

Adult AD/HD and Social Skills: What Does Everybody Else Know That I Don't?

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At the recent CHADD Conference in Washington, D.C. they came in large numbers. They quickly filled the room and then sat on the floor in the aisles until there wasn't an inch of carpet showing. They filled the hallway outside the room. They filled the adjoining tiny kitchen area and the bathroom. Yes, even the bathroom people stood in the tub and sat on the commode to listen to the lecture. Others were angry that they were unable to get near enough the lecture to listen. What was all this fuss about?

Social skills. They came to hear about adult AD/HD and social skills. According to Richard Lavoie, "Social competence, not academic skill, is the primary determiner of adult success." Many adults with AD/HD have learned ways to compensate in their jobs and activities of daily living. But many continue to struggle with a lack of social connections in their life.

Social skills are not specifically taught, and yet the penalties are harsh for those who violate these unwritten social rules. Often, most don't even know what they're doing wrong, so there's little chance to improve. People struggle quietly with social isolation or social rejection, longing for connections with others, yet unsure how to proceed.

My son Jarryd had worked hard to overcome the academic difficulties associated with AD/HD. He had become an academic success, but he desperately struggled in the area of social relationships. Although I had been a behavior management consultant for over 15 years and had helped teach many people social skills, I had never been as painfully aware of the consequences of social skill difficulties as I was when the problem hit home.

At the age of 10, Jarryd had not been invited to a birthday party outside of our family. No one at school wanted to come over to play when he would call. No one invited him over to play. He was overwhelmed with frustration and sadness. My heart broke to see my child in such emotional pain.

Jarryd did not seem to be committing any overt social violations. He wasn't aggressive or obviously rude. But somehow he was doing or not doing something that had others choosing not to be with him. I began to notice similar social difficulties in many of the adults with AD/HD with whom I worked. Often social difficulties at home and work caused a great deal of emotional pain in their lives. Many were struggling with the weight of social isolation or rejection.

Little has been written to date on social skills especially in the area of adult AD/HD and social skills. Review of the existing literature was not encouraging regarding the effectiveness of teaching of social skills, but I knew from my years of work in other settings that it could be done. This began my journey into the world of AD/HD and social skills. In this article I'll share with you some of the key concepts in improving social skills.

Attribution Theory

Although many people struggle with social skill difficulties, those with AD/HD have additional difficulties because of the attributions others often make regarding their AD/HD characteristics. According to attribution theory, people try to make sense of their world so they make explanations of behaviors based upon what they already know and understand (Taylor et al, 1997). Therefore, many times the AD/HD symptoms of inattention, impulsivity, hyperactivity or disorganization are attributed to a lack of caring, a lack of motivation, rudeness, being self-centered and the like. The title of the Kelly Ramundo book, *So You Mean I'm Not Lazy, Stupid, or Crazy?!* captures the misattributions all too well.

Unless people in your life understand AD/HD, there is a tendency for them to attribute your social difficulties to all sorts of negative characteristics. However, once they understand AD/HD they then have something else to attribute your behaviors to and are much less likely to see you in a negative light.

Subtext

A social skill difficulty for many with AD/HD involves missing the subtle nuances of communication. Unfortunately, what is said is often not what is actually meant. You may have a difficult enough time trying to hear what is being said. Often there is not the energy to figure out if that is what is actually meant. It would be great if our world had little pop-up bubbles like those on music videos to tell you what is really going on, but until that happens, below are some tips.

Assessment

In order to improve your social skills, you'll need a realistic picture of your strengths as well as areas that need improvement. It's difficult to work on improving your social skills if you don't understand what it is that you are or are not doing. Self-assessment, along with assessments by others, can help you see blind spots that others can see clearly. However, others will usually not tell you about your social errors unless you specifically and openly ask. For example, Jarryd discovered that his excessive talking often drove others away. He asked a simple question. "Why didn't they just tell me I was talking too much? I can't believe they think that it's rude to tell me that I talk too much. I think it's much ruder to not play with me." Although I agree with him, and perhaps you do too, we don't make the rules.

Take a few minutes to go over the brief checklist included with this article. Ask others to also fill out a copy. When you know what areas you need to improve, you'll have a sense of direction and you'll no longer feel blind-sided by these mysterious social errors.

Becoming a subtext detective:

1. Look for clues in your environment to help you decipher the subtext. Be mindful of

alternative possibilities. Be observant.

2. Be aware of body language, tone of voice, behavior and the look in someone's eyes to help you interpret what is really being said.

3. Look at the choice of words the person uses to help you detect the subtext. (I'd love to go probably means yes. If you want to probably means I'd rather not, but I'll do it.)

4. Actions speak louder than words. If someone's words say one thing but his actions reveal another, it would be wise to consider that his actions might be revealing his true feelings.

5. Find someone to act as a guide to help you with this hidden language. Compare your understanding of reality with the guide's understanding of reality. If there is a discrepancy, you might want to try the other person's interpretation and see what happens, especially if you usually get it wrong.

6. Learn to interpret polite behavior. Polite behavior often disguises actual feelings.

7. Be alert to what others are doing. Look around for clues about proper behavior, dress, seating, parking and the like.

Strategies

Attitude:

Be open to growing in the area of social skills. Be open to feedback from others.

One Goal:

Using your assessment and the assessments of others, pick one goal at a time to work on. Yes, pick only one. You'll be much more successful if you tackle the skill areas one at a time.

If, for example, you struggle with missing pieces of information due to attentional difficulties, you may develop a system of checking what you heard with others. "I heard you say that.... Did I get it right? Is there more?" Or you could ask others to check with you after they give you important information: "Please tell me what you heard me say." In this way, social errors aren't committed because you missed important information.

Observe others:

You can learn a great deal by watching others do what you need to learn to do. Use people in your life as well as people on television to serve as role models.

Role play:

Practice the skill you need with others. Get their feedback on how you are doing.

Visualization:

Gain additional practice and improve the ability to apply this skill in other settings by using visualization. Once you know what you want to do, rehearse this in your mind. Imagine actually using the skill in the setting you will be in, with the people you will be interacting with. Repeat this as many times as possible to help you "overlearn" the skill. In this manner, you can gain experience in the "real" world, which will greatly increase the likelihood of your success.

Prompts:

Set yourself up for success by using prompts to help you stay focused on your social skill goal. The prompts can be visual (an index card), verbal (someone telling you to be quiet), physical (a vibrating watch set every four minutes reminding you to be quiet), or a gesture (someone rubbing his head) to help remind you to work on your social skill.

Learn skills of anger management, negotiation and compromise:

Even though you may not get exactly what you want all the time, if you are able to be included socially with a group of people you want to be with – you still win.

Increase your "likeability":

Social exchange theory states that we maintain relationships based on how well those relationships meet our needs (Taylor, et al., 1997). People are not exactly "social accountants," but people do on some level weigh the costs and benefits of being in relationships. Many with AD/HD are considered "high maintenance." Therefore, it is helpful to see what you can bring into relationships to help balance the equation. Researchers (Anderson, 1968) have found that the following traits are characteristic of highly likeable people:

sincere	reliable
honest	warm
understanding	kind
loyal	friendly
truthful	happy
trustworthy	unselfish
intelligent	humorous
dependable	responsible
thoughtful	cheerful
considerate	trustful

Any of the likeability characteristics you can develop or improve upon should help your social standing.

There are specific things you can learn about yourself as well as specific skills you can learn to help improve your social skills. Seek help through reading, counseling or coaching. You can improve social connections in your life. Social skills can be learned; they do not need to remain a mystery. You too can learn the skills that everybody else seems to know.

Michele Novotni, Ph.D., is author of *What Does Everybody Else Know That I Don't? Social Skills Help for Adults with AD/HD — A Reader Friendly Guide* (1999, Specialty Press) and co-authored, *Adult ADD: A Reader-Friendly Guide to Identifying, Understanding, and Treating Adult Attention Deficit Disorder* (1995, Pinion Press). She lectures extensively on AD/HD. She has more than 20 years of experience as a psychologist working with children and adults with AD/HD and a lifetime of experience living with AD/HD as both her son, Jarryd, and her father have AD/HD. She is an assistant professor in the graduate counseling department of Eastern College, Saint Davids, Pennsylvania.

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