LET'S HAVE FUN! TEACHING SOCIAL SKILLS THROUGH STORIES, TELECOMMUNICATIONS, AND ACTIVITIES

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This article concerns social skills interventions for children with emotional/behavioral disorders. Drawing on the author's teaching experience and the findings of research on social skills training in schools, and exploring effective ways to facilitate children's social skill development, the paper describes how social skills interventions can be accomplished through the use of a story-based method that employs telecommunications, cooperative learning and gaming, and various other activities. The article concludes that as teachers explore innovative ways to enhance students' social competence; they also need to consider the complexity of learning social competence and how difficult it is for students to gain mastery. Finally, researchers in the field are encouraged to carry out both theoretical and empirical studies to explore the overall efficacy of social skills training in general, the effectiveness of particular approaches, and to identify more proven strategies that promote students' social competence.

Social competence is essential to the quality of life of each individual. The development of social skill allows individuals to build positive and rewarding relationships (Chen & Bullock, 2004; Dennison, 2008). Unfortunately, teachers consistently report that poor social skills and classroom discipline have been primary concerns of schools (Corso, 2007; Richardson & Shupe, 2003; Wood, 2006). Indeed, behavioral challenges not only often negatively affect students' learning and their relationships with peers and adults (Chen & Bullock, 2004; Clough, 2005; Wright, 2006), deficiencies in social competence have been found to be associated social maladjustment (Gresham, 1995) and psychopathology that may carry over into adulthood (e.g., Meadows, Neel, Parker, & Timo, 1991).

Researchers (e.g., Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995) have noted that by providing formal and informal social skills training (SST), the school can become a potential optimal setting that fosters the development of social competence in students with behavioral problems. Indeed, learning to get along with people is one of the most important skills that we can teach students. However, in the United States, for example, most school curricula do not place achievement in social skills on a par with achievement in academic subjects (Janney & Snell, 2006). For students with emotional/behavioral disorders (E/BD), social skills intervention is as critical as, if not more critical than, an academic curriculum and more effort should be devoted to improving current SST practices and to identifying more proven strategies (Regan, 2009; Sugai & Horner, 2006). Drawing on the author's teaching experience and the findings of research on SST in schools (Chen & Bullock, 2004; Chen & Estes, 2007; Chen, 2006), and exploring effective ways to facilitate children's emotional and behavioral development, this paper describes how social skills interventions can be accomplished through the use of a story-based method that employs telecommunications (which refers to communications through the international computer network via electronic mail), cooperative learning and gaming and various other activities.
Why Stories, Telecommunications, and Activities?

In a comprehensive review of research evidence on the effectiveness of SST programs, Gresham (1998) concluded that the SST programs studied did not seem to be very effective for students with E/BD. Gresham and colleagues (Gresham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001) concluded that one of the most important reasons for this was that the skills learnt by students during the training were often not maintained or generalized. Other researchers (e.g., Nelson & Rutherford, 1988) echoed this, pointing out that social skills tended to be taught in artificial settings, and students were not able to use the skills in natural environments. Teachers also often lack time and training in teaching social skills (e.g., Janney & Snell, 2006). The need to know how to socialize our children to participate successfully in school and society is tremendous (Chen & Estes, 2007; Goldstein, 1999; Jenney & Snell, 2006).

More teachers would be interested in teaching social skills if they were able to integrate SST into their existing classroom activities. This can be done, for example, through the ways that a teacher organizes and manages learning and activities in class. Social skill literature strategy (SSLS) programs provide a model for integrating social and emotional skill development into the elementary and middle school language arts curriculum (Anderson, 2000). Using children's literature and stories has been found to be effective in improving friendship skills in young students with learning disabilities (DeGeorge, 1998). Some of the scenes from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* lend themselves to discussions of various social skills such as problem-solving and alternatives to aggression (Anderson, 2000). Indeed, although story-telling alone will not teach social skills, literacy experiences are tools that can be an integral part of the behavioral training process. One only has to review the body of existing children's literature in order to realize that many stories were designed to help children form socially approved behaviors and values.

In recent years, some researchers (e.g., Parsons, Mitchell, & Leonard, 2004) have promoted the use of educational technology as a tool for the training of social skills to children and individuals with disabilities. Cobb et al. (2002) created social scenarios within virtual environments and constructed games to support the learning of social interaction skills in users with Asperger's Syndrome. Randel, Morris, Wetzel, and Whitehill's (1992) review of research on instructional games and simulations indicated that students showed more interest in games than in traditional classroom instruction. Randel and colleagues maintained that technology such as computer games resulted in improved content retention over time, possibly because of the opportunity for greater student participation.

Educators such as Dewey, Erikson, and Piaget (Holton, Ahmed, Williams, & Hili, 2001) all emphasized the importance of play in learning, and it is generally recognized that play offers opportunities for children to learn about one another and facilitates friendship development. Various methods have been employed to teach students how to develop socially approved behaviors through play. For example, Barry and Burlew (2004) encouraged students to play by combining Social Stories and teacher prompts. Also, play training with Pivotal Response Training (Koegel, Schreibman et al., 1989) has been validated with children with autism. Play activities also give the learner many opportunities to reinforce their current knowledge and to try out new skills. In the context of social skills training, activities and games allow for creativity and opportunities for students to practice and generalize acquired skills in natural settings. According to Goldstein (1999), cooperative learning and gaming can enhance the likelihood of future cooperation and channel behaviors in pro-social directions. In addition, the use of games and activities encourages students to develop new skills such as organization and leadership skills. Indeed, when used appropriately, stories, educational technology, and fun activities can increase student motivation and participation, support positive attitudes toward social skills intervention, and encourage connections among different skills (Chen & Bullock, 2004; Walker et al., 1983).

Authorities in the field of E/BD generally agree that a common model for social skills instruction involves a series of steps that include: (a) modeling, (b) role-play or rehearsal, (c) feedback, and (d) generalization training (e.g., Goldstein, 1999; Melloy, Davis, Wehby, Murry, & Leiber, 1998). In addition, in order to maximize its effectiveness, a SST program must be motivating and personally relevant enough for students to want to learn and use the skills. It must also provide opportunities for skills to be practiced under varying conditions and in as close to natural situations as possible in order to enhance the generalization of skills (Chen & Estes, 2007; Chen, 2006). Based on these frameworks and the preliminary success of a SST study that employed stories, telecommunications, and activities (Chen & Bullock, 2004; for a summary of the study, please refer to Appendix A), the following sections present a framework for developing a SST program using a story-based method that employs telecommunications and activities. Strategies presented in this article are appropriate for most elementary classrooms and can be used as interventions for children with emotional and/or behavioral challenges. However, as social skills instruction is an important aspect of the curriculum for all students, not only for students with E/BD, the approaches selected and described here are not exclusively relevant for students with E/BD only; they can also be easily adapted for students without disabilities in general education classrooms.

Planning and Implementing the SST Program
In planning the program, the teacher must first identify students' major behavioral challenges and needs and decide what skills to target. Individual assessments; teacher observations; interviews with teachers, students, and parents; as well as Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and other education and psychological evaluation records often provide rich information with which to identify social skills deficits and strengths.

To set the stage for SST, teachers can consider a small group setting as a means of formal instruction   as it allows the teacher to focus on the most important behavioral characteristics and individual needs. In a previous study by the author (Chen & Bullock, 2004), for example, the SST class was divided into two groups: Group I (five students aged 6-8) and Group II (four students aged 9-12), and lessons for each group were conducted separately.   Typically, each session consisted of story-reading/listening, discussions, modeling and rehearsal of skills, telecommunications, and activities and games that were used to reinforce skills. The pace of introducing new skills was determined by the teacher's judgment of the students' readiness and the relatedness to the story in the text.

Integrating Stories and Social Skills: The Use of the Textbook
In planning the program, teachers need to choose a book that has story elements and themes that are relevant and make sense within the context of the students` lives. As mentioned, students' needs and the targeted skills as well as the length of the story are also important factors to consider.   In the author's study mentioned above, an age-appropriate storybook, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* written by C. S. (Clive Staples) Lewis (1950) was chosen (Chen & Bullock, 2004).   A brief synopsis of the story is found in Appendix B.   Teachers may also find that other books in Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* series can also provide good platforms for SST.   Other children's books such as Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and Eleanor H. Porter's *Pollyanna* can also be considered. No matter which text is used, one should bear in mind that what matters most in the story-telling process is that the teacher takes advantage of every opportunity to encourage and reinforce the learning of social skills.   If students' reading ability is a concern, teachers can use books that have audio versions, or adapted versions that provide additional explanations and controlled vocabulary. Reading aloud and watching video clips of the scenes are other ways to increase learning and address the issue of different reading levels.   Once the text is selected, the teacher then develops objectives for each lesson. In each lesson, the teacher identifies the main events of the story, discusses characters' different perspectives, and when appropriate, encourages students to describe the characters' emotions and the consequences of their actions.

The Use of Telecommunications and other Web-based Activities
The story in the text provides a platform for telecommunications and other web-based activities. After dividing the class into two smaller groups, the teacher then sets up a website and two group-email accounts which are accessible during the training. The author's study also used character impersonation by incorporating the online mimicking of the language and persona of the major fictional characters (Chen & Bullock, 2004). The older group (Group II) portrayed the main characters online by using character impersonation. Group I used telecommunications to question the characters about events of the story, while Group II answered the questions and explained those events in more detail by using their imagination. Corresponding with the characters/readers via emails was an exciting and fun thing to do for the students.

At the beginning of the SST, the teacher can present a mini-lesson on Internet etiquettes and telecommunication rules (e.g., share the email account with the group; messages should be related to the story). If impersonation and online mimicking are used, teachers need to explain clearly what they are as well. Teachers should encourage students to pose any questions they have about the story, while at the same time making sure that every student has a voice in the telecommunication process.   In this way, not only do students have to carry out their responsibilities—asking appropriate questions and handling replies, but each group also needs to speak with a common voice on issues of fact, such as things connected to events in the story.   They are also required to respond accurately to questions dealing with different aspects of the characters' lives, such as how they like a certain food and how certain things are possible.   In this way, group members learn to work together as a team to achieve their common goals.

The children in one of the author's studies (Chen & Bullock, 2004) were first interested in all aspects of the characters' life in the land of Narnia. They also tried to test the reality of the creatures. Answering positively and in a believable way was sometimes a challenge for the youthful portrayers. The following are samples of dialogues between the two groups.

Student B was very concerned about the freezing cold weather in Narnia, since Narnia had been under the control of the White Witch and there had been no spring for one hundred years. He wrote to Lucy, the first human visitor to Narnia: *Since it is so cold there, do you get frost bite?* Lucy replied, T*o CB (Student B's initials), yes I did get frost bite when I first got to Narnia, but I enjoy [sic] my visit so much that I almost forgot about it!*

Students in the younger group were fascinated by the Faun's appearance and life in the cave, so they wrote to Mr. Tumnus the Faun: *Are you really half goat and half man? How do you clean your house?* After considerable thought, Mr. Tumnus replied: *My dear friends, Yes, I do have horns, goat legs, and a tail! You asked me how I clean my house, well, I use a broom. How do you clean your house?*

In addition to the use of emails, other web-based activities can also be integrated into the SST. For example, students can work in teams to research information about topics related to the story or access internet resources such as music or movies about the story. During these activities, students may need to be reminded to use the skills they learn (e.g., disagreeing appropriately, accepting feedback) and should be reinforced for using them appropriately. In addition, teachers can publish students' work (e.g., pictures of characters, stories boards) related to the story on the SST website. Recognizing students' efforts is an effective way to raise their self-esteem. The application of technology resources provides an enjoyable alternative to the traditional lesson format, motivates students to participate, and enhances their learning experience.

The above sections outline a creative approach to bringing technology into elementary classrooms, which can be utilized by teachers who may have only minimal knowledge of computer systems and programs. It would also be an attractive project for teachers to develop in conjunction with district technology support teams or local universities who can provide technology support.

Integrating Activities in Social Skills Lessons
At this stage, the teacher combines the social skills with an appropriate cooperative structure that includes activities and games for each lesson. There are various activities and games that can be used for teaching social skills, and the following sections present and show teachers how some of the activities can be implemented.

Cooperative learning activities. As indicated earlier, cooperative activities and games can be incorporated into the SST so as to promote positive interactions and generalize the new-learned skills. For example, an activity called *Thingamajig* can be used to teach the students cooperative problem-solving skills. Small teams are formed, and each team is given a Ziploc bag of materials such as color cardboard squares, pipe cleaners, and paper clips.   Students are then asked to brainstorm ideas and work together creatively to make something out of the materials. When all the teams have finished their projects, the teacher states that in real life there are often multiple ways to solve problems, and these problems require teamwork and cooperation. Through activities such as the *Thingamajig*, students learn to work with their teammates and evaluate solutions to problems as a means of testing and enriching their understanding. Examples of cooperative activities for teaching social skills can be found in Appendix C.

Activities based on cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). Some strategies based on CBT help students to modify their thinking patterns and develop more functional behaviors.   Students with E/BD often need to be taught how use cognitive strategies such as self-evaluation and self-recording to mediate their behaviors. Teachers can use contracts to teach students how to assess their own behaviors according to a predetermined goal. The contract is an agreement between the teacher and student, stating a behavioral goal that the student will work towards and the reward that will be earned for achieving that goal. For younger students, teachers can use some simple self-recording forms, which require them to color an object (e.g., a balloon) when they use a certain skill.

Because of the long-term stability of cognitive and behavior problems in children with E/BD, according to Camp and Bash (1981), it is important to increase their repertoire of alternatives.   Therefore, the teacher may introduce the concept of *think of as many ideas as you can* to the students.   The companion concept that can be used to help the students brainstorm is: *That is one idea. What is a different idea?* The teacher can also help students to build up a vocabulary that helps them to identify emotions and to learn the use of phrases such as *what...if, what may happen next*, and *what are the consequences*. This type of lesson is illustrated by the following example:

Teacher: *Since the children came back to the professor's house, there are no more kings or queens in the land of Narnia, so who is going to rule the country?*
Student 1: *If I were Aslan, I would ask Mr. Tumnus the Faun to be the King.*
Teacher: *Thank you.   What may happen if Mr. Tumnus became the king?*

Student 2: *Mr. Tumnus is a very nice faun and he helped in the battle against the Witch, he should be the king.*
Student 3: *I think Mr. and Mrs. Beaver should be the king and queen.*
Teacher: *Thank you.   How would you feel if you lived in Narnia under the governance of Mr. and Mrs. Beaver? What is a different solution Aslan can use to solve the problem?*
Student 4: *The Beavers are not strong enough to protect Narnia.   The giants should be the kings.*
Teacher: *Thank you for sharing your ideas! Of all these solutions, which one do you think resolves the problem best?* The teacher can then continue pairing solutions and consequences and let the students evaluate each solution.

Maintenance activities. As mentioned, an important emphasis of SST is on increasing generalization in real-life situations. This may involve discussing other situations in which the skills may be helpful and provoking behaviors and responses which typically occur in social situations. In addition, to help students continue to use the skills over time and in other settings, maintenance activities such as friendship songs and art activities can be presented in the form of typical classroom activities. Opportunities can also be created for students to teach the skills they learned to the class or younger children in the school.

Other games and social activities. A variety of group games can be used to facilitate the social skills practices and generalization. Group games such as *Pin-the-Tail-on-the-Donkey* often require students to practice a variety of social skills, which include taking turns, sharing, and showing good sportsmanship. Teachers can also use social activities such as parties creatively to promote positive interactions and generalize skills in real life situations. For example, in the study (Chen & Bullock, 2004) mentioned previously, when the class was reading the chapter about Lucy having tea with the Faun, a tea party was held to teach students table etiquette. As the class read the story, teachers can ask students to portray pro-social behaviors described in the book. In this way, characters with pro-social behaviors serve not only as models, but also as a springboard for more in-depth discussions of the target skills and how they can be used in a given situation. Furthermore, skits, dramas, and role-plays predicting how characters will deal with specific situations can also be used to enhance students' ability to investigate different behavioral strategies and experience the outcomes in a safe environment.

Evaluating the Effectiveness of the SST Program
As mentioned previously, in planning the program, the teacher will first need to conduct a needs assessment (i.e., a pretest) of each student's social skill deficits and strengths by using individual assessments, and/or teacher observations, interviews, as well as education and psychological evaluation records. Following the completion of a SST program, for the purpose of gaining information about possible progress in terms of the students' social skills, the teacher could do a posttest of each student's social skills utilizing a reliable instrument such as an effective rating scale. Typically speaking, the ratings of the same student by the same individual (e.g., a teacher) at two different times (before and after the intervention) provide information on the stability of ratings over time. Test reliability is considered to be high when more than one respondent rates the same person in a consistent manner on the different occasions (Salvia & Ysseldyke, 2004).

Teachers can conduct post-interviews with the same teaching staff, students and/or parents who were interviewed before the implementation of the curriculum. Interviews across sources allow for the specific identification and delineation of the students' behaviors. They also bring about insights and perspectives that rating scales cannot otherwise accomplish, and they therefore enhance the reliability of the intervention. Observations across time (before and after the intervention) can also provide useful information.

Conclusion
Building upon practice and related research on SST for students with E/BD, this article describes how social skills interventions can be accomplished through the use of a story-based method that employs telecommunications and activities. By providing intensive, literature-based training in small groups, social skills lessons provide students opportunities to practice skills in a natural, real-life environment and therefore increased the likelihood of generalizing these new-learned skills in other settings. It links cooperative learning arrangements with social skills instruction to accelerate student learning and to improve students' social competence. The use of telecommunications also enhanced students' acquisitions of the skills and motivates their interests to learn.
As teachers explore innovative ways to enhance students' social competence, they may want to consider

the complexity of learning social competence and how difficult it is for students to gain mastery (Elksnin & Elksnin, 1998).   Although stories, technology, and activities motivate students to participate in class and offer a fun alternative to reinforce learning, schools should regularly evaluate the effectiveness of the SST programs as part of the instructional curriculum. Otherwise, a SST curriculum for these exceptional learners can degenerate into a situation of fun and play with beans and sticks.

In today's modern societies, the demands of a fast-changing society put a great deal of pressure both on children and youth as well as their families. Indicators of mental health among students in the U.S.A (and some other countries alike) suggest that the issue of providing education and services for students with emotional and behavioral challenges should be examined more closely. More research, both theoretical and empirical, should be carried out to explore the overall efficacy of social skills training in general, the effectiveness of particular approaches, and to identify more proven strategies that promote students' social competence.

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Appendix A
Summary of the social skill training (SST) study (Chen & Bullock, 2004)

The purposes of the study reported here were to investigate the social competence of students aged from six to twelve, diagnosed with emotional/behavioral disorders (E/BD) in a public self-contained school setting, and to increase the students' social competence by using a literature-based method that employed multiage grouping, impersonation, and telecommunications. By providing intensive, literature-based training in a multiage classroom, the social skills training (SST) gave students opportunities to practice skills in a natural, real-life environment and, therefore, increased the likelihood of generalizing these skills in other settings. The employment of impersonation and telecommunications also enhanced students' acquisition of social skills and their interests to learn.

The subjects (eight males and one female) for this study were students from one of the most comprehensive regional programs for students with E/BD in north central Texas. Students who attended the research site had a history of significant behavioral, emotional, social, and school related problems at their home campuses, and all of them were eligible for and received special education services.

Analysis of the *Behavior Dimensions Rating Scale* (*BDRS*; Bullock & Wilson, 1989) data and interviews revealed that the majority of subjects (66.7% of the subjects, according to data from the *BDRS* and, 77.8% according the data from interviews) had demonstrated evident improvement in their social competence. The aim of investigating and enhancing the social competence of young students (aged from six to twelve) with E/BD was achieved.

Appendix B
Synopsis of the *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*

The story, in this first of seven *Chronicles of Narnia*, begins when four sibling children, Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy are sent to an unusual house in the English countryside during World War II to live with a kind old professor. During a game of hide-and-seek with her brothers and sister, Lucy, the youngest of the four, finds that the big wardrobe in the professor's house leads to the land of Narnia. Lucy meets and befriends Mr. Tumnus the faun, and eventually brings her siblings through the wardrobe to Narnia.

After learning that an evil White Witch has ruled the land of Narnia for one hundred years and made sure that it is always winter and never Christmas, the children become involved in saving Narnia from her evil curse with the help of the land's resident deity, a lion-god named Aslan. However, Edmund betrays his siblings to the White Witch, who knows she must capture the siblings because it has been foretold that Narnia will return to its true form when four Kings and Queens sit upon the four thrones at the castle of Cair Paravel. Aslan does return to Narnia, and Edmund knows that he has wronged all of Narnia, but only by Aslan's sacrifice of death (killed by the White Witch) can Edmund be forgiven. The Witch slays Aslan at the Stone Table, but Aslan rises from the dead. Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy, along with Aslan's army of Narnians defeat the White Witch and her evil followers in the battle. Narnia is saved. The siblings are appointed the Kings and Queens of Narnia. Many years pass and the siblings all grow up, and one day while hunting a White Stag, they find themselves stumbling back through the wardrobe in the professor's house, and find that they are all children again. Throughout the story, these ordinary boys and girls learn extraordinary lessons in courage, self-sacrifice, friendship, and honor when faced with peril.

Appendix C
Examples of Cooperative Activities for Teaching Social Skills

1. *Marketing Narnia*. This activity can be adapted for any age. Students are asked to create a
kid's meal package for a fast-food restaurant to promote *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. They will need to decorate it with scenes from the book (pictures of the scenes, a lunch bag, glue, scissors, tapes, and markers will be provided). They will also design a toy that would be included with the meal as a free gift. There will be ten minutes for them to work together in small groups. Finally, they are to present their packages to the class and give the teacher their opinions as to why she should take their ideas.

2. *The friendship recipe*. (Background: In the story *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Mr. Tumnus has become Lucy's good friend. He risks his life to let Lucy go. He was kind, honest, and faithful. Today we are going to talk about what it means to be a friend. Here are some questions for us to discuss: *What is a friend? How would you define a friend?* Students will be given a chance to think about the questions presented. Different group members will be assigned to play different roles—the scribe who will be writing down the group's ideas on the worksheet, the spokesman who will be responsible of reporting their project to the class, and the coach who will give instruction and make sure everyone in the group agrees with the procedures (there will be no coach if there were only two people in the group). The friendship worksheets will be designed to elicit the characteristics that the students feel are important in being a good friend. The students will be asked to come up with four traits that they look for in a friend and share with the class what they had decided to be positive characteristics of a friend. The final question on the friend recipe worksheet deals with friendship traits that the students felt would *spoil* friendship. Each group will be asked to write the traits on a chart (one side of the chart said *Good Friend Traits* and the other said *Bad Friend Traits*). The students will be given about 15 minutes to express their thoughts and ideas to their groups and present their charts to the class. The spokesmen reads all the items listed in the chart aloud and elaborates on what each trait means to them as far as what they look for in a friend. The teacher will give stars to students who were on task. In the meantime, the students will then be invited to share their stories of being a good friend to others. Throughout the session stars will be given to students.

3. *Toothpaste time*. (Materials: paper plates, small tubes of toothpaste, $5 bill)

Procedures: A. Divide the class into groups of 3. Pass out paper plates and toothpaste tubes. B. Explain the rules of the activity. C. No one is allowed to open the toothpaste until directed to do so. D. No one is allowed to touch the toothpaste with his or her fingers or to spread the toothpaste around the tube or anywhere outside the plate. E. Ask the students to squeeze some of the toothpaste out of the tube onto the plate. F. After the students are finished, the teacher holds out a real $5 bill and tells the class that this will be given to the group which can put back every bit of toothpaste back into the tube. Of course, it is impossible to do this; therefore, the teacher gets to keep the money. The teacher then explains to the class that hurtful words are like the toothpaste. Once the words leave our mouth, we can't take them back or make them go away. No amount of money can erase the hurtful feelings of the person we said those words to. You may be able to apologize for what you said, but that does not erase the feelings of hurt that the person experienced. The teacher reminds the students of what was learned through the story. They are asked to recall how hurtful it was when Peter calls Edmund a beast in the story. The students are also asked to recall how the traits of a good friend include acceptance and tolerance.