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## **Impact of Social Skills Groups on School Aged Children with Emotional Disturbance**

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Stephanie Coauette, Kaitlyn Ekre, & Benjamin Stagg, 2021

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### **Focused Question**

How does a social skills group for children with emotional disturbance improve their ability to interact in the social context of their elementary school?

### **Clinical Scenario**

According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2017, Sec. 300.8), emotional disturbance is defined as a condition in which there are one or more of the following symptoms that interferes with a child's ability perform successfully in their education: "An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors, an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers, inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances, a general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression, and a tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems" (Sec. 300.8 c, 4, para. i-ii) In a publication from the United States Department of Education's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation (2020), almost six percent of students with disabilities have a diagnosis of emotional disturbance. Even though emotional disturbance affects almost six percent of students, the available literature contains little research on the subject. Specifically, almost no research has been done on occupational therapy interventions to assist in school success. Children with emotional disturbance are an under researched and misunderstood subsection of children with disabilities. One specific diagnosis that exists in the same realm as emotional disturbance and is heavily researched is Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Application of interventions originally geared for ASD to children with emotional disturbance could yield promising results if time and resources are spent on research.

The environment a child spends time in is a complex and dynamic system, even just within the social realities of a school. In a study about 634 school-aged children in results revealed that children in elementary schools, from kindergarten through 5th grade, show that emotional disturbances may lead to social skills problems in the classroom affecting social participation (Chen et al., 2020). The typical ages for children who are in these grade levels are classified as "school-aged" and range from 5 to 11 years old. (Chen et al., 2020). Elementary schools include a primary teacher of that specific grade level, and students who are members of the class. Other staff may include a principal, paraprofessionals, medical professionals such as a school nurse, psychologist, or an occupational therapist. A wide variety of social interactions are required in order to navigate each of these different social contexts. Social behavior development is crucial during these specific years of life, and social-emotional interventions have the potential to prompt positive development (Chen et al., 2020). An in depth awareness of a child's social environment within the school is essential to designing and tailoring interventions geared towards school success. Occupational therapists need to explore various intervention possibilities that can help children with emotional disturbances to improve quality of life and school experience. Social skills play a huge role in the success and development of important life skills in the early school years of life.

Research on interventions targeting social behaviors in individuals with ASD has occurred in the school setting and in an out-patient clinic (Barry et al., 2003; DeRosier, 2004). In their examination of social skills groups for 6 to 9 year old children in an outpatient clinic Barry et al. (2003) worked to examine the development of social skills such as greeting, conversation, and play skills in an outpatient setting while DeRosier (2004) tried to help children develop generic skills specifically for children around age 9 in the school setting. Combining strategies



used in outpatient clinics with the realities involved in a school setting could help create interventions more appropriately targeting social skills that are limited by emotional disturbance. These interventions could help children with emotional disturbance in their occupation of social participation. Oftentimes, children with emotional disturbances may have barriers to socially interact with their peers at the typical developmental time. If school staff are able to create a safe environment to support social interaction among peers, emotional and behavioral struggles can be worked through (Desautels, 2017). In the article written by Desautels (2017), the effects of classroom brain-based learning centers that allow students a brain break from classroom activities and classroom productivity were studied. If students are experiencing emotional disturbances, their focus may be skewed in the classroom and impact the ability to learn. Various interventions that can be incorporated into social skills groups like daily affirmations, small notes, and strategies to work through social interactions in the classroom and focusing redirection may increase classroom output both academically and socially.

One specific intervention, the “2x10” strategy, developed by Raymond Wlodkowski, a psychologist, is a process where for 2 minutes each day for 10 days the student would have a conversation either face-to-face or written with the teacher about anything the student is interested in. He found that this strategy improved overall class performance and behavior (Desautels, 2017). Interventions such as the “2x10” strategy and other social skills based interventions children with emotional disturbance can improve their ability to socially engage in school. In turn, their academic performance, self-efficacy and self-esteem may increase leading to positive outcomes in any number of extracurricular contexts.

The Ecology of Human Performance (EHP), created by Dunn et al. in 1994, gave us an occupational lens to view social skills groups. As EHP postulates, modifying a person’s context as well as helping them increase their performance skills can help increase their performance range or the amount of tasks (occupations) available to them. So too does a social skills group help a child improve their abilities in specific skills while also helping to examine what in the environment is limiting their ability to perform. Even more, this model’s interdisciplinary nature did not bog down our examination of literature with having to apply occupation heavy terminology to another discipline’s language.

With a broad lens to view social skills groups, we also focused our analysis using Jane Ayers’ (1979) groundbreaking Sensory Integration Theory (SIT). SIT explains behaviors related to sensory surroundings and helps occupational therapists plan interventions specific to sensory stimuli that a client may be sensitive to. One key component of this theory focuses on the neuroplasticity of the brain, in essence the brain is capable of changing and learning throughout the lifespan. As such, this theory may help practitioners predict change, incorporate sensations and help modify behaviors related to different reactions that are experienced within children who have emotional dysregulation (Roley et al., 2007). This theory will help us navigate the effects of removing children with emotional disturbances from their environment as well as evaluating the effects of implementing a social skills group within the school setting.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this review is to assist future and current occupational therapy professionals in understanding the current research regarding social skills groups and assist future and current occupational therapy professionals in understanding the current research regarding social skills groups and their application to increasing school performance in children with emotional disturbance ultimately revealing a new area of research.



### **Synthesis of Key Findings**

We reviewed forty articles, of those forty articles sixteen were selected for further review. We felt like we hit the point of saturation when there was recurring research on social skills groups after reviewing forty articles. When narrowing down which articles to include for further review, two categories of information emerged: social skills group research and emotional disturbance research. Due to a lack of research regarding social skills groups, all of the articles we found were included. Unfortunately, none of the articles regarding social skills groups were occupational therapy focused. This is a clear and present gap in existing research for practice. There was more research on emotional disturbance in general, which allowed for the exclusion of articles if they were outside the school setting or involved self-coping techniques instead of group therapy. The date of publication was a point of concern for many of our articles, including Barry et al., 2003; DeRosier, 2004; and Roley, et al., 2007, but we chose to include them for two specific reasons. One, at the time these articles were some of the first on the topic, showing a clear lack of relevant research. Two, although they are slightly older, they still contain quality information. After final review sixteen articles were selected for review, including three level I randomized control trials (DeRosier, 2004; Fernández-Martínez et al., 2020; Kindt et al., 2012), two level II (Chester et al., 2019; DeRosier et al., 2011) two level III (Barnes et al., 2008; Barry et al., 2003), and ten qualitative level N/A (Barnes et al., 2003; Beck et al., 2008; Becker et al., 2014; Chandler, 2007; Chen et al., 2020; Hanchon & Allen, 2013; Nestler & Goldbeck, 2011; Nipedal et al., 2010; Siperstein et al., 2011; Tillman & Prazak, 2019).

There was a variety of levels of evidence among the articles we looked at. The articles ranged from randomized control trials to longitudinal studies; most of the social skills research was centered on children with autism, or emotional disturbance's impact on school performance. It was beneficial to look at randomized control trials as well as qualitative research for our topic, as it provided a fuller picture of the evidence. Inclusion criteria included research on social skills groups for children, school or clinic based programs, emotional disturbance and its impact on children. Exclusion criteria included articles involving participants over the age of 14 and research not involving either social skills groups or some type of emotional or sensory regulation disorder. Our articles all were found utilizing CINAHL, PubMed, EBSCOhost, MEDLINE, SagePub, Wiley, PSYCinfo and on AJOT.

### **Synthesis of Evidence**

Under the IDEA improvement act in 2004, President Bush hoped to reiterate the importance of helping children learn better by promoting accountability for results, enhancing parent involvement, using proven practices and materials, providing more flexibility, and reducing paperwork burdens for teachers, states and local school districts. Unfortunately, studies have shown that children with emotional disturbance are consistently showing little to no improvement over time in academic and social functioning (Siperstein et al., 2011). Specifically, Siperstein et al. (2011) found that students with emotional disturbance are not taking steps forward in the classroom and some are even falling behind. Their study was a self-contained analysis of one classroom, which does not lend great generalizability, but still shows a snapshot of one reality for children with emotional disturbance. In order to discuss children with emotional disturbance, a clear definition is necessary. Unfortunately, as shown in a survey of school psychologists by Hanchon et al. in 2012, the vague and ambiguous definitions across disciplines create confusion for those trying to help students. In most instances, researchers have



noted that due to the complex and poorly defined definition, many of these students do not get the adequate help that they need in order to succeed (Becker, et al., 2014; Chandler, 2007; Hanchon & Allen, 2012). Even more, secondary special educators can have an extremely positive impact on children diagnosed with emotional disturbance (Becker et al., 2014). To identify this information Becker et al. (2014) sent out a confidential online survey to special educators who were conveniently sampled. It is important to consider both mental health and behavioral health when it comes to classifying emotional disturbance in children. Just as Hanchon et al. (2012) found, Becker et al. (2014) emphasized the ambiguity around the definition of emotional disturbance.

In the literature that was found addressing occupational therapy services in school, the research failed to provide insight as to why occupational therapists are not working with this group of children despite the profession's commitment to this area. An evidence-based understanding of the rationale for the makeup of occupational therapy caseloads and the low rate of inclusion of this group is needed. In an article written by Beck et al. (2006), a national survey was conducted using a very specific instrument that asked participants to list any obstacles involving providing occupational therapy services to school-aged students with serious emotional disturbance. In that same article written by Beck et al. (2006), a national survey was conducted with occupational therapists who indicated that their primary employment was in public schools. After analysis, eight themes emerged: role confusion, limited knowledge base, identification and provision of occupational therapy services, administrative factors, lack of efficient teaming, classroom factors, the behaviors of the students with emotional disturbance, and parental factors. Many people in the school systems think that occupational therapists only deal with handwriting and not with children's mental health (Barnes et al., 2003). Barnes et al. (2003) found through a pre-test post-test design that self-regulation strategies can help children with emotional disturbance regulate their behavior at a higher level. School systems tend to have children with ED in special education rooms rather than teaching them how to cope and providing modifications. In an AOTA continuing education article, interventions that were used focused on the development of social skills, peer interactions, leisure activities, organizational skills and strategies, coping strategies, stress management and reduction, and self-image. It was also noted that sensory processing and modulation issues were known to affect social and emotional development (Chandler, 2007).

There are several factors that impact the effects emotional disturbance can have on school-aged children. A lot of the research we reviewed related back to lack of resources or funding for a specific program to be implemented in different settings. Specific training is also required for individuals that want to start a program within the school like a social skills group for students with emotional disturbances (Kindt et al., 2012). According to Nestler et al. (2011), the interaction of emotional, behavioral, and social problems in students with intellectual disability or emotional disturbance occurs in about half of students when compared to students with normal development. Transitioning from school to a work setting later in life is typically more challenging for those students with intellectual disabilities or emotional disturbance (Nestler et al., 2011). Due to this, we see a need for implementation of a social skills group or extracurricular program for these students to engage in.

Expanding on previous work, DeRosier et al. (2011) found further evidence that social skills group interventions helped children with ASD in mastery of social skills. In a broad sense, social skills groups can occur in a variety of contexts including outpatient clinics (Barry et al., 2003; DeRosier et al., 2011) and in the school (DeRosier, 2004). In school settings, social skills



groups and keeping children with ASD in the typical classroom have been shown to help increase traits such as self-esteem and self-efficacy (DeRosier, 2004), while also reducing aggressive and emotional outbursts in typical developing children (Nipedal et al., 2010). For children with emotional disturbances and childhood trauma further problems in academics can start when they begin grade school, and implementing a social skills group or small group program for students may help their emotional state (Loewy, 2019). Emotional disturbances in younger life impact the ability to develop social skills at the appropriate developmental age (Fernandez-Martinez et al., 2020). According to Fernández-Martinez et al. (2020) early intervention using a social skills group in the school setting may help children reach the social participation milestones for their specific age. Low-income housing may contribute to emotional disturbances due to lack of resources (Kindt et al., 2012), but Carter et al. (2011) countered that emotional disturbances can happen in a variety of settings with little or many resources available and can be addressed through self-determination in grade-level students. The multitude of roadblocks in the path of children with emotional disturbance is high, yet little research exists on the implementation of social skills groups with them.

One area where the research does exist is social skills groups implementation for children with autism. When examining existing literature, many studies addressed social skills groups for children with ASD (Barry et al., 2003; Chester et al., 2019; DeRosier et al., 2011). Chester et al. (2019) assigned participants to one of three groups including social skills training with unstructured play, with semi-structured play and waitlist control; children who participated in the social skills training showed significant improvement in both social skills and social competence after the study. Social skills groups specifically created for children with ASD helped to foster growth in the broad areas such as social awareness, motivation for social interaction and social communication skills (DeRosier et al., 2011), and target skills such as greeting, play, initiating and responding (Barry et al., 2003). Even though another study by Chester et al. (2019), also contributed to the growing evidence suggesting that a social skills group can increase social skills and competence in children with autism, it is the one of the only outpatient groups to show statistical levels of generalizability. Without generalizability, the current social skills group research helps to show the value, but does not contain any interventions that could be implemented in children with autism. Compounded with this is a clear lack of research utilizing social skills groups for children with emotional disturbance. One of the first and only research studies to address a non-ASD centered social skills group was published in 2019 by Tillman and Prazak. In their mixed methods pre-test post test pilot study, they identified a similar lack of quality and applicable research for social skills group training on individuals without autism. As a result, they developed the Friendship Club, a group that targeted social skills in individuals without any clear or pervasive psychological disorders. Their study included topics such as listening to others, asking questions, complimenting friends, joining play, asking for help, apologizing and dealing with teasing. Many studies including the research by Barry et al. (2003) and Tillman and Prazak (2019) showed that social skills groups are efficacious. The next step is quality research to target individuals with emotional disturbance, specifically social interaction within the school setting.

After reviewing the evidence including studies conducted in outpatient clinics and school based groups, most if not all of the research is focused on children with autism. Social skills groups have shown high levels of efficacy with this population, but the generalization to other diagnoses is still not supported by the research. A strength within the research we found was the number of studies done regarding children diagnosed with ASD and the positive effects of a



social skills group. A weakness within the research is the lack of studies involving emotional disturbance and the effects of social skills groups on school-aged children with this diagnosis. Furthermore, most of the studies on social skills groups are based in disciplines outside of occupational therapy. This clear gap in the literature demonstrates a very promising future intervention area for occupational therapy as a discipline.

### **Clinical Bottom Line**

Our focused question for this CAT was “How does a social skills group for children with emotional disturbance improve their ability to interact in the social context of their elementary school?”. After reviewing a wide variety of research, there was no conclusive support for social skills groups for children with emotional disturbance. Based on the other research reviewed, we have concluded that children with emotional disturbance may benefit from a social skills group implemented in the school setting. Although there is a lack of clear research on this specific implementation, studies involving social skills groups with children with ASD continually show promising results. With the continued efficacy for children with autism, research on the generalization of social skills groups to individuals with ED is the next logical step. Social skills groups have been shown to be a valuable tool for children with autism, and now there needs to be research on the effectiveness of social skills group interventions for individuals with emotional disturbance.

### **Contextual Implications**

Emotional disturbance severely impacts a child’s ability to learn, maintain interpersonal relationships with classmates and teachers and may cause general unhappiness, depression or fear regarding school or personal problems (U.S. Department of Education, 2017, Sec. 300.8). ED is only exacerbated by the wide range of skills and interactions necessary to thrive in school and the development of these skills is crucial to future developmental milestones (Chen et al., 2020). There are concrete and unspoken rules, social norms, non-verbal cues, and a wide range of sensory stimuli all to filter through. This wide spectrum of skills is essential in navigating school for any child, and ED is no exception. If this was not difficult enough, the context the children move into outside of the school day also plays a role in their success. The research on external contexts' influence on children with ED is inconclusive as there is varying evidence. On one hand, Kindt et al. (2012), saw low-income housing as a contributing factor to emotional disturbance, but Carter et al. (2011) disagreed. As we have previously noted, the research on this topic has not caught up to the need.

### **Usefulness in Practice**

When viewing the current research on social skills groups, occupational therapy practitioners can use the Ecology of Human Performance (EHP) to fully understand their usefulness. Both the students themselves and the school and external contexts around them need to be adapted to increase the overall performance range, and the tasks (occupations) students can be successful with (Dunn et al., 1994). Social skills groups can increase self-esteem and self-efficacy (DeRosier, 2004) teach skills such as social awareness, motivation for social interaction, and social communication skills (DeRosier et al., 2011) and help improve the skills of greeting, play, initiating and responding (Barry et al., 2003). It is essential that more research occurs specifically addressing social skills interventions for children with emotional disturbance. These individuals represent such a unique group of students that are being left behind. As occupational





therapists, we have a unique opportunity to assist in the development of children with ED and typical children as well. As Tillman and Prazak (2019) suggested, social skills groups can help students without a diagnosis. If social skills training is implemented for all students, with options to tailor it as needed, students with and without deficits could be helped (Tillman & Prazak, 2019).

### ***Future Research***

The research is helpful to practicing occupational therapists because client care should always remain centered on the clients' wants and needs. Collaboration between therapists and school setting administration is beneficial to the students enrolled in the institution by specifically addressing needs in order to help the children perform to the best of their abilities. Furthering research addressing interventions for elementary age of students with emotional disturbances will impact the way schools function, and will bring to light many programs and supports that can be implemented to enhance educational experiences for this population of students. Although evidence for social skills groups in the school settings is lacking, we know that there are positive correlations between development of social skills and school performance. Specifically, research addressing social skills groups for children with emotional disturbance is needed in order to fully understand the efficacy of these groups. Current research in a school setting does exist, but very little is linked to how emotional disturbances affects school performance. Due to the lack of research provided, we suggest that the design of future studies be pre-test post-test with emphasis on how a social skills group for children with emotional disturbance improves their ability to interact in the social context of their elementary school. With time, research can progress to randomized control trials, but currently the base of knowledge does not support this type of design.

### ***Future Intervention***

If nothing else, this critically appraised topic paper shows a clear need for occupational therapy to research and implement this promising intervention into practice. Based on the research we reviewed, social skills groups are efficacious for children with ASD, and their generalizability to children with emotional disturbance is just waiting to be explored.



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