

SKILLS

Asking a Friend to Play



Joining a group of children in a game or asking a friend to play can be very challenging for some children. Playing and interacting with others is an important social skill that children need to learn. As an educator of young children, your job is to teach new skills that will help a child build independence and move forward in their development. You also teach new skills to reduce frustration, promote self-esteem, and to replace behaviour that may not be the most acceptable.

You may remember Michael from our Context Story and the difficulties he has with play. During outdoor play time, Michael hits or pushes his peers. He is using problem behaviour to tell others, “I want to play with you”. If you have a child like Michael in your classroom, you too can teach him how to ask a friend to play.

Breaking Down the Task

Though some children quickly learn social skills through observing and imitating others, many children will benefit from having a skill broken down into smaller steps. The breaking down of complex skills into smaller components is called **task analysis**. Anything we do can be broken down into smaller steps. The number of steps depends on the needs of the child.

Let’s break down the steps to asking a friend to play:

1. Look for a friend who is playing.
2. Walk towards the friend.
3. Tap them gently on the shoulder.
4. Look at them and say, “Can I play with you?”
5. Wait for other child to answer.

Teaching the New Skill

One effective way to teach social skills is by creating a Social Script. This is a method of teaching children how to behave in specific social situations. It might include a short description of a challenging social situation and then it provides suggestions of specific things the child can say or do in response to the social situation.

When writing a Social Script, consider using photos or pictures symbols that represent each step. We are going to use picture symbols for Michael's story. You'll also notice that we simplified the skill into three steps and did not include the step of tapping the person on the shoulder. Michael was inappropriately hitting and pushing his peers; we want to teach him to use words to get a friend's attention and ask to play.

Here's what the social script will look like.



We can review this story every day before outdoor play and free play time. Michael may also need some assistance to follow these steps. Remember, that in order for a child to learn the steps to a new skill, you will have to provide assistance or "prompt" along the way. A **prompt** is a cue or hint meant to help a child to perform a desired behaviour, skill, or part of a skill.

We can physically guide him with the first few steps and walk with him to stand next to the other child. Then we prompt him by whispering the exact words he is to say. Once he becomes familiar with asking a friend to play we can reduce the amount of physical prompting by slowly removing ourselves and allowing Michael to do it independently. For example, we can walk through each step - stand close, say the friend's name then WAIT for Michael to say the rest. We can work backwards to fade out the prompting.

Giving Reinforcement

Reinforcement is anything that motivates or encourages a child. It is any environmental event that maintains or strengthens an action or behaviour. Praise, a special activity, music, toys and food can be used as reinforcers. Reinforcement is a reward that occurs or is given after a behaviour.

It is important to motivate and reward a child who is learning a new skill. It helps them to stay on track and understand what is required or expected of them. By rewarding the child for approximating or getting increasingly closer to the steps that we want to see in the end we can shape his behaviour.

We know that Michael wants to play with another child so this is the greatest reward. We may also need to reward Michael as he follows each step in the social script. We can do this with verbal praise, "Yeah Michael, you asked Jazmine to play!"

We are also going to use a token economy system to reinforce Michael for his positive behaviour. Token systems provide a visual representation of how much the child has accomplished and how much

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more he needs to accomplish before reinforcement is delivered.

In this case, Michael will work towards earning his favourite treat - a rice crispy square! Michael will get one token (a picture symbol of a 2 children playing) every time he successfully asks a child to play by following the steps and using words. We'll start with him earning two tokens and gradually increase the requirement to three and four tokens.

Generalizing the New Skill

We want Michael to know that this new skill can be applied in many places, with many people, and under many conditions. For some children asking another child to play at the child care centre does not necessarily mean that they are going to demonstrate this skill at home, or with anyone other than the care provider who taught them.

To help Michael generalize this skill we can:

- Have parents teach the same skills.
- Create a social script that Michael's parents can use at home or out in the community.
- Have all teachers in the classroom participate in teaching this new skill.

Remember that these tools and strategies can also be used to teach children in your program to ask a friend to play and build social skills.

For more information:

- Read about [Michael at the Playground](#) in the Context Story section.
- Learn more about teaching techniques like [Task Analysis](#), [Shaping and Chaining Behaviour](#), and [Prompting and Fading](#).
- Visit our workshops on [Reinforcement](#) and our two-part series workshop on [Understanding and Changing Behaviour](#), [Why does he do that?](#) and [Planning for Change](#).
- Learn more about [Using Visuals](#) in your classroom.
- Take a look at the following [Tip Sheets](#): [Building Social Skills](#), [Creating Social Stories](#) and [Token Economy System](#).