

# Skillstreaming- A Step Toward Improved Self Esteem and Academic Progress?

Judy Cody

## Biography



Judy Cody teaches the Primary Assessment Class (PAC), at West Lynn Public School in Simcoe. The PAC class is comprised mainly of students of Grade 1 age, working on improving readiness skills. The students are also assessed during their year in PAC. Judy began her teaching career in Grade 1, then taught Kindergarten for 18 years, before moving to the PAC class. Before teaching, Judy worked as a residential counselor for Developmentally Delayed adults, and then as a group home parent for adolescent boys with the Children's Aid Society.

## Abstract

This is an account of a Special Education Teacher incorporating social skills as an important aspect of learning for students in a Primary Assessment Class. Although progress was not steady and sometimes discouraging, improvements were made. Teacher observations, and comments of colleagues indicate an improvement in the ability of the students to solve conflict and to work together.

## Background

After a few weeks with my new group of students in the Primary Assessment class, I realized I was becoming increasingly frustrated each day, particularly after each recess, with the amount of time spent mediating the social problems that occurred during recess. Usually at least ten minutes was spent discussing who said what to whom, or who was unkind, or who pushed to be first. Most of the problems seemed quite insignificant, yet to the children these were major issues and, consequently, they demanded the attention of the two adults in our classroom.

Also, classroom games and activities were anything but fun. There was constant bickering about who would have the glue first, who sat in someone's spot, and a general "me first" attitude that made our classroom atmosphere unpleasant. The children seemed to lack basic consideration of the feelings of others.

One day, late in September, Peggy Blair, coordinator of Special Education for the Grand Erie District School Board (GEDSB), visited me in my classroom. She asked if I would be interested in doing an Action Research project on "Skillstreaming". To be honest, I was a bit intimidated by the term "Action Research", but I knew my students needed the social skills training. I said, "Yes."

Many of the children in our program arrived with reports of difficulties accepting authority, difficulties developing social relationships with their peers, impulsive and aggressive behaviours, and poor work habits. I wondered how much these problems contributed to the lack of academic progress that brought them to the PAC class. Or did the lack of academic progress lead to frustration, and consequently poor social skills? Did inability to relate positively to others in the school setting develop poor self-esteem? Or did poor self-esteem result in more inappropriate behaviours? I had many questions, and all the things I was considering seemed to be intertwined.

Would formal teaching of social skills result in more socially acceptable behaviours by my students, and consequently the development of self-esteem and more academic success?

I knew that the children needed to learn more positive responses in social situations, but how would it fit in our day? Was it really my job? I think teachers all feel overwhelmed with the amount of material we need to cover, and there never seems to be enough time. Teaching social skills seemed to be one more thing, but I felt that it was important. This belief was reinforced when we watched a video by Rick Lavoie during one of our Action Research group sessions October 28, 2003. I noted that he said that a teacher saying, “I don’t have time to teach social skills”, is like the farmer who says “I don’t have time to fix the fence, I’m too busy chasing the cows” (Lavoie, 1997). I laughed. And I admitted to myself that whether I spent the time teaching positive social skills, or whether I spent the time mediating and dealing with negative behaviours, the time was being spent!

Also, can children be taught social skills, or are they a part of each individual personality? The authors of *Skillstreaming* feel that rather than focus on decreasing negative behaviours, young children can be taught “Behaviours that are acceptable and rewarding, and that facilitate good interpersonal relationships and readiness to learn academically” (McGinnis & Goldstein, 1990, p. 3 ). Also, the authors state that “children typically do what they know or what is familiar to them. The focus of social skills training is to increase these children’s repertoire of choices” ( McGinnis and Goldstein, 1990, p. 151). It would seem, then, that the authors believed that social skills can be taught.

However, if we taught specific social skills, how much change could it make in the short ten months that a particular group of children are in our classroom? Would it result in less time spent each day dealing with social problems, and consequently more time to spend on academics? Or, should this even be the issue? Perhaps I was approaching these problems with the wrong attitude. The authors of *Skillstreaming* state that assuming that children have a deficit of social skills “allows adults to focus on proactive instruction instead of reacting to children’s misbehaviour as if it were done purposefully to create problems. In other words, it is recognized that it is more important to teach desirable skills than to punish children for inappropriate behaviours” ( McGinnis and Goldstein, 1990, p. 9 ). In Rick LaVoie’s video, he states that positive reinforcement changes behaviour, negative reinforcement only stops behaviour.

Also, I have always taught social skills, to an extent, dealing with specific issues as they come up in the classroom. Is this not enough? Not according to the authors of *Skillstreaming*. “Incidental learning (such as discussing alternatives or telling children what to do) is insufficient for children to learn alternative behaviours and to perform these behaviours under stressful conditions” ( McGinnis and Goldstein, 1990, p. 9). It would seem that in order for the child to develop a repertoire of appropriate responses, he or she needs to practice the skills, just like he or she needs to practice academic skills. I was willing to give it a try.

The Skillstreaming program consists of a book that discusses the background of the program, the program, the skills, the research, a box of task cards, and a spiral bound book with blackline masters of questionnaires, homework tasks and rewards. There are programs geared towards early childhood, elementary age students, and adolescents. I chose to use the program for early childhood with my group of five and six year old children, since the skills at that level seemed most appropriate.

## Process

In January I began by sending home the questionnaire for parents and guardians along with an explanatory note. Most of the questionnaires were completed and returned the following day, in spite of the fact that they were several

pages long. I was encouraged by the prompt response of parents and guardians, and I realized they must have felt that these skills are an important part of their child's program as well.

I did not complete the teacher's questionnaire myself, but asked DeAnna Kirkwood, the Educational Assistant in our classroom, to undertake that task. I felt that would be helpful, because I knew the skills that I thought the children needed, and DeAnna's input added a third opinion. I tabulated the results with a check system, and identified the skills most of the children needed. It was not surprising to discover that parents and guardians, DeAnna and I all generally agreed on the skills on which the children needed to work.

I considered when I would set aside time for the Skillstreaming lessons. I decided that the afternoon would be best. I felt that 15 minutes would be enough time for each specific lesson.

Each skill in the program has several steps that the child is to follow when dealing with an issue. These steps are illustrated for the early childhood program. DeAnna spent some time during one of our snow days in January making small posters to list and illustrate the steps for each skill. (I have put these in a binder in plastic sleeves so that they can be reused). We were ready to start our formal social skills program!

We began with the skill of listening. Each lesson is broken down into steps. The first step involves defining the skill. We talked about some times when listening is important, and the consequences of not listening. We reviewed the steps for being a good listener several times, and practiced the steps together.

I then modeled what good listening looks like, and the children talked about how well I used the steps. Two of the children then modeled the skill, and the others watched carefully to see how well the role players followed the steps. Homework can then be assigned to the role players, and the next role player is chosen.

In my group, I found it necessary to spend several days on a skill. We usually talked about the skill and the steps, then did some role playing on several subsequent days.

We often reviewed the steps during opening exercises, as well as at times when a child needed to use the skill. Lots of repetition was needed. I also did not do as much writing during the lessons as suggested, because I found that the children were having difficulty attending.

As well as the formal lessons, I tried to use the playground incidents as a teaching tool. I found that when I approached problems with the attitude that this was an opportunity for teaching, I wasn't as frustrated and the other children had input into the situations. They were able to suggest alternate responses to problems, and it felt more like we were working together. We practiced how to deal with many situations, not just the skills we had covered. For example, one child had difficulty dealing with anyone touching him when we were sitting in the circle. This often resulted in a shoving match. We discussed possible solutions. Then we all practiced asking, "Would you please move over?" At first the kids seemed to think it was a game, and said it if anyone was even near them. This tapered off, and now the skill is usually used only when necessary.

## Findings

At the beginning of March, after two months of the program, as well as several mini lessons, I was a little discouraged. We didn't seem to be making much progress. I reread my notes, and was reminded of the Rick Lavoie video that directed adults to "reinforce each step toward the goal (and to) reward direction, not perfection" (Lavoie, 1990). I remembered that after one incident of pushing in the yard, the child who pushed was at least able to tell me what he should have done (count to 5, stop and think, walk away). I praised him for remembering the steps, while wondering to myself why he didn't DO IT! The other children, for the most part, were also able to tell me what should have happened when we discussed particular incidents. However, they were not using the skills spontaneously.

On February 23 I noted that one of the children complained that someone was making faces at him. Another child said, “Just ignore him”. A March 1 journal entry noted that after a Monday morning assembly, one of the children informed me that a girl had been poking him, but he just “ignored her”. Small steps, but steps in the right direction!

On March 24, Jalyne Reynolds, a student teacher, visited our classroom. She had worked for some weeks in our school. My journal entry quotes her as saying, “These children are so polite to each other!” (Journal entry, March 24, 2004)

What a wonderful compliment! Could they be learning?

On March 30, another entry relates an incident overheard by DeAnna Kirkwood. One of the girls was working on a puzzle and asked one of the boys, “Would you like to help me make this puzzle?” The boy answered, “No, thank you.” If nothing else, we were speaking more politely to one another!

Then early in April, I entered in my journal that one of my fellow staff members, Mike Rustan, told me about an incident outside in the yard with one of my students. The child involved has a great deal of difficulty with impulsive behaviours, and can also be very aggressive when he feels threatened. Mr. Rustan said the child hurt another student, and Mike asked him to go and stand by the wall. The boy immediately shouted “No”, and Mike said “Excuse me?”. The child then stopped, thought a second, and said, “I’m sorry, I’ll go to the wall”. I knew this would have never happened earlier in the year. What a huge step for this child! Could we really be making progress?

What about the self esteem issue? Were the kids feeling better about themselves? They certainly loved to report the times that they used a skill appropriately. One child, who frequently exhibits aggressive behaviours, told me that someone was bothering him outside but he counted to five, then thought about it, and walked away. He asked, “Are you so proud of me?”

I was noticing more “random acts of kindness”. Empathy seemed to be developing in our students. “Children who are able to show empathy are far less likely to act out aggressively, and are more accepted and sought after in social situations” ( McGinnis and Goldstein, 1990, p. 158). Showing empathy, one would assume, would lead to increased self esteem. One of the children, who earlier in the year very rarely interacted with the other children, was beginning to ask others to play. I noticed the children helping their friends more. If someone dropped something, another child always seemed willing to help.

We had completed a unit on “Feelings” in February, and had spent a lot of time talking about events and situations and how they make us, and others, feel. I became aware of how difficult it is for some children to interpret how others are feeling. I felt this was another area that needed to be addressed as part of the social skills program. I noted in my journal in February, while reading the Skillstreaming text, that “many aggressive youth perceive negative intentions of others, even when actions clearly appear accidental in nature, while more socially competent youngsters do not” (Journal entry, February 2, 2004).

Another positive result noted in late March, was the eagerness of the children to participate in role playing during the Skillstreaming lessons. Children who earlier in the year were very hesitant to participate, were now very comfortable, even eager, to have a turn. They were enjoying the opportunity to practice appropriate behaviours. I feel this is one of the most important parts of the program. It is not enough for children to be told what is appropriate, they need to practice it. This is especially true with my group of children, many of whom have great difficulty comprehending language, and consequently need to have instructions and new skills modeled. And they may need to see and practice many times!

The other thing I’ve noticed is that the children in my classroom, who in other years mainly played together in the yard, were beginning to play more often with children from other classes. Although I don’t really know the

reason for this, I'm hoping that it's because they have more appropriate social skills, and consequently more self-confidence to socialize outside of the classroom group.

Also, I can't really say if the development of social skills has improved the academic progress in our classroom. I think that it would take longer than a few months to see changes in academics. But I do know that many of our children have made great gains academically this year.

Even with the small changes that we have noticed in the classroom, I would certainly use the program another year. Any improvement in behaviour, no matter how small, is important and worthwhile. I also know that when you are with children all the time, you sometimes don't notice the small changes that are taking place. However, another year, I would make some changes in the implementation of the "Skillstreaming" program.

## Next Steps

I think it would be most beneficial to choose about ten skills that I felt were important for my children to learn. In my opinion, ten skills developed very well would have more impact than many skills simply touched upon. I would probably spend several weeks on one skill.

Also, I would plan the program as part of our opening exercises each day. Many days my children were just not able to concentrate in the afternoons. Morning is the time when the children are most attentive. A journal entry dated February 18 notes that by 1:30 pm the children have "had it", and don't want to listen anymore. As part of opening exercises, the skill could be reinforced each morning, and the children would have all day to practice. If the skill were something the children would use on the playground, I would try to remind them before they went out for recess.

We have a reward system in our classroom. The children collect popsicle sticks for a variety of things, such as listening attentively, completing work carefully, and sharing with a friend. I would try to be more diligent in rewarding use of the particular skill we were working on for that month. A reward card to take home might also reinforce the importance of positive social skills. I remember the Rick Lavoie video which emphasizes that "positive reinforcement changes behaviour" (Lavoie, 1997).

I would also give more homework than I did this year. There are homework sheet black line masters included in the program. Some parents weren't sure what was expected, but if the children had taken homework sheets home more regularly, I think this wouldn't have been a problem. I think the children would have benefitted even more from the program if the skills had been practiced more at home, as well as at school. Another way I would include the parents would be to include the skill we were working on that month in a monthly newsletter, and explain the steps the child should use. I would also encourage the parents to communicate progress in the daily communication book.

## Conclusion

As mentioned previously, many of the changes I noted were very small. However, I feel that any improvement in behaviour is a step in the right direction. The authors of the Skillstreaming text state that, "when students learn to handle conflict in ways that yield approval from others they learn a sense of responsibility and control" ( McGinnis and Goldstein, 1990, pp. 21-22). Educators continue to be concerned about increased violence and aggressive behaviour.

**The educational approach to prevention, in which emphasis is placed on teaching students the skills they need to deal with conflict and to get their needs met in prosocial ways, offers the best hope for the future (McGinnis and Goldstein, 1990, p. 23).**

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