



Social Skills



Information Sheet



Social Skills

Do you struggle to meet new people or join in conversation at social gatherings? Many people with Dyspraxia/DCD find social situations difficult for many different reasons.

What are Social Skills?

Collins Dictionary defines social skills as *'the skills that are necessary in order to communicate and interact with others.'*

These are the skills that allow a person to act appropriately in given social contexts. They include assertiveness, coping, communication and friendship-making skills.

The first thing to bear in mind is no matter how many social skills you have, if you are anxious things may not go as you hoped so remaining calm is important. Try to relax and use strategies that help you to relax. (See anxiety factsheet for more info)

Below are a few hints and tips that may hopefully be useful to you.

Non Verbal Skills to practice

It might be that your body language is sending the message for others to stay away. Here are some ways to make your body language appear more approachable:

Smile and look interested: The easiest way to appear more approachable is to make sure you are wearing a smile instead of a frown. Try to think of things that make you happy or laugh and your smile will be more natural.

Be accessible: If you are constantly on your phone or buried in a book people will feel like they are interrupting you. Make sure that you are accessible and open to communication from others.

Avoid blocks: Make sure that you aren't using objects to shield yourself from others. The obvious one to avoid is crossing your arms.



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Keep your head up: It is hard for others to know to approach you if your head is constantly down; they need to see your face to feel like you want to get to know them.

Angle towards: Watch your feet, your legs and your body; ensure your feet are facing towards the person and not away. Don't cross your arms/legs as this can sometimes be seen as defensive. If your body language looks interested people then will engage with you better.

Mirroring: This can be a difficult skill to get right - the best way is to every now and again copy the body movement of the person you are talking to. Don't do this all the time as it could start to look odd. It is a subtle skill and one many of us do without realising. Take a look at conversations around you to watch it being done.

Nod during conversation: When listening to someone, nod to show that you are paying attention and interested. Doing this lets the other person know that you want to be involved in the conversation.

Stay positive: As well as your body language, make sure that you are always positive! Say nice things about other people or situations you are in. Include those who seem to be left out.

Use eye contact: A lot of people with Dyspraxia/DCD find this one very tricky. If looking someone in the eye is too difficult, try the following:

- Choose a spot directly between or slightly above the listener's eyes.
- If this doesn't feel comfortable, try letting your eyes go slightly out of focus. Letting your eyes go out of focus has the added benefit of softening and relaxing your gaze.
- Staring too intensely will turn people off and make them uncomfortable in your presence—so be sure to look away occasionally.

When speaking to a group of people, instead of thinking of the group as a whole, imagine having individual conversations with one person in the group at a time.

- As you speak, choose one person in the group and pretend that you are talking just with that person.
- Look at him/her as you finish your thought or sentence.
- As you begin a new sentence or idea, choose another person in the group and look them in the eye as you finish your thought.
- Make sure that you eventually include everyone in the group



Verbal tips to help conversations with others.

Many people with Dyspraxia/DCD find it really hard to initiate a conversation that could result in a potential friendship so here a few tips that may help.

If you're meeting someone for the first time, start the conversation by introducing yourself. This especially applies to more formal situations:

- ✓ "Hey, my name'snice to meet you..."
- ✓ "Hi, what's your name?... I'm"
- ✓ "Hi. I'm from (say what Uni, group, area, organisation)."

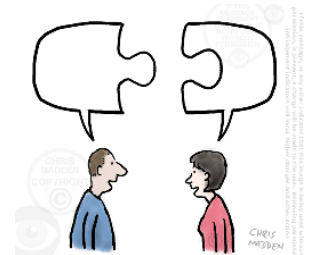


Hopefully this will get things started, but if not we've listed some ideas below to keep the conversation moving. Remember to speak slowly so the other person can hear you ok. Remember to give the other person time to answer. Most importantly LISTEN to the other person's conversation so you can gauge what question to ask next or answer them appropriately.

Ideas for conversations:

Ask how/why the person has ended up in the situation you find yourself in e.g.:

- ✓ "How long have you been working here?"
- ✓ If you are at university or college, ask where they have moved from
- ✓ "Why did you choose to come on this course/event?"
- ✓ "Wow! Work is busy today isn't it?"
- ✓ "It's so cold outside today isn't it?"
- ✓ "Do you know when this place shuts?"
- ✓ "How long have you been a part of/playing for this group/team?"



Comment on something personal. This helps connect with that person and makes the conversation individual:

- ✓ Often the person you are trying to start a conversation with will have some distinguishable feature like a funky shirt or nice piece of jewellery that you can comment on.



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✓ Say something like: “Wow, that is a great shirt, really suits you” or “I really like your ring.”

- ✓ This should start a conversation about where they purchased the item or if the T shirt was of a band or athletic event then you can carry it on from there with bands you like or sport you do.
- ✓ You can start to find out a bit about the person like how long they have been attending the Group, or what school they go/went to, where have they travelled from etc.
- ✓ Don't point out anything too personal though.

Talk to people as if you already know them:

- When you start talking to someone, do it in more or less the same manner as if you were going up to someone you already know and are friendly with. Don't go too far and be inappropriately familiar with people, but at the same time you don't need to be overly formal or courteous and restrained around acquaintances and strangers. When you follow this suggestion you'll naturally adopt a warmer, more confident attitude and put the other person at ease.

Having a Plan B!

Sometimes you'll say something to start a conversation and the other person replies, but doesn't give you much to work with. By far the most classic example is when you ask someone how they're doing and they say "fine" or "good". Or you may ask them about a film they recently saw, and they'll say "It was okay."

You never know when this will happen so it's always good to be prepared to try again and say something else that may get the discussion moving. You could ask a more specific follow-up question, ask about another topic, or make a new statement. In time and with practise you can start to think on your feet more, but starting off it's always good to have a couple of conversation openers in your head ready. Also worth remembering the person may be just as nervous as you, hence the short replies!

Practice makes perfect

Role-playing is a really helpful activity for improving social skills as it creates a mock scenario and allows you to practice skills for any situation you find yourself in.

Ask a friend, family member or trusted colleague to play the part of someone you need to communicate with, and then practice your verbal and non-verbal behaviour with them until you feel comfortable enough to approach the real-life situation.

The role-play partner can provide you with feedback along the way so that you have a better idea of how you may be coming across to others. If you are happy to film yourself, you can watch back and see the areas that you may want to practice.



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Seeking professional help

If you experience severe anxiety it might feel overwhelming to try out these strategies. Although at first it may seem odd, with time you might start to feel more open and confident as a result of changing your body language. If, however, you still struggle to be open with others, you may wish to seek further help for your social anxiety. There are effective treatments such as medication and cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) that could make a difference. In the first instance the Dyspraxia Foundation recommend speaking this through with your G.P who can best advise you of your options.

Below is a link to a website which goes into greater depth about how to go about this that you may wish to read:

<http://www.succeedsocially.com/sociallife>

Sources:

Positivity Blog:18 Ways to Improve Your Body Language. Accessed April 26, 2013.

Gal Time: How to Make Yourself More Approachable. Accessed April 26, 2013.

<http://www.succeedsocially.com/>



Further information available from:

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