reinforcement and tokens to cue children to appropriate group behaviors. Essentially, negative behaviors are to be ignored because even the child's awareness of a disapproving response is likely to ensure a repeat of the child's undesirable actions. In the case of a child's demonstrating highly aggressive behaviors, he/she can be asked to leave the group for a few minutes and be rewarded later for returning to group activity.

Use the principle of small steps.

It is unrealistic to expect a child to master a whole new set of behaviors at first try. Therefore, we believe in reinforcing steps and increments. Small steps can be seen in the approach to assertiveness training. Students gradually learn to distinguish between assertive and non-assertive behaviors, and they practice the desired behavior in role-plays. Monitoring feelings associated with assertive and non-assertive actions is another skill component leading to social assertiveness. Teachers reward beginning steps. One aspect of the child's behavior is selected and a goal is set. "John, I really liked the way you looked Susan in the eye. Next time I would

like your voice to be a little stronger.” Only one goal is selected at a time, and teachers focus on a different skill in each session. Teachers need to be alert when observing children trying to learn and demonstrate competency so that they can “catch someone doing something good.”

Raise one’s expectations.

Positive reinforcement can be used to teach complex, unfamiliar new skills through shaping. To shape a new skill, reward a child first for performing each behavioral component of a skill, beginning with the last component in the chain. Little by little more components are required before the reward is delivered, until the child finally earns the reward only after performing the complex skill. Shaping requires as much knowledge and skill as does giving good instruction.

Model socially competent behavior.

When learning new skills, students need (1) to understand what they are supposed to do; (2) to see the skill demonstrated; and (3) to practice the new skill. Modeling has several components to it. The first factor is showing the children how to behave in the desired manner. Teachers look for opportunities in the classroom to show the students how to be assertive or how to assess their feeling level. The second factor is for children to be critical of the demonstration of using the new behaviors. Dialoguing with the students encourages them to think about what they have seen and to process it. “Does it make sense to act assertively in this situation?” “Would it work for me?” “What if...?” Dialoguing can make the new skills more relevant and meaningful. The third factor of modeling is revealing one’s internal self-dialogue. In this situation, the teacher exposes his/her own thought process during a situation requiring assertiveness that arises during the school day. The teacher might show the class how he/she thinks through a provocative situation. “Victor is acting up again in the group. What am I going to do? I get upset when Victor does this. The first step is to stay cool. I will take a few deep breaths. I know I can handle this. I feel calmer now. I will ask Victor to stop picking on Louise. If he does it again, he will leave group and have some time out. I’m not going to sit around and do nothing, and I am not going to be mean and punishing. I know I can take care of Victor by being assertive.”

Encourage independent thinking.

To develop appropriate social competence, children must have opportunities to control their own behavior and structure their environment. One technique used to encourage independence is the sequence of feedback delivered following a role-play. Teachers are instructed to ask in sequence: (a) what the child actor liked about his/her own behavior and what one feature the child would have liked to change; (b) what each child director liked about the actor’s behavior; (c) what the Super Coach teacher liked about the actor’s behavior; and (d) what goal the Super Coach has for the next role-play. Across sessions, the child directors increasingly assume the role of teachers, and begin to ask questions of the child actors automatically.

Management Practices

Whole class: To successfully implement the ACT Game in a classroom with 20

or more students, two adults are required. A counselor and teacher may work together. A counselor or teacher with a paraprofessional or adult volunteer could work well. Two teachers could collaborate to offer this class to their students. When working with a classroom of students, the teaching section is presented to the whole class. Practice and role-play sections are done in two smaller groups with an adult working with each group. The two adults work as the Super Coach and Trainer. They model role-playing with skits provided in the training manual, or with skits they develop for their students.

Small group: A counselor, teacher, or paraprofessional may implement the ACT Game with a small group of selected students. In this case, the adult is the Super Coach. One or two students can be selected prior to each session to practice a skit with the Super Coach to introduce the next session. The use of skits to introduce lesson objectives models role-playing, demonstrates what to do or not to do, and engages students in session.

NOTES ON THE “KEY ELEMENTS IN EACH SESSION”

Tokens

Behaviors that are noticed and encouraged by others increase in frequency. Those behaviors that are not noticed or punished usually decrease. This process generally occurs without awareness, and encouraging the children can be as simple as smiling. To help group leaders make this encouragement process explicit in the group, tokens are used. You have probably participated in group discussions or activities (with friends, family members, associates, or formal groups) during which someone said or did something that you liked or agreed with. However, because you may not have wanted to interrupt the person at that moment to tell them how you felt, your feelings went unexpressed until after the discussion was over, or perhaps, may never have been expressed at all.

Tokens are pieces of 2” X 2” colored construction paper that anyone can make. They are used by the group leaders (teacher, counselor, Super Coach, Trainer) to cue appropriate behavior. When the Super Coach gives a student a token with a positive comment, everybody knows that the student demonstrated a desired behavior. Students enjoy receiving tokens. They know what to continue doing. They know what to practice, to try, to continue. Other students also learn. The tokens are not turned in for any rewards at a later time. They serve as a tangible component of a positive response by the group leader. Tokens are always accompanied with an affirming verbal statement.

The key to the tokens’ effectiveness is the group leaders’ comfort with them. If the group leaders take tokens seriously and use them at every opportunity to offer positive encouragement, the students will also respect their value. We recommend using tokens in every session.

White tokens are not recommended. In our experience with minority youth, if “white” is associated with “good,” the leader loses credibility.

Feeling Thermometer

Children in grades 3 through 6, in becoming more aware of their feelings, often need help to recognize, name, discuss, and appropriately express their feelings. Learning these skills is important because intense feelings interfere with children's abilities to make good decisions and act safely. Children must improve and hone their affective skills, so they can recognize and appropriately express their feelings of anger, excitement, nervousness, anxiety, and hesitancy. Only when children are able to recognize their feelings can they use self-calming techniques to allow them to make sound decisions.

Group leaders use a Feeling Thermometer to allow students to better assess and discuss their feelings. The Feeling Thermometer ranges from 0 to 100, with 100 representing the most discomfort: extreme anger, anxiety, excitement, nervousness, depression, and happiness. Zero represents a total lack of discomfort, whether it be "happy" comfort or the "blues" comfort. The person at or near 0 is better able to think and make decisions regardless of the particular emotion. After reviewing the Feeling Thermometer with the group, group leaders ask students to identify ways to reduce their level of emotion, and to regain control and practice techniques through various group exercises.

Role-Playing

Instructions for role-playing are as follows: After asking the group members to identify problem situations, ask them to choose one of the situations to act out. With younger children, it is best to give them situations.

- a) Provide the description of a problem situation, e.g., "Your friend wants to see your test paper and answers during a test."
- b) Assign two or more persons as the principal actors.
- c) Assign coaches or directors: One is assigned to each of the principal actors to offer suggestions on what to say during the role-play.
- d) Assign one person to be the director of the scene: He/she determines who is to play which part, where the scene is taking place, and who will speak first.
- e) Assign other group members to monitor the interaction, a person to watch eye contact, a person to watch body language, a person to watch gestures or voice tone.
- f) The rest of the group should be asked to pay close attention because group leaders will be asking for their suggestions about other ways to play the scene. Be sure that each person understands his/her role.

There is a recommended sequence for delivering feedback at this point:

1. Ask the principal actors to assess where their Feeling Thermometers are at this moment.
2. Ask the actors what aspect they liked about what they did.
3. Ask the actors what words or acts they would change.
4. Sequentially ask group members observing eye contact and body language to report one positive aspect they observed and what these observations suggest about the actors' feelings.

5. Ask the coaches to express what they think the principal actors may have been thinking but not saying to the other person.
6. Ask coaches and other group members to share where their Feeling Thermometers are.
7. Ask group members to make suggestions to the principal actors or coaches on one thing they might do differently.
8. Finally, role-play the scene again with a different stated outcome.

Group leaders should make every effort to avoid stereotyped role-playing. Many of the activities involve role-plays between persons with specific characteristics. Be sure that these exercises do not stereotype individuals by sex, age, and/or race. Reverse stereotype roles whenever possible.

Problem-Solving

Whenever possible, encourage group members to apply problem-solving to a situation. Typically problem-solving has nine steps to it after the situation has been sharply defined. These steps are: 1) define the problem; 2) determine what is important to the person; 3) set a goal; 4) list at least three ways to solve the problem and reach the goal; 5) weigh the pros and cons of each alternative approach to reaching the goal; 6) select the one that will be tried; 7) decide how to implement that approach; 8) try it; and 9) evaluate what happened.

While the steps of problem-solving appear quite logical, problem-solving is often not successful due to a wide variety of human biases and limitations. Examples of biases include: paying attention to things presented first or last rather than those in the middle, getting caught up in competition, being trapped by superficial elements like being cool, and taking greater risks depending on the desired outcome. Limitations refer to a lack of information, time pressures, limited resources, imperfect perceptions, short-term memories, and levels of complication. These biases must be considered and guarded against while practicing problem-solving.

Students benefit from explicit instruction of some elements of the problem-solving sequence. They can learn to set clear goals, generate alternatives, and examine consequences. To do this, they need consistent practice.

Goals: Goals are expressed in one sentence. The goal identifies an outcome that the student selects. Students develop discrimination skills as they evaluate the appropriateness of the goal. The ability to state a concise goal, stated in behavioral terms and limited to one sentence, provides clarity and allows the student to determine the best action to reach the goal. Students learn to stop and think, and the goal-setting process slows down as students learn to identify the problem and set a goal more easily.

Generate alternatives: The trainer assists the group to determine many alternatives to reach the goal. Students are questioned: "What could you do to reach the goal? What else?" Goals are listed. When the list of alternatives is exhausted, through nonjudgmental brainstorming, group members give feedback. They examine the alternatives as passive, aggressive, or assertive. After brainstorming a large list of alternatives, and reviewing them,

actors select one alternative to role-play.

SEQUENCE OF ACTIVITIES WITHIN SESSIONS

Didactic presentation (TEACH)

Each session begins with educational information about one skill. The use of scripts acted by the teachers and other engaging activities are designed to generate interest as well as demonstrate the desired behavior. The role-plays and dialogues help discriminate between desired and undesirable actions, define problem situations, explore exceptions, and create a positive learning environment. They also model acting as a time to try new behaviors.

Presentation of problem situations (PRACTICE)

After the educational information, the focus is on application. What are the situations that require using this skill? Where would you not want to practice it? The group generates lists of problem situations from which one or two are selected. The students are divided into teams and are assigned the task of determining the goals in these situations, generating alternative solutions, and evaluating the consequences of each alternative. Trying to solve problems cooperatively is the theme.

Behavioral rehearsal and feedback (THE GAME)

Some people in the small groups are actors, while others in the group are directors. The actors are given a social competence situation that requires interaction, e.g., talking to a teacher about a contested grade or resolving a problem with a friend. The actors decide who will play what role, and the key actor decides on his/her goal in the role-play. The trainers guide this process. They assist the students in developing a goal and generating multiple alternatives. Once the alternative is selected, the role-play begins. Directors observe the way the action unfolds and pay particular attention to characteristics such as posture, gestures, eye contact, voice level, clear messages, and so on. When the role-play has proceeded to an appropriate stopping place, the directors manage the feedback process, first asking the actors for input and then giving their own response. The trainer cues the directors in the feedback process. The atmosphere of a sound stage can be created to enliven the procedures. It is important to give every child the chance to practice the desired skills. Groups switch roles frequently.

COURSE OUTLINE FOR SOCIAL SKILLS TRAINING

Module 1: Assertiveness

- Learning to play the problem-solving game
- Understanding assertiveness
- Making assertive requests
- Making assertive refusals

Module 2: Feelings

- Recognizing discomfort
- Recognizing the signs of discomfort
- Reducing discomfort
- Feeling and requesting

Module 3: Giving Positive Responses to Oneself and Others

- Saying good things about oneself
- Saying good things about other people
- Understanding what a face tells me
- Understanding compliments and faces

Module 4: Friendship

- Asking open-ended questions
- Being specific
- Getting to know you
- Learning how close is too close

Module 5: Anger

- Relaxing
- Using time out
- Using self-talk: before and during
- Using self-talk: Too much and afterwards

Module 6: Criticism and Maintenance Skills

- Giving criticism
- Receiving criticism
- Yelling
- Maintaining skills