



Social Interaction At Work And In The Community

A Fact Sheet for youth, by youth!

Social interaction is one of the greatest challenges people with disabilities face. Many people with disabilities do not have the opportunity to develop social skills in their childhood making it difficult to make new friends and maintain jobs. However, that does not mean these skills cannot be learned.

Who belongs in Your Social Network?

Think about people who would be your support system. These should be people who make you feel comfortable and happy and will support you in your decisions.

- Family are the immediate people you turn to help support you in big decisions.
- Friends are people you can turn to who will listen to you and just hang out.
- Co-workers are people who interact with you on a daily basis at work. Your co-workers may only want to talk to you about work related issues but, oftentimes, co-workers can turn into friends as well.

Social Skills Can Be Learned

The following is a list of basic social skills compiled by Embrace the Future Resilient Youth, www.embracethefuture.org/au. Can you identify any areas where you might be able to improve?

Basic Interaction Skills

These are the simple skills involved in talking and interacting with others on an everyday basis.

- Making frequent eye contact
- Smiling when greeting people and talking
- Showing "confident" body language: an open, direct stance, not fidgeting or twisting
- Basic politeness: saying please and thank-you, saying hello and good-bye, etc.
- Showing interest in others, e.g., asking how their day was, how they thought they did on an exam, etc.

Making Conversation

These are the skills you use when talking to other people.

- Taking turns when talking
- Listening and showing interest in what the other person has to say
- "Small talk": being able to chat about unimportant things like the weather
- Nodding and smiling to indicate that you are following along
- Using humor
- Knowing when to disclose personal information and when not to

Building and Maintaining Friendships

There are many skills involved in making and sustaining friendships.

- Approach Skills - Being able to go up and start talking to someone who you don't know or don't know well
- Sharing decision making - Not always insisting on having one's way but negotiating about what to do, where to go, etc.
- Showing appropriate affection and appreciation
- Maintaining contact - Not expecting the other person to "do all the work" of keeping up the friendship
- Being supportive - Showing concern when your friend is having a hard time
- Allowing distance and closeness - People need time apart as well as together
- Being thoughtful - "Thinking ahead" about what might be a nice thing to do for your friend or co-worker

Empathy

Empathy means being able to put yourself into someone else's shoes and recognizing their feelings. It is not the same as sympathy or "feeling sorry for someone". Empathy is responding in an understanding and caring way to what others are feeling. Empathic skills include:

- Noticing other people's feelings
- Expressing concern at others' distress
- Being able to recognize what someone else might be feeling in a given situation
- Showing sensitivity to others' feelings when communicating
For example, being tactful when making critical comments (when criticism is necessary and/or appropriate).

Dealing with Conflict

Social interactions do not always run smoothly. It's important to develop conflict resolution skills to handle difficult situations, especially at work. Conflict resolution skills include:

- Assertiveness - Being able to say what you are feeling without being aggressive or getting personal
- Negotiation Skills - Being able to discuss a conflict calmly and rationally and come to an agreement about a solution

Alternative Ways to Interact with People

In this age of technology, there are many alternative ways to interact with people as well.

- Chat with people on Instant message, Facebook, Twitter, E-mail, texting and phone conversations as well.
- There are online groups you can join that relate to something you believe in or are experiencing.
- There are even professional social networks like Linked In to help you on your career path.

Keep in mind that it takes time, patience and practice to develop social skills or to successfully interact with your peers.

Fact Sheet written by Neelam Dhadankar, Alenia Heisz, Caroline Leung, Chad Murphy-Price, and Lindsey Wood

