

## TIP SHEET FOR PARENTS: Social Competence

Many children and youth with learning disabilities (LDs) experience social difficulties in addition to academic challenges. In fact, around 75% of children with LDs experience difficulties with social relationships.<sup>1</sup> Social competence plays an important role in developing and maintaining relationships.

### What is social competence?

Social competence refers to the ability to successfully and independently engage in social interactions, to establish and maintain relationships with others, and to have one's needs and desires met across diverse contexts. It involves using social skills at the right time in the right context. Social competence involves a complex set of skills, including age-appropriate social skills, regulation of behaviours and emotions, perspective taking abilities, and an understanding of the social environment (what is expected). For children with LDs social competence may be a difficult skill to master.



Memory challenges can get in the way of keeping track of social information. Children with executive functioning difficulties may get stuck in social problem solving or have trouble letting go of ideas, which can affect their ability to manage conflict with peers or to negotiate group projects at school. Many of the cognitive processes affect our ability to follow and participate in a group conversation. For children with slow processing, they may think of a great idea to contribute to the conversation but it is three topics too late.

### What might social difficulties look like for children and youth with LDs?

Not all children with LDs will experience social difficulties. The nature of the social skills deficit may vary depending on the nature of the LD and/or the presence of mental health issues. However, if your child does experience social difficulties they may have trouble: reading non-verbal social cues (e.g., facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice), understanding sarcasm and/or humor, engaging in effective social problem solving, tracking and keeping up with group conversations, and recalling information about social situations.

### Why is social competence harder for children and youth with LDs?

The relationship between LDs and difficulties with social competence may reflect in part the nature of the individual's information processing challenges.<sup>5</sup> For example, if we have trouble interpreting abstract language and words with multiple meanings, we might miss sarcasm or struggle to figure out if the communication is intended to flirt or to mock.



## Why is social competence important?

Engaging in meaningful social relationships plays an important role in fostering mental health and well-being across the lifespan. Without supportive social relationships, children are more likely to experience low self-esteem, loneliness, social rejection, and bullying and peer victimization, and are at greater risk for school failure.

## What strategies might help?

We know children with LDs need more time, more direct teaching, and supported opportunities to practice social competence skills in a safe environment.

Some simple strategies to consider:

1. Narrating: Some children do not know how to interpret a social situation or may not know what to do or say. Tactfully pulling the child aside to interpret the situation and coach the child in the moment can be helpful. For example, ‘Susan was being sarcastic when she said she loves doing homework for four hours.’
2. Conversation skills: Directly teach the child how to share information in a conversation and practice following up a statement with a related question. E.g. ‘I played Minecraft last night. Do you also play Minecraft?’
3. Conflict resolution: Help the child to become aware of when they may have hurt someone’s feelings or made a social ‘misstep’ by explaining the situation and the observed behavior (e.g., ‘when you took over the game and changed the rules, it was frustrating for Johnny, who made a mad face and didn’t want to play anymore’). Teach the child how to ‘repair’ by apologizing, and practice the skills.



4. Natural learning moments: Use media (e.g., TV shows, movies, video games, books) or real life examples to talk about appropriate social behaviours and expectations.
5. Acknowledge, label and validate emotions: For some children and youth with LDs emotion regulation can be difficult, especially in certain social situations. Support children in building their emotional vocabulary by acknowledging, labelling and validating their emotions. You can help younger children label their feelings and the amount by using a meaningful measure such as a ‘feeling thermometer.’ For example, “It looks like you are starting to get frustrated. How hot is your thermometer? What can you do to cool down your thermometer?”

## References

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3. Blair, B., et al. (2015). Identifying Developmental Cascades Among Differentiated Dimensions of Social Competence and Emotion Regulation. *Developmental Psychology*, 51(8), 1062-1073.