



# Teaching Dining Skills to Students with Emotional and Behavior Disorders

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*A Feature Article Published in*

*TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus*

*Volume 5, Issue 5, May 2009*

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## Abstract

Children with emotional and behavior disorders often have difficulties understanding social cues, responding appropriately in social situations, and initiating age-appropriate interactions with peers and adults. A real-life social activity that is often neglected in social skills training is dining. Dining involves dining etiquette, personal hygiene, mathematics, and social skills. Dining skills can be taught using a direct model approach that include introduction and instruction of the skill, modeling, peer involvement, role-playing, feedback, and reinforcement of desired social behaviors. Providing social skills training and real-life dining experiences for students with emotional and behavior disorders can provide many opportunities for students to learn appropriate interaction with peers and authority figures, recognize social cues, and learn social competence.

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## Keywords

emotional and behavior disorders, dining skills, social skills, dining etiquette

## SUGGESTED CITATION:

Shepherd, T. L. (2009). Teaching dining skills to students with emotional and behavior disorders. *TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus*, 5(5) Article 2. Retrieved [date] from <http://escholarship.bc.edu/education/tecplus/vol5/iss5/art2>

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*Wearing a dress, Mary picked up the fork from the outermost left of her place setting and began to eat the salad she had ordered. Miguel excused himself to go to the restroom, and laid his cloth napkin on the seat of his chair. David picked up his dinner roll, broke off a piece, and buttered it before eating it. The waiter refilled Ana's glass with soda, and she thanked him. The eight individuals having lunch at Tippecanoe Place, a fine restaurant that once was the mansion of the Studebakers, were not from a preparatory school, but were students with emotional and behavior disorders from a local high school.*

Children and young adults with age-appropriate social skills know what is expected in a social situation and are able to behave in an expected manner. In the classroom, students are expected to follow directions, ask for help in an appropriate manner (usually by raising their hands), and interact appropriately with peers and adults (Lane, Wehby, & Cooley, 2006). Students with emotional and behavior disorders often lack social competence. They have difficulties understanding social cues, responding appropriately in social situations, and initiating age-appropriate interactions with peers and adults. Many students with deficits in social skills are at risk for unemployment, aggression in the community, juvenile delinquency and adult mental health problems (Elksnin & Elksnin, 1998a; Elksnin & Elksnin, 1998b, Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005), yet research has shown that social skills interventions have the potential to provide the social skills needed for students with emotional and behavior disorders (Kam, Greenberg, & Kusche, 2004).

Social skills activities for students with emotional and behavior disorders should begin in the special education classroom, but

eventually involve the general education classroom and should also be combined with activities outside the classroom. These activities should involve real-life social activities, which include board games, sports, and other recreational activities (Farmer, 2000).

A real-life social activity that is often neglected in social skills training is dining. While dining is generally not a part of the special education curriculum, it does involve a number of academic and social skills. Dining involves social skills, mathematics (computing the tip), dining etiquette (or the rules for dining), and personal hygiene (e.g., grooming, appropriate dress, hand washing). Dining etiquette has become such an important factor in the business world that some Fortune 500 CEOs will not hire or promote someone who has not mastered simple table manners (Hernandez, 2004).

With more and more individuals finding jobs in the service sector, it is important that students with emotional and behavior disorders have some understanding of dining skills. Even in occupations where individuals are not expected to conduct business at lunches or dinners, appropriate dining skills may indirectly affect a person's status on the job. This is especially true as more and more Americans eat meals at fast food and sit-down restaurants during meal breaks. Often, these meals are shared with colleagues.

### **Social Skills**

The first step to developing appropriate dining skills is developing the social skills needed for this activity. Effective social skills programs use a generic direct model that include defining the skill, modeling, role-playing, feedback, and providing opportunities to practice the skill in various settings (Kamps, Ellis, Mancina, & Greene, 1995; Miller, Lane, & Wehby, 2005; Morgan & Jen-

son, 1988; Williams & Reisberg, 2003). Special education teachers can use *The Prepare Curriculum: Teaching Prosocial Competencies* (Goldstein, 1999) to teach social skills needed for dining skills. These skills could include “saying thank you,” or “having a conversation.” The teacher begins the social skills lesson by introducing and defining the skills students are going to be learning. For example, the teacher may inform the class that, “today, we are going to learn how to have a conversation.” The explanation of the social skill should be conducted succinctly,

avoiding protracted discussion over trivial details.

Next, the teacher models the five steps of “having a conversation” (see Table 1) to students in a small group. The first step is for the student to say what he wants to say. This can be problematic with students who do not know what to say or have difficulties initiating a conversation. The teacher may give examples of topics in which the student can engage (e.g., “I saw *Spiderman 3* last night. It was a good movie.”).

**Table 1: Sample Skillstreaming Skills**

| <b>Having a Conversation</b> |  |
|------------------------------|--|
| <b>STEPS</b>                 |  |
| 1.                           | The student should say what they want to say.  |
| 2.                           | The student should ask the other person what he or she thinks                                  |
| 3.                           | The student should listen to what the other person says.                                       |
| 4.                           | They student should respond to the other person by adding new information or asking questions. |
| 5.                           | The student should make a closing remark.  |

The Prepare Curriculum, Goldstein (1999)

The second step is to ask what the other person thinks. For example, the teacher could ask if the other person saw *Spiderman 3*, and what they thought about the movie. It may not occur to students with emotional and behavior disorders to consider the opinions of

others. Not only do the students have to ask others what they think, they have to listen to what they say (Step 3). The next step is to respond to what the other person said by adding new information or asking questions. The first four steps can be repeated several times be-

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fore the teacher concludes the conversation with some closing remark (e.g., “Thank you for a pleasant evening.”).

Once the teacher has explained and modeled the lesson, students take turns role-playing the lesson. Role-playing usually involves the main actor, the student who is demonstrating the steps, and a co-actor, a student who assists the main actor in the role-playing. Role-playing provides a safe environment in which students can practice the social skill. Once the student has completed the role-playing, the entire group provides feedback. The first person to provide feedback should be the co-actor. Students in the group should provide feedback next, and the teacher provides feedback after the students have completed their remarks. Feedback should be positive and include praise, approval, constructive criticism, and should maintain a behavioral focus. Once everyone has commented on the role-playing activity, the main actor should make remarks about the activity and respond to the comments made by the group. This will allow the main actor to evaluate the effectiveness of his skill enactment (Goldstein, 1999). In small group settings, each participant should have the opportunity to play the main actor once. Since practice is an important component of learning any skill, the role-playing should continue until the students have acquired the skill.

Another important component of social skills training is the generalization and maintenance of the acquired skills in different settings and situations, such as the school cafeteria or public restaurants. Assessment of dining skills can be accomplished through authentic assessment, which requires students to demonstrate their knowledge in real-world settings.

*Mary waited in the lunch line. As she takes her tray down the serving line, Mrs.*

*Carpenter, the cafeteria worker, asked Mary if she wanted any mashed potatoes. Mary says, “Yes, please.” Mrs. Carpenter serves the mashed potatoes. “Thank you,” responds Mary. Mr. Salyer, the special education teacher, notes the generalization of the learned social skills, and notes it in his records.*

### **Academic Skills**

The next component of dining skills are the mathematics involved in the dining experience. Students should be taught how to estimate how much their meal is going to cost before they order so they do not go over their budget. For example, at McDonalds, a Big Mac Value Meal costs \$3.49. Students need to add the sales tax. If the sales tax is 5%, then they know to add about eighteen cents ( $\$3.49 \times .05 = .17$ ), which means the meal will cost \$3.67 ( $\$3.49 + .18 = \$3.67$ ). If a student has difficulties in math, the student could simplify the problem by rounding the cost of the meal to \$4.00 and multiplying that amount by 5, making the cost of the meal approximately \$4.20. If the student has \$5.00, he knows that he can afford his meal.

When attending a sit-down restaurant where students are being served by a waitress or waiter, they need to be able to figure the amount for the tip. This is usually 15% of cost of their meal. This can easily be determined by estimating the tip by using the state’s sales tax. If the sales tax is 5%, then students can multiply the sale tax of their meal by three. For example, if the tax for the meal is fifty cents, then the tip should be about \$1.50 ( $\$.50 \times 3 = \$1.50$ ).

### **Dining Etiquette**

Dining etiquette is a set of rules for dining behavior. The special education teacher will need to become familiar with

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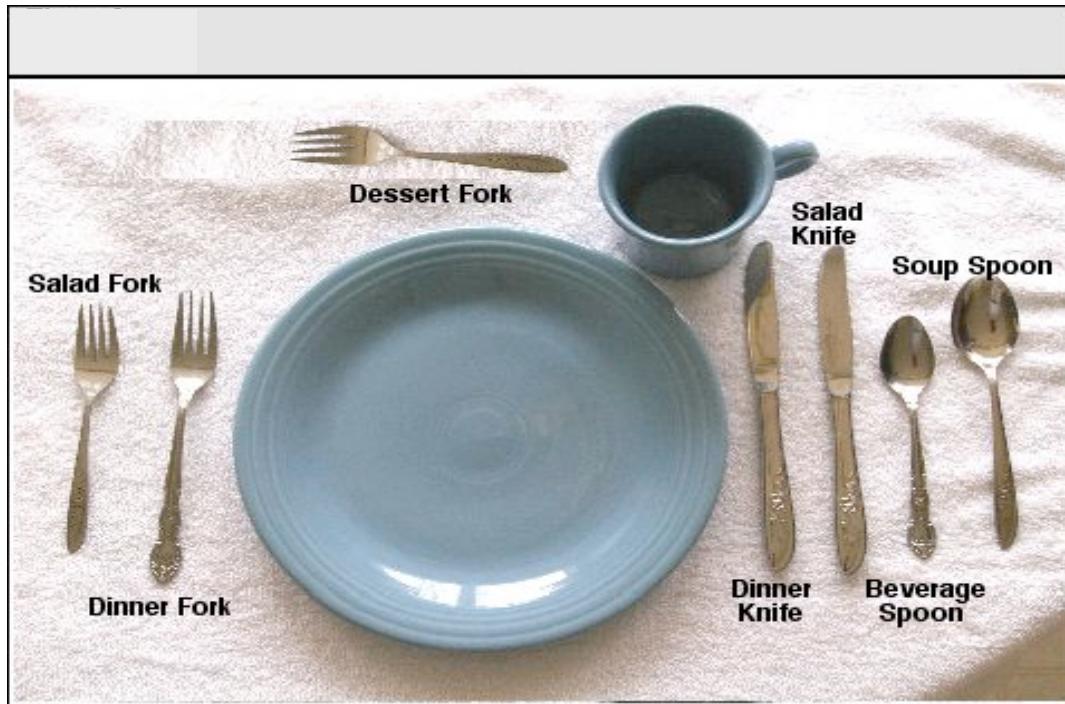
these rules prior to providing student instruction. Teaching dining etiquette begins by introducing the rules to the students over a period of time. Most dining etiquette rules are simple, but many students may not know them. Some of the more common rules are:

- 1.The meal begins when the host unfolds his or her napkin.
- 2.Place napkins on your lap. If it is a large dinner napkin, fold it in half, and then place it on your lap.
- 3.The napkin should remain on your lap unless you are blotting your mouth when needed, or when you leave the table. If you leave the table, leave the napkin on your chair. It is not appropriate to put a used napkin back on the table when others are eating. Leaving the napkin on the chair lets the waiter or waitress know that you are returning.
- 4.When buttering bread or a roll, break the bread into small pieces. Butter the pieces one at a time before eating it.
- 5.When using silverware, the general rule is to work from the outside in. The salad fork is on the outermost left, followed by the dinner fork. The soup spoon is on the outermost right, followed by the beverage spoon, salad knife, and dinner knife. The dessert spoon or fork is usually above the plate or brought out with the dessert (see Figure 1).
- 6.The drinking glass is on the right. An easy way to remember this is to place your thumb and forefingers together on each hand. The remaining fingers are pointed upwards. The left hand will form a “b” and your right hand will form a “d”. Bread

(“b”) is on the left, and the drinking glass (“d”) is on the right.

- 7.Continental Style and American Style are two ways of using the knife and fork to cut food. With Continental Style, cut one piece of food or meat at a time by holding the knife in your right hand and using the fork in your left hand while securing your food. Both the knife and fork remain in your hands. With American Style, cut the food by holding the knife in the right hand and the fork in the left hand. Cut a few bite-size pieces of food, and then lay the knife across the top edge of the plate with the sharp edge of the blade facing in. Change your fork from your left to your right hand to eat (unless you are left-handed). Continental Style is considered the preferred method of eating.
- 8.Food should be passed from the left to the right.
- 9.Bring all food to your mouth; do not bring your mouth to your food.
- 10.Finished chewing and swallowing your food before taking a sip of your drink.
- 11.When you are finished eating, place the knife and fork side by side diagonally across the plate. The knife and fork should be placed as if they are pointing to the numbers 10 and 4 on a clock face. Do not push the plate away from you.
- 12.When the meal is over, place the napkin unfolded, but neatly on the table to the left of your dinner plate or in the center if the plates have been cleared (Dining Etiquette, n.d.; Lewis, 2004; Manners International, 2006; MonsterTRAK, n.d.).

**Figure 1: Sample Place Setting**



Photograph: Samuel B. Shepherd

The teacher should model dining etiquette rules as he explains them. Modeling is an established intervention technique for appropriate behavior and social skills (Bandura, 1977). When modeling the lesson, it is extremely important that the teacher provides clear instructions and explanations. Students learn specific behavior by watching others demonstrate the behavior.

Once the lesson has been completed, the teacher should allow time for the students to practice the skill at lunch in the school cafeteria, or by taking them to fast food or family-style restaurants can easily allow for practice of the learned skills. As the students practice their dining skills, the teacher should check each student to see if they understand the rules of etiquette, sometimes offering corrections.

*Michael took his napkin from his lunch tray and placed it on his lap. Occa-*

*sionally, he used his napkin to wipe his mouth, but he kept it on his lap until he was done eating.*

*At Ponderosa, Ana passed the butter to her left. Mr. Salyer reminded her that food should be passed to the right.*

### **Personal Hygiene**

Personal hygiene skills can be incorporated into health classes, either in the special education classroom, or the general education classroom with collaboration between the special education teacher and general education teacher. Generally, this includes hand washing, combing hair, and dental hygiene. Hand washing can be integrated into health and wellness courses because it is critical in preventing infections, especially methicillin-resistant staph infection (MRSA), the so-called “superbug.” Students should wash their hands after they go to the

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restroom, before they eat, or any time their hands are dirty.

Students also need to know what dress is appropriate in different dining environments. For example, the manner of their dress will be determined by whether they eat at McDonalds or at Tippecanoe Place, a posh,

sit-down restaurant. The special education teacher will need to explain that casual clothes such as jeans and tee shirts are acceptable for dining at McDonalds, but formal dresses and shirts and ties are expected when dining at formal sit-down restaurants, such as Tippecanoe Place.

**Table 2: Sample Questions from Dining Skills Quiz**

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|--|
| <p>When you are finished eating, where and how do you place your fork and knife?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. At the right side of your plate.</li><li>b. Diagonally across the plate.</li><li>c. The fork on the left side of the plate and the knife on the right side.</li><li>d. Inside your napkin, and at the top of the plate.</li></ul> <p>What is the standard tip when being served by a waiter or waitress?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. 5%</li><li>b. 10%</li><li>c. 15%</li><li>d. 20%</li></ul> <p>From which direction should you pass the food?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. From left to right.</li><li>b. From right to left.</li><li>c. Across the table.</li><li>d. Directly to the person who asked for the food.</li></ul> |
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**Discussion**

Over a period of three years, twenty-three middle school and high school students with emotional and behavior disorders were provided dining skills instruction over the course of a semester. Four males and four females were from the middle school setting, and eleven males and four females were from the high school setting. Of these twenty-three students, twelve had comorbid conditions: three had a secondary disability of learning disability, five had a secondary disability of mild mental retardation, and four had a secondary disability of attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder. These students were provided training in dining etiquette, mathe-

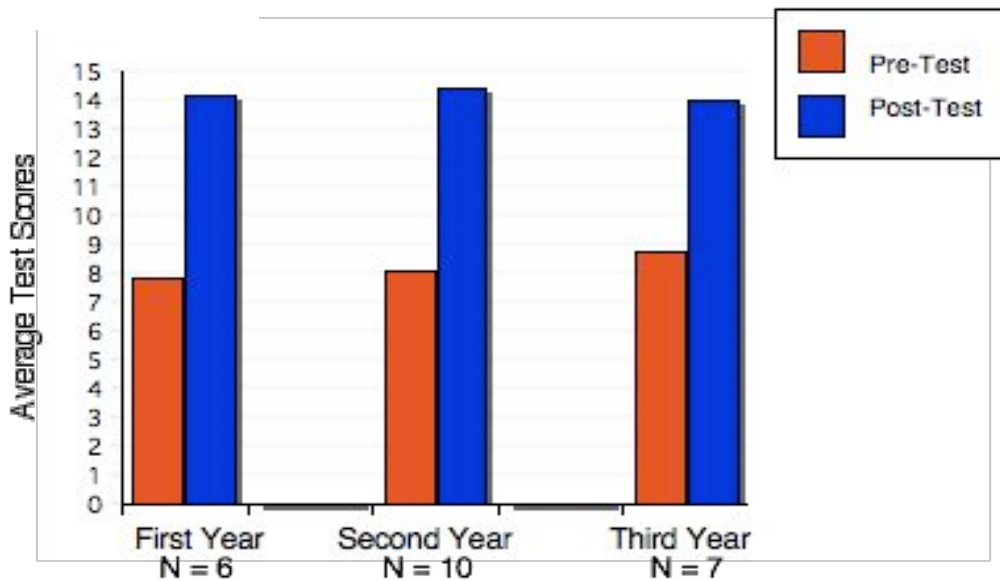
matics skills relating to calculating the cost of the meal which included taxes and tips, grooming, and social skills training that included starting and maintaining a conversation. These skills were taught in the special education classroom, and practiced in a variety of environments beginning with the school cafeteria. Each month, the students would eat at different restaurants, starting with McDonalds and culminating with lunch at Tippecanoe Place, an elegant, sit-down restaurant, at the end of the semester.

Before initiating the dining skills program, these students were given a teacher-made quiz relating to dining skills at the beginning of the school year in September. The

quiz contained 20 multiple-choice questions (see Table 2). At the completion of the program, these students were given the Dining Skills quiz again, which showed a marked

improvement in their knowledge of skills associated with eating in restaurants ( see Table 3).

**Table 3: Dining Skills Quiz Results**



Authentic assessment measured students' attitudes, habits, and behavior in multiple areas of learning. For example, the teacher can note the students' proper use of silverware, placement of napkins when leaving the table, engagement in common courtesy, calculation of tips, etc. Students taught dining skills showed a marked improvement in their knowledge of skills associated with eating in various styles of restaurants. However, the most important aspect of this program was providing these students the unique opportunity to dress in suits and ties, and dresses, and having dinner at an elegant restaurant using proper dining etiquette.

Providing social skills training and real-life experiences for students with emotional and behavior disorders cannot be marginalized, especially since many children with

emotional and behavior disorders often lack social competence. Unfortunately, social skills, which is a necessary survival skill in today's society, is often neglected at school, especially in an environment in which test results drive the curriculum.

School can be a fun, exciting and educational place for students with emotional and behavior disorders. Schools can provide many opportunities for students to learn appropriate interaction with peers and authority figures, recognize social cues, and learn social competence. These are skills that will serve them well throughout life.

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