



Using iPad supported Social Stations in classrooms to improve the initiating and responding behaviours of autistic students.

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OVERVIEW OF THE SOCIAL STATIONS PROGRAM

The *Social Stations* program was developed to improve specific social communication behaviours of autistic students in the primary school years. These behaviours are:

- The ability to verbally initiate to a peer during a conversation.
- The ability to verbally respond to a peer during a conversation.
- The ability to stay on topic with a peer during a conversation.

The *Social Stations* program is a classroom based, peer mediated intervention designed to improve the social communication skills of initiating and responding for autistic students. Peer mediated interventions arrange for students with additional needs to learn from typically developing peers. The peer acts as a model for social communication skills.

Social Station sessions occur during academic lessons and give autistic students and their classmates an opportunity for structured, visually supported conversational practice. During each session, the autistic student and a classmate sit at a *Social Station* to have a conversation. The *Social Station* is a table and two chairs in a quiet area of the classroom. The students take the classroom's iPad and a book to the *Social Station*. The pair use the Puppet Pals app on the iPad, a fun game where children move characters on the screen while recording their voice. A photo of the title page of the book is taken and is displayed in the app. Each student takes turns to comment on the book as they move their character. Students are prompted by a visual support to take turns initiating a comment about the book and responding to the comments of their classmate.

SOCIAL COMMUNICATION AND AUTISM

Social communication is a struggle for students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)¹.

Social communication is a broad term which has been defined as “those competencies which contribute to an individual’s ability to effectively communicate in social contexts”² (p. 977).

The list of skills attributed to social communication is extensive with the skills of verbal initiations, verbal responses, and joint attention or mutual engagement identified as the most affected³. As many students enrolled in mainstream schools are linguistically and academically competent, teachers may be unaware of the extent of their difficulties with social communication⁴.

WHY TEACH SOCIAL COMMUNICATION?

Social communication is vital for facilitating interactions with other students for the establishment and maintenance of friendships⁵. In addition, peer interactions have been identified as crucial to the development of linguistic⁶ and cognitive skills⁷. Students with poor social communication risk peer rejection and have greater difficulty establishing and maintaining peer friendships. Unfortunately, students who show a low level of social engagement are more likely to be lonely⁸. For these reasons, targeting the improvement of social communication skills has been suggested as one of the most important intervention goals for students with autism⁹.

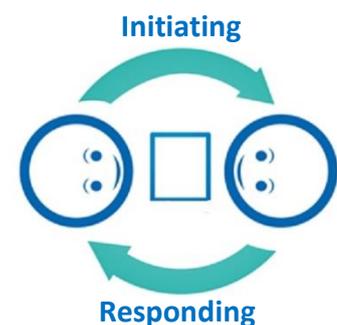
SOCIAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

VERBAL INITIATING AND RESPONDING

Researchers have identified four pivotal behaviors that impact on the social communication competence of children with autism: verbal initiations, verbal responses, nonverbal communicative attempts, and joint attention³. In today's classrooms, social communication between peers is an important part of the learning experience for all students. Teachers use peer conversations as an opportunity to discuss curriculum topics, engage learners, and build a classroom community¹⁰. As a result, students with autism who have difficulty initiating communication with, and responding to, their peers may be considerably disadvantaged in the classroom setting.

TALKING ABOUT A SHARED TOPIC

When children take turns initiating and responding to each other in conversations, the exchange of information is centred on a mutual topic. "Smooth verbal interaction consists of an even distribution of initiations and responses from both conversational partners while maintaining the topic"¹¹(p. 494). Not surprisingly, the ability to stay on topic while initiating and responding has been put forward as being crucial to the quality of conversational exchange¹².



THE SOCIAL COMMUNICATION PROFILE OF AUTISTIC STUDENTS

One of the social communication skills which many autistic students find difficult is verbal initiation. These students experience difficulty initiating communication with their peers to comment, ask questions or add information. Compared to other students with developmental delays, autistic students spend less time initiating communication with peers but also initiate communication to give information and greet rather than to initiate play¹³. Other students may over-initiate, carrying on a one-sided monologue on a favourite subject giving no one else the opportunity to respond. Autistic students may also have difficulty formulating an adequate response to their conversational partner¹⁴. They are more like to fail to respond to the comments and queries of others than children with developmental delays¹⁵. The inability to respond may be due to an inability to attend and be sensitive to others¹⁶. When autistic students do respond contingently, they do not tend to extend the topic of the conversation or add new information¹⁷.

RESEARCH THAT INFORMED THE SOCIAL STATIONS PROGRAM

The *Social Stations* program was developed from recommendations in the research literature for teaching social communication to school aged autistic students.

LEARNING IN THE STUDENT’S NATURAL SOCIAL SETTING

Many researchers agree that social communication interventions should include the child’s typical peers and should occur in the child’s natural social setting^{9,18}. For primary aged students, school is their natural social setting providing access to peers both in the playground and in the classroom. School is a rich social environment with potential for learning social skills¹⁹.

PEER MEDIATED INTERVENTION

A range of interventions has been developed to support the teaching of social communication skills in the classroom. Reviews of the literature which evaluated interventions for teaching the broader domain of social skills, have established the efficacy of peer-mediated interventions^{20,21}. Peer-mediated interventions (PMI) involve peers engaging with children with a diverse range of abilities in a mutually enjoyable, positive experience²². Procedures include training typically developing peers with the skills needed to encourage the social skills of children with disabilities²³. Peer mediated interventions are well suited to school contexts as they benefit both students without autism and teachers. Typically developing students benefit from increased time on task-learning skills such as providing and receiving positive feedback and valuing teamwork as well as sharing the responsibility for teaching and learning²⁴. Teachers also benefit from reducing demands on their time²⁵.

EMBEDDED INTO THE ACADEMIC CURRICULUM

Traditionally, the focus of general education classrooms has been on the remediation of academic rather than social skills or communication deficits. Teachers report a lack of time to teach social skills in a busy day²⁶. A promising approach is the integration of both academic and social skills into the normal classroom program. Embedding social skills learning into content areas such as literacy and science has the advantage of being time efficient and may have the potential to improve the generalisation of these skills²⁷. The benefits of integrating social communication interventions into academic instruction are many. Rather than being seen as an “add on” to the classroom program, which is short term and limited in length, this approach means that students can receive intervention throughout the entire school year. This has the benefit of increasing the dosage of the intervention, a recommendation which has been widely reported in the literature²⁸. This approach exploits the child’s natural social setting as well as the materials currently available in that setting. Researchers have recommended finding as many opportunities for social skills intervention as possible throughout the school day to increase the intensity of intervention²⁹.

UTILISING MATERIALS OF INTEREST

Materials that are mutually reinforcing for both the child with disabilities and their peers are more likely to support the development of a relationship³⁰. For this reason, researchers recommend embedding social skills interventions into preferred activities³¹. Familiarity with materials has also been suggested as important to the social interaction capability of a

material as children will converse more with their peers when playing together when they are familiar with the play materials which are being used³².

Resources must not only be motivating and familiar but must naturally facilitate social interaction. For example, while swinging in a hammock may be motivating, it is not an activity which is practical for promoting social communication. Mutual attention to an object may have been shown to be the setting event which results in the highest number of communicative acts³³.

The Apple iPad has been identified as having the potential to engage and motivate children with autism to learn³⁴. Initial evidence suggests that a social communication intervention which can be embedded into the everyday classroom program which utilises the motivating power of the iPad could be an effective method for teaching children with autism to increase their social communication skills.

SOCIAL STATIONS RESERACH

A systematic review of intervention studies that targeted the initiating and responding behaviours of students with autism, was conducted by Bronwyn Sutton. This research informed the development of the *Social Stations* program.

Sutton, B. M., Webster, A. A., & Westerveld, M. F. (2019). A systematic review of school-based interventions targeting social communication behaviors for students with autism. *Autism, 23*(2), 274-286.

The Social Stations program was then implemented in a primary school in Queensland, Australia.

Sutton, B. M., Westerveld, M. F., & Webster, A. A. (2021). Classroom Teachers' Implementation of the Social Stations Intervention to Improve the Verbal Initiations and Responses of Students with Autism. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 1-15*.

SOCIAL COMMUNICATION ASSESSMENT

The *Social Stations* program was designed for students who are verbal communicators. That is, students that have the verbal language skills to initiate and respond. However, these students have difficulty with the pragmatic or social communication ability to use their language to initiate and respond. In addition, they have difficulty staying on topic.

SUITABILITY OF AUTISTIC STUDENTS

Assessment of the student's social communication skills is recommended before commencing the program.

The Profile of Social Difficulty

The Profile of Social Difficulty³⁵ is freely available online. The classroom teacher or parent can complete this assessment which includes the targeted skills of social initiations and social responses as well as non-verbal social skills and items which measure getting along with others.

In class observation

Observation of the student talking to a peer is recommended to determine their:

- baseline level of social communication.
- changes in their level of social communication following the *Social Stations* program

Data on social communication behaviours can be collected using the VIRDS "Verbal Initiations and Responses Data Sheet" found in the Appendix.

SUITABILITY OF CLASSMATES (PEERS)

The *Social Stations* program utilises a peer-mediated or peer-modeling approach. Therefore, classmates chosen to pair with the autistic student should (a) exhibit good social, language and age-appropriate play skills, (b) be well-liked by peers, (c) have a positive social interaction history with the focal child, (d) be generally compliant with adult directives, (e) be willing to participate and (f) attend school on a regular basis³⁶. Teachers are advised to invite as many peers as possible, who met these criteria, to participate. The use of multiple peers would give the student opportunities to practice social communication with a range of classmates who would interact in their own unique way.

COMPONENTS OF THE SOCIAL STATIONS PROGRAM

THE COMMENTING STRATEGY

Traditionally teachers ask questions and students answer. However, this is a less effective way to promote social communication. An answer to a question usually ends the interaction. So questions are less likely to promote the reciprocal initiating/responding circles that make up a conversation.



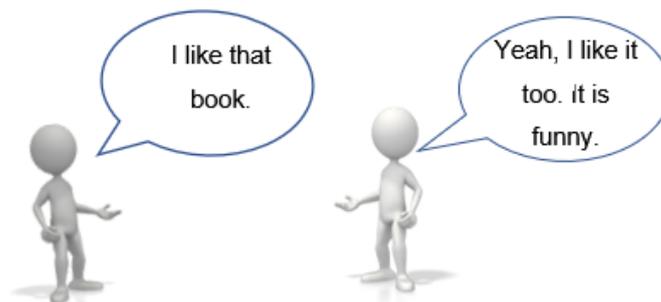
In the *Social Stations* program, students learn to initiate and respond by using comments as:

- Comments facilitate the backwards and forwards nature of a conversation.
- Children mostly using comments when talking to each other.

Children are encouraged to talk to each other with the instruction to

"Make comments to your friend about the book."

"Comment back to your friend about what they said."



THE SOCIAL STATION

A *Social Station* is a table with two chairs. The *Social Station* is positioned in a quiet corner of the classroom. A sign for the *Social Station* can be found in the Appendix.

BOOKS

Books are used in classrooms for many subjects including English and SOSE. The *Social Stations* program utilises books that are familiar to the child.

IPAD

The iPad and the app “Puppet Pals” are used in the first part of the program. The iPad should be locked when used, to prevent students wandering onto other apps.

Locking an app using Guided Access

Guided Access locks the app so that children cannot close it and move to another app.

Setting up Guided Access

- Tap Settings > General > Accessibility > Guided Access.
- Set a passcode.

Starting a Guided Access session

- Open the app you want to run.
- Triple-click the Home button.
- Click Start.

Ending a Guided Access session

- Triple-click the Home button.
- Enter the passcode.

VISUAL SUPPORTS

This first part of the program will teach both the students how to have a conversation together about a book. The visual supports are a :

- Video Model
- iPad app “Puppet Pals”
- Visual reminder card (see Appendix)

The Video Model

The video model is shown during the practice sessions and regularly throughout the program.

This is a You Tube available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3cUI6j2hMPI&t=36sPuppet>

Puppet Pals App

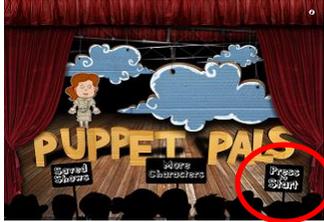
Puppet Pals is an app which displays a virtual puppet theatre where children choose puppets and record a conversation. These puppets serve as a support to show children the turns that are taken in a conversation.

Students record a conversation by taking turns moving a

puppet as they speak. The background picture behind the puppets is a photo of the cover of the book and will represent the topic of the conversation. The app records the movement of the puppet and the student’s voice then saves the conversation as a video for review.



How to make a Puppet Pals video



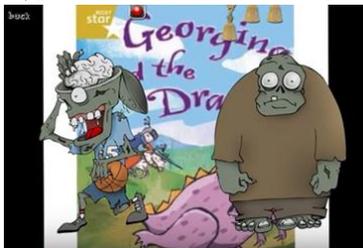
Press to Start.



Each student chooses 1 character.

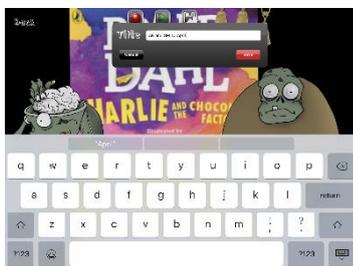


Take a photo of the book cover for the backdrop



Tap to start recording.

Talk about the book together for 5 minutes until the clock shows 5.00.



Stop the recording.

Save your names and the date.

Listen back to your recording.

PART 1: WHOLE CLASS INSTRUCTION

The *Social Stations* program begins with an introduction to the whole class so that all students gain an understanding of the program. The teacher explains the program and shows the students the *Social Station*, which is now a permanent learning centre in the classroom.

As the program occurs in the classroom during the usual classroom program, the whole class is shown the video model in order to explain the program strategy. Students watch the video on the classroom interactive whiteboard connected to the teachers' computer. The video should be screened twice in each classroom on different days, to ensure all students had seen them.

STEPS IN WHOLE CLASS INSTRUCTION

- 1 Explain to the class that a new program called *Social Stations* will commence soon
- 2 Show Commenting Video
- 3 Classroom discussion and questions

PART 2: TEACHING SESSIONS

Teaching sessions are a small group session that are designed to teach students how to participate in the program. These sessions can be conducted during normal classroom time by the teacher or teacher aid. A maximum of 5 pairs of students is recommended.

Each student should attend at least one teaching session. The aim to teach the students to:

- independently use the Puppet Pals app
- to understand the social communication strategies

SETTING UP THE SESSIONS

Materials

- The iPad
- Table
- Two chairs
- The visual reminder card
- Blu Tac or Velcro



Puppet Pals App

Download Puppet Pals HD from the iTunes store.



Reminder card

The reminder card can be attached to the top of the iPad with blue tac.



LEARNING PUPPET PALS

The students practice using the *Puppet Pals* app to select characters, create a book background and record conversations. The iPad and visual support will be placed between the social pair at the *Social Station*. Provide plenty of feedback and praise.

LEARNING THE SOCIAL COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

The students receive training in strategies for improving the social communication skills of initiating and responding on topic with peers. The strategies will be:

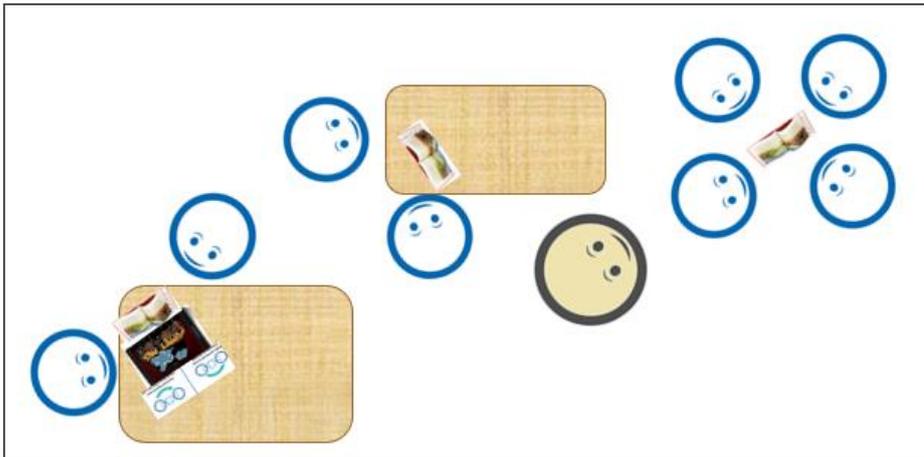
- *Make comments to your friend about the book.*
- *Comment back to your friend about what they said.*

The reminder card will be attached or in front of the iPad. The teacher provides general prompting and reinforcement.

PART 3: IPAD BASED SOCIAL STATION SESSIONS

EMBEDDED INTO THE CURRICULUM

Social Stations provides an opportunity for social communication learning during typical classroom lessons. Indeed, the *Social Station* can be utilised by all students in the class.



Here are some examples of ways to embed *Social Stations* into the classroom.

- English lesson to discuss characters in a book. The students discuss their current novel “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory”.
- Science lesson focusing on volcanoes. The students look at a book on volcanoes.

SOCIAL STATION SESSIONS

Social Station sessions are typically 15 minutes. This includes time to

- Set up the iPad and take the photo of the book
- Record the conversation (5 minutes)

- Listen back to the conversation (optional) and pack up.

The number and frequency of sessions will vary in each classroom. At least 20 sessions are recommended for a student to gain skills in initiating and responding on topic.

MOVING ON TO PART 4

PART 4: IPAD FREE SOCIAL STATION

This next part of the program will teach the student with autism how to have a conversation together, without the assistance of the iPad app. This part will use the 1) visual reminder card and 2) books.

All other components remain the same.

- The program is embedded into usual curriculum activities.
- A book is chosen for discussion.
- Students sit at the *Social Station*.
- *Social Stations* sessions are now around 10 minutes.



Approximately 10 sessions are recommended.

PART 5: PROGRAM EVALUATION

A review of the student's social communication skills is recommended at the end of the *Social Stations* program. Again, the VIRDS assessment can be utilised.

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APPENDICES

VIRDS (VERBAL INITIATIONS AND RESPONSES DATA SHEET)

Student:	
Peer:	
Date:	

OBSERVATION OF SOCIAL COMMUNICATION

Select a book that is familiar to both students. Ask the students to sit together and discuss the book. Remind them that they are not to read the book. Instead, they should talk about the book together.

FREQUENCY OF VERBAL INITIATIONS

Circle how often the student initiates to their peer at the beginning or during a conversation.

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Rarely Less than 25% of the time	Sometimes About 50% of the time	Often About 75% of the time	Always

FREQUENCY OF VERBAL RESPONSES

Circle how often the student responds to their peers' comments or questions. Responses can include acknowledgements such as "yeah", "yes", "no", "oh", "okay", or "uh-huh".

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Rarely Less than 25% of the time	Sometimes About 50% of the time	Often About 75% of the time	Always

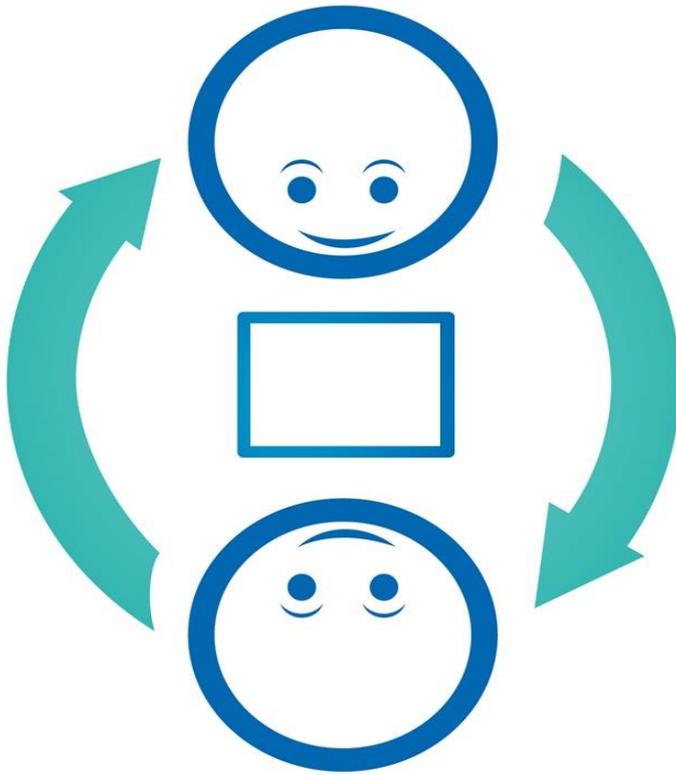
FREQUENCY OF STAYING ON TOPIC

Circle how often the student stays on topic.

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Rarely Less than 25% of the time	Sometimes About 50% of the time	Often About 75% of the time	Always

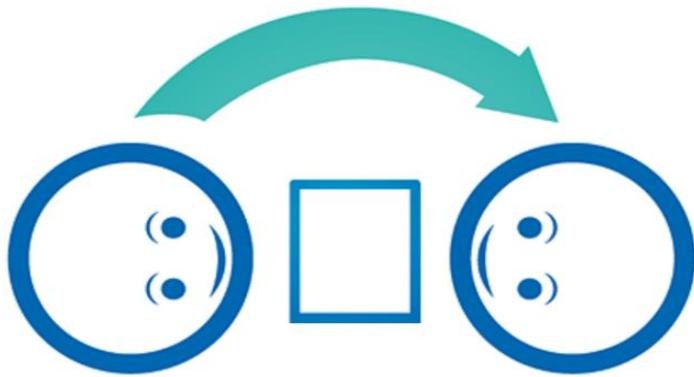
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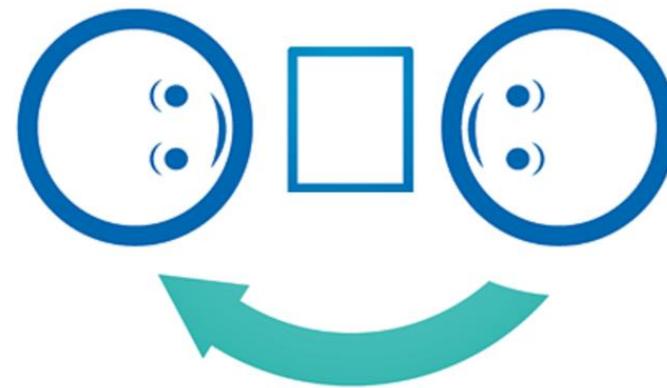


SOCIAL STATIONS

SOCIAL STATIONS STRATEGY REMINDER CARD



**Make comments to your
friend about the book.**



**Comment back to your
friend about what they said.**

