

Teaching Job-Related Social Skills To Learning Disabled Adolescents

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Little information is available on the use of social skills by persons with disabilities in work settings. Positive styles of interaction in the workplace might include the job-related social skills of explaining a problem to a supervisor, providing constructive criticism, accepting criticism, accepting a compliment, accepting an instruction, and providing a compliment. The effects of training procedures for these social skills were evaluated with two learning disabled adolescents. The results showed the procedures to be effective in increasing the level of job-related social skills performed by the participants in analogue situations. Direct observations of performance taken at the adolescents' place of employment suggest some generalization of training effects to actual work environments.

Improved skill in social situations may extend opportunities for reinforcement and decrease possibilities for punishment for many populations during interactions in a variety of settings and situations. Social skills training has been conducted with diverse client populations, including chronic schizophrenics (Bellack, Hersen, & Turner, 1976), mentally retarded adults (Senatore, Matson, & Kazdin, 1982), predelinquents (Braukmann, Maloney, Fixsen, Phillips, & Wolf, 1974), and the economically disadvantaged (Barbee & Keil, 1973). Social skills training has been identified as a technique for increasing assertiveness in school settings (Galassi & Galassi, 1978), improving conversational skills with members of the opposite sex (Kelly, Urey, & Patterson, 1980), and improving effectiveness in job interviews (Hall, Sheldon-Wildgen, & Sherman, 1980; Hollands worth, Gla-

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zeksi, & Dressel, 1978). However, little information is available on the effects of teaching social skills that might be functional in everyday employment situations or the effects of social skills training with learning disabled adolescents (Meyen & Deshler, 1978).

Tensions between workers and their supervisors often follow such common employment situations as a worker's failing to follow an instruction, arguing with a supervisor, or failing to report a problem that exists in the work situation (Kimbell & Vineyard, 1975). Presumably, the job-related social skills of accepting instructions and criticism from an employer and explaining problems to an employer might help workers avoid the aversive consequences that can follow such problem situations. In addition, the use of constructive job-related social skills, such as accepting compliments and complimenting coworkers on their work, may increase the amount and types of positive reinforcement available to workers and their supervisors.

Previous research (Mathews, Whang, & Fawcett, 1981; 1982) indicated that learning disabled adolescents have difficulties in the area of job-related social skills. The present study analyzed the effects of training procedures and materials designed to teach the job-related social skills of accepting criticism, providing constructive criticism, explaining a problem, accepting an instruction, providing a compliment, and accepting a compliment. This research was conducted with learning disabled adolescents who were employed at the time of the research. In addition, the study measured the generalization of the training effects to actual work environments.

METHOD

Trainees and Setting

Two high school students from a midwestern city of 60,000 served as trainees. Both students had been identified by high school personnel as learning disabled and were enrolled in at least one credit hour in the high school's Learning Center classroom. The trainees were recruited by a notice posted on a bulletin board in the Learning Center classroom requesting the participation of currently-employed students. Both trainees and their parents were informed of the purposes of the research and consented to participate. Both students received a \$30 incentive payment for participation.

The first trainee, whom we shall call Ron, was a 17-year-old high school junior who was employed as a cook at a fast-food restaurant. On the WAIS, his scores were 99 for Performance IQ and 76 for Verbal IQ, with a Full Scale score of 85. Lisa, the second trainee, was a 17-year-old junior, who was employed as a switchboard operator at an answering service. Her WAIS scores were 96 for Performance IQ, 85 for Verbal IQ, and a Full Scale score of 89.

Training and assessment in the job-related social skills were conducted after school at a place that was convenient to the participant. These settings included the public library, a community service center, and a university office. Assessments were also made in the students' place of work.

Observation

The participants' social skills were observed during both analogue and actual employment situations. A role-playing evaluation script (Mathews, Whang, & Fawcett, 1980) was developed for six social interaction situations, including (a) providing a compliment, (b) accepting an instruction from a supervisor, (c) accepting a compliment, (d) accepting criticism from a supervisor, (e) providing constructive criticism, and (f) explaining a problem to a supervisor. Each script specified the verbal statements and physical activities that the experimenter, playing the role of the participant's supervisor or coworker, was to say or do. A different script was used for each of the observation sessions. Each of these scripts included situations that were different from those used during training. At the beginning of each situation the participants were instructed to perform "as if" they were in the actual job-related situation.

The job-related social skills and discrete behaviors involved in the performance of each skill were identified in a previous study (Mathews et al. 1980) which applied Goldfried and D'Zurilla's (1969) behavioral-analytic model to the development and validation of an occupational skills assessment instrument. Table 1 displays the discrete behaviors involved in the performance of each job-related social skill. A detailed response definition was prepared for each behavior.

Each role-playing evaluation session was recorded on audio tape. In addition, two pretraining situations and two posttraining situations for each skill were videotaped. An observer, using behavioral checklists, listened to the audio tapes and scored the occurrence or nonoccurrence of each discrete behavior. A percentage score was derived by multiplying 100 times the number of behaviors scored as an occurrence divided by the number of behaviors noted in the task analysis. A second observer independently scored the participants' performance from a random sample of the same audio tapes. Interobserver agreement was measured by an item-by-item comparison of the target behaviors for each social skill situation. An agreement was scored when both observers scored an item as having occurred or not having occurred. A disagreement was scored when one observer scored an item as having occurred and the other observer scored that same item as not having occurred. Total reliability was calculated by dividing the number of agreements by the number of agreements plus disagreements multiplied by 100. Total reliability averaged 92% (ranging from 88% to 100%).

In an attempt to measure the generalization of treatment effects, each participant was also observed before and after training at his or her place of employment. During these situations, one of the researchers observed the participant's

TABLE 1
Job-Related Social Skills

- A. *Providing a compliment*
 - 1. Make or return initial greeting.
 - 2. Provide compliment.
 - 3. Provide positive response to lead into conversation.
- B. *Accepting an instruction*
 - 1. Acknowledge that you heard request to talk and state that you can talk. (If a request was made.)
 - 2. Acknowledge that you heard the instruction.
 - 3. Repeat the instruction.
 - 4. State that you will follow the instruction, or explain why you can't.
- C. *Accepting a compliment*
 - 1. Thank the person for the compliment.
 - 2. Comment about the content of the compliment.
- D. *Accepting criticism*
 - 1. Restate the criticism or ask for clarification.
 - 2. Apologize for what you did incorrectly or state agreement with the problem.
 - 3. Request permission to explain.
 - 4. Explain your side with fact.
 - 5. Request or provide solutions to avoid the problem from occurring in the future.
 - 6. Make a positive comment about the potential solution.
 - 7. Provide further comment.
- E. *Providing constructive criticism*
 - 1. Request an opportunity to speak with the person.
 - 2. Describe your concern.
 - 3. Provide constructive criticism.
 - 4. Provide rationale for change.
 - 5. Ask if the person understood.
 - 6. Thank the person for listening to you.
- F. *Explaining a problem*
 - 1. Request an opportunity to speak with your supervisor.
 - 2. State that you have a problem.
 - 3. Describe the problem.
 - 4. Describe any solutions you have considered.
 - 5. Solicit suggestions.
 - 6. Repeat supervisor's suggestions.
 - 7. Ask if you should do anything else about the situation.
 - 8. Thank the supervisor for helping.

performance during interactions with coworkers and supervisors. When an opportunity for the display of one of the social skills occurred (e.g., the supervisor complimented the participant) the observer scored the participant's performance. For Ron, the observer sat in a corner of the fast-food restaurant near the cooking grills. For Lisa, the observer sat in a corner of the answering service office near the area where Lisa and her supervisor worked. The opportunity for scoring the performance of a skill, such as accepting a compliment from a coworker, depended on the naturally occurring interactions between the supervisor, coworkers, and trainee. A total of four two-hour observation sessions were conducted, during

which the observer attempted to be as unobstructive as possible. During these observation sessions there were a total of 12 opportunities to score Ron's performance of the job-related social skills before he participated in training and 11 opportunities to score his performance after training. There were four opportunities to score Lisa's performance before and after training. Before these observations, all participants, coworkers, and supervisors were informed of the nature of the observations and consented to being observed.

Training in Job-Related Social Skills

The instructional materials used to teach the job-related skills were designed in a standardized format consisting of written behavioral specifications for the task, examples of appropriate performance of the task, rationales for each task, and a study guide (Fawcett & Fletcher, 1977; Fawcett, Fletcher, & Mathews, 1980).¹ The training followed a standardized format (Mathews & Fawcett, 1977) that consisted of reading the prepared materials, practice, and corrective feedback.² First, each trainee read the written specifications, examples, and rationales contained in the instructions. Second, the learner answered study guide questions, re-reading the instructions when unable to correctly answer a study guide question. Third, Ron or Lisa practiced the behaviors with one of the experimenters, receiving feedback on performance and an opportunity to re-practice to mastery. Mastery was defined as performing the entire skill to 100% criteria during two consecutive practice situations. This procedure was followed for each of the six skills. An average of 35 minutes was required for each trainee to reach mastery on a single social skill.

Ratings by Employment Experts

To determine the social importance (Wolf, 1978) of any changes in the performance of the social skills, five employment experts were asked to view videotaped role-playing sessions. These experts included a personnel manager from a large company, a general manager and an assistant manager from a fast-food restaurant, and a supervisor and an assistant supervisor from a small private business. The judges viewed the participants' performance in one baseline and one posttraining situation for each of the social skills. The order of viewing the videotaped segments was randomized. The experts were not informed about whether the sessions occurred before or after training, nor were they informed about the specific behaviors used to score performance.

The lessons *Learning Job-Related Social Skills*, by R. M. Mathews, P. L. Whang, and S. B. Fawcett, are available from the third author for the cost of reproduction.

²Detailed instructions are provided in the instructor's manual for the textbook, *Learning Job-Finding Skills* which is available from the third author for the cost of reproduction.

For each skill situation, the expert judges viewed the videotape and then answered the question: "How satisfied are you with the person's performance (on this task)?" Ratings were completed on a 5-point bi-polar scale that ranged from "not satisfied" to "very satisfied."

Experimental Conditions

The effects of the training procedures on performance of the job-related social skills was analyzed using a multiple-baseline design across skill categories. The effects of training were replicated with the same skills for two trainees. The experimental design consisted of the following conditions.

Baseline. The performance of each trainee was observed for each of the six social skills. No specific instructions or feedback were provided in how to respond in the job-related situations.

Social Skills Training. After three observation sessions, training to mastery was administered for the first and fourth skills. After the sixth observation session, training was conducted for the second and fifth skills. Training was administered for the third and sixth skills after the ninth observation session. Upon completion of training, trainee performance was again observed for each skill. Regardless of posttraining performance, in the evaluation sessions, no additional training was provided.

Follow-up Observation. A follow-up observation session for the six social skills was conducted four weeks after training.

RESULTS

The percentage of occurrence of the target behaviors in the six social interaction skills completed correctly by each of the trainees was markedly higher after training than before. For Ron (Figure 1) training resulted in an increase from a baseline mean of 39% of the social skills completed correctly to a posttraining mean of 97%. In the four week follow-up session, he performed 76% of the target behaviors. For Lisa (Figure 2) training resulted in a similar increase from an overall baseline mean of 41% to a posttraining mean of 90%. In a four week follow-up session she was observed to perform 64% of the target behaviors.

Generalization data collected for Ron, at the fast-food restaurant, showed performance increased for the skill of "accepting a compliment" from a baseline mean of 25% to a posttraining mean of 67%. Performance of "accepting an instruction" increased from a baseline mean of 17% to a posttraining mean of 77%, and "accepting criticism" increased from 0% during baseline observations

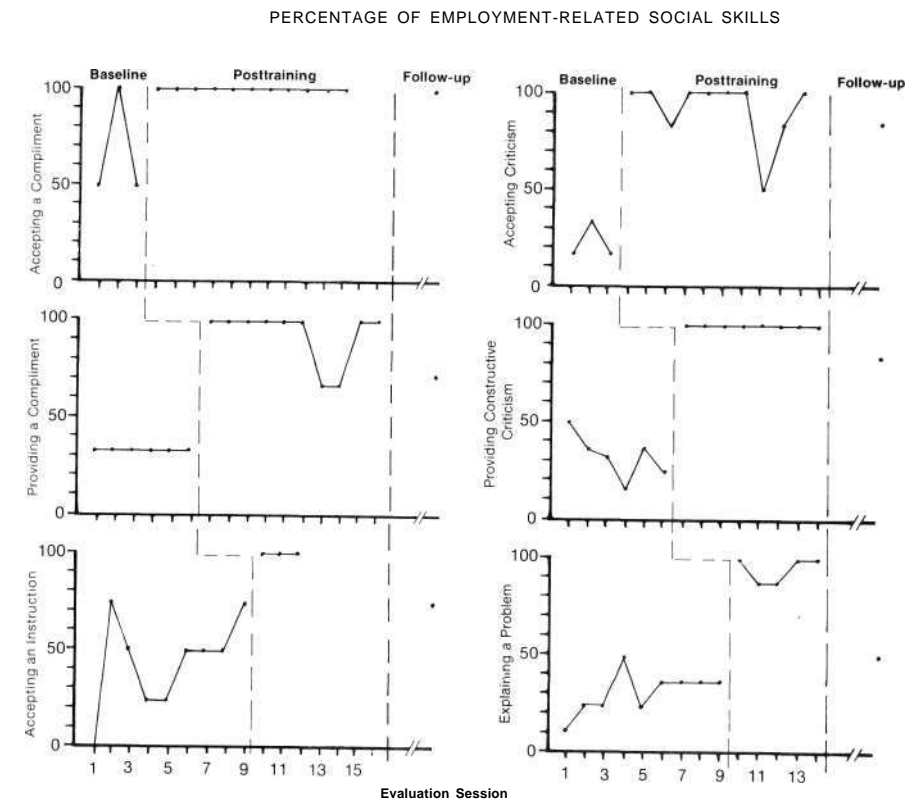


FIGURE 1. Percentage of occurrence of target behaviors for the six job-related social skills performed by Ron.

to 33% following training. Generalization data on Lisa's performance of job-related social skills was also collected at the answering service. Lisa was observed to perform 33% of the behaviors involved in "accepting an instruction" during baseline and 100% after training. For the situation of "accepting a compliment," she increased from 0% during baseline observations to 50% following training. The occurrence and scoring of each skill depended on the naturally occurring interactions between the supervisors, coworkers, and the trainee. Therefore, observations of the other social skills were not possible during the generalization sessions.

Ratings of Ron's performance during the videotape analog situation showed an average satisfaction rating of 2.9 (on a 5-point scale) for his pretraining performance and 4.7 at posttraining observation. Ratings of Lisa's pretraining performance averaged 3.0 and increased to 3.4 for posttraining. Increases in

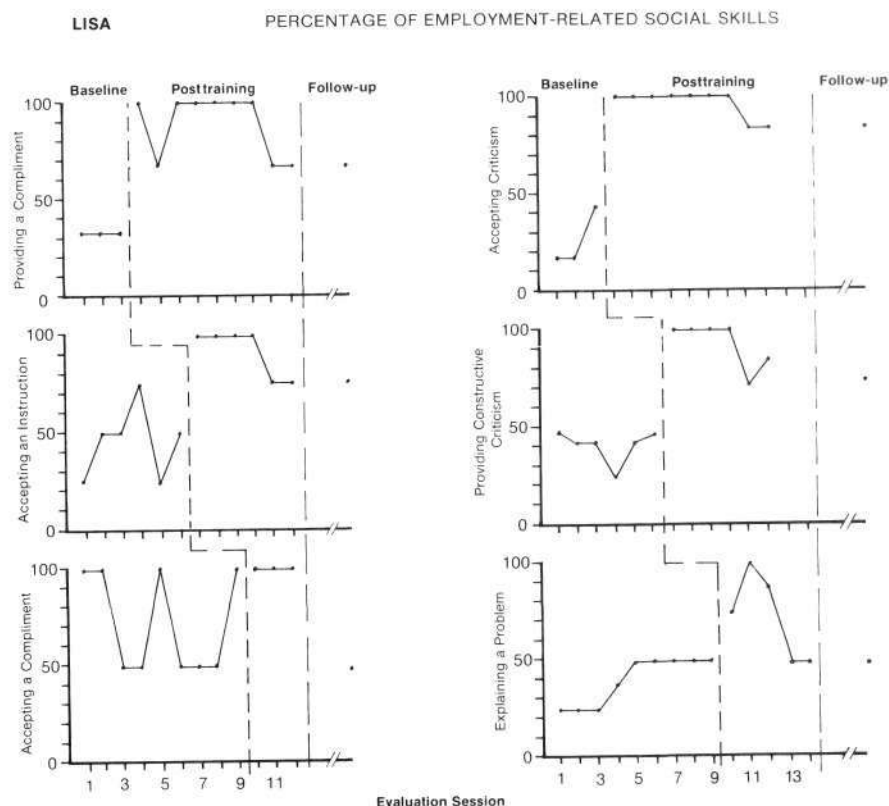


FIGURE 2. Percentage of occurrence of target behaviors for the six job-related social skills performed by Lisa.

satisfaction during the posttraining observation over the rating of pretraining performance were noted for the skills of accepting an instruction, explaining a problem, accepting criticism, and complimenting a coworker.

DISCUSSION

The results suggest that the training procedures were effective in increasing the job-related social skills performed by learning disabled adolescents in analogue situations. The four week follow-up observations indicated that the performance of the skills declined over time, yet remained above baseline levels. Observations at the trainees' place of employment indicated that increases in the performance of the social skills generalized to the actual work situation. In addition, expert judges' ratings of satisfaction with trainee performance showed increases corresponding to the observed rates of the social skills. These combined

findings suggest that the procedures are effective with learning disabled adolescents and that these effects may have generalized to the work setting and other evaluative measures of social skill performance.

A number of questions remain unanswered by this study. First, the single follow-up observation does not permit clear statements regarding the maintenance of training effects. Second, the small number of observations of generalization, for only some of the social skills, does not permit definitive statements about the generalization of effects to actual employment situations. Third, the study did not address which specific responses may be critical to each social skill. Further research might examine generalization across time and situations and might isolate specific responses and procedural components of particular importance.

Societal observers (e.g., Terkel, 1974) have noted that aversive forms of control (e.g., yelling, harsh criticism) are commonly used with workers in employment settings. Skinner (1974) argued that the redesign of social environments based on the scientific analysis of behavior is a promising approach to promoting countercontrol in such potentially oppressive environments. Presumably, workers' social interaction skills represent a basis for restructuring the social aspects of the work environment. Training workers in the use of job-related social skills may reduce harassment and other aversive forms of control used by supervisors and employers. As such, job-related social skills training may offer a starting point from which more comprehensive programs may be designed for workers with learning disabilities, minority status, or other circumstances associated with less than optimal working environments.

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