



Why are social skills important?

And do you need to worry if you don't have good social skills?



Welcome to my second issue of Alex's Talkabout Tips! Thank you for being encouraging with my first blog last month... please do continue to comment and let me know what you have found useful and if there is anything in particular you would like me to write about.

So, what's in my second issue of Talkabout Tips?



In this second issue I am continuing the theme of 'making sense of social skills' by thinking about why being socially competent is important. Research appears to point to 4 major reasons why social skills are important skills to learn. So, in this blog, I am going to talk about these and try to summarise why they are linked to your ability to be socially skilled.

1. Quality of Life



The first one is quality of life... Quality of life is a BIG statement isn't it? And I don't know about you, but it often feels a bit vague... what does it mean to say, 'he has a better quality of life than she does' or 'I want a good quality of life'?

So, what does it mean to you? If I asked you 'What makes you happy?' I wonder what you would say. I find that most people immediately talk about relationships in their lives –



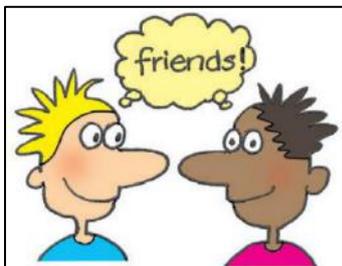
friends, family, a lover or partner. And then they may also talk about their work or what they fill their time with, and their experiences of success.

This appears to be backed up by the definitions of 'quality of life'. Writers talk about the fact that there are a number of 'domains of living' that contribute to your assessment of your own quality of life, or happiness. These include family and friends, work, neighbourhood or shelter, community, health, education, and spiritual. And you are more likely to be happy if...

- you enjoy a supportive network of close relationships,
- you are engaged in work and leisure activity, and
- your culture and faith are supported in your daily lives.

I am going to talk about relationships and success separately below, but if we agree that our quality of life is affected in part by your relationships and your ability to work, and that you need some social skills to make friends and be successful in work (more of that to follow), then it is easy to agree that social competence contributes to quality of life...

2. Relationships



Secondly, we need to talk about relationships. So much of our self-identity and self-worth (and therefore quality of life) comes from our relationships – from being a mother, a husband, a friend, a colleague. Who would you be without your relationships? How would you feel about yourself if you didn't have any friends? How would you know if you were funny, a good listener, or kind? And many authors talk about the importance of relationships to reduce stress, increase self-worth, improve health, and improve quality of life.

Indeed, it is hard to imagine a life without friends. Yet this is often the experience of people who struggle with their social skills. They may have not learnt the skills to go up and introduce themselves, listen attentively, or comment appropriately. And others may perceive them as rude or awkward, shy or stand-offish, aggressive or inept.

Rubin (2002) describes friends as taking centre stage in a child's life and yet children with social skills difficulties often find it hard to make friends and 'are often rejected by their peers'. How many times have you heard a child with social skills difficulties say 'no-one likes me' or 'people are mean to me' or 'I don't have many friends'? So, we can also agree that social skills are important to help people make and keep friends, which will in turn contribute to their quality of life.



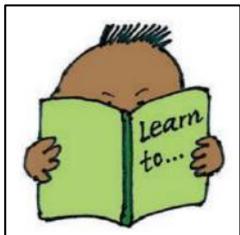
3. Success at school or work



Thirdly, let's talk about success. We also get some of our sense of worth through what we do with our days, our lives. You may not like your job (paid or unpaid) at the moment, but being employed, having a reason to get up in the morning, having a purpose to your day and a role to play, gives you a sense of worth. You are a valued member of society. You have a purpose. How much was your self-esteem or sense of well-being adversely affected by lockdown? I know mine was.

So do you need social skills to have a purpose to your days? No, of course not. But do you need social skills to be successful? It would appear from the research that you do!

Social competence has been repeatedly shown to be a critical variable in predicting success in future life (Denham et al, 2001) and is a more accurate predictor of achievement than intellectual ability (Schneider, 2016). The people who get jobs and get promoted are the people with good social skills. So if we look at our school leavers and try to predict who will be able to get into college or get a job, look at their social competence, not their academic achievements.



However, the interesting thing about academic achievement is the link between social interaction and cognitive development... It has been found that academic achievement is influenced by social competence and peer acceptance, which in turn affects success. So... you have good social skills, your peers like you, you make friends, you are happier about being at school and learning, you do better at school, you are more likely to be successful. Simple.

This has been known for many years. So why don't more schools do more about it? I will talk about this more in another blog, as there is so much to say about what schools can do to help. But I often quote some research that was done in the 90s that concludes with the following:

'when schools attend systematically to students' social and emotional skills, the academic achievement of children increases, the incidence of problem behaviours decreases, and the quality of the relationships surrounding each child improves' (Elias et al, 1997).



4. Staying out of trouble



Finally, we must talk about staying out of trouble. As the previous bit of research showed, improving social skills can also have a positive impact on behaviour. A study in 2007 (Bryan et al) showed that between 60% of young people who pass through young offender institutions have communication difficulties and up to 95% of children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties were found to have social skills difficulties (Butler and Kersey 2012). This means that at least 60% of the children who are

getting into trouble are struggling with their social competence – maybe they had difficulties in reading the situation or they misinterpreted someone else's communication?

When I think about that research back in 2007, I often wonder what would have happened if those children had been taught social skills in school? What if learning social skills was on the curriculum of every school and teachers were trained to teach these skills? Do you think we would see a difference in years to come? I think we would.

So, in summary...

Is it important to be socially skilled? Do we need to worry? Well, it strikes me that we do.

We live in a world where social skills are essential for our quality of life and our self-esteem. You need them to make friends, to do well at school, to get a job, and to stay out of trouble. You are then likely to feel better about yourself, and so your self-esteem continues to stay healthy.

I hope you have enjoyed my second blog. Please do comment on Facebook or share this with others. If you would like to be added to my email distribution list, please contact me through the website or email me directly or PM me.

Thanks for reading!



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I have quoted a few people so here are the full references for those of you who are interested.



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