



**TURN AUTISM AROUND**  
WITH DR. MARY BARBERA

Transcript for Podcast Episode: 017  
*Social Skills: When and How to  
Teach Social Skills*

Hosted by: Dr. Mary Barbera

You're listening to the Turn Autism Around podcast, episode number 17. In today's episode, we're going to talk all about social skills, when and how to teach them to children with autism, but before we get there, I'd like to give a shout out to a listener who gave me a great five-star rating and review on iTunes. That person's name is Lucid Anna, and she said, "I'm so glad Mary launched the long-awaited podcast. Her words of wisdom have been resonating with me for so long, and now we have audio. Congratulations."

Thank you to that listener for writing the review. If you haven't subscribed and left me a review yet on iTunes or anywhere else, she listened to podcasts, I'd love it if you would do that. And let's move on to social skills, how and when to teach them.

*Welcome to the Turn Autism Around podcast for both parents and professionals in the autism world who want to turn things around, be less stressed and lead happier lives. And now your host, autism mom, behavior analyst, and bestselling author, Dr. Mary Barbara.*

Welcome back to another episode of the Turn Autism Around podcast. I'm your host Dr. Mary Barbera, and I'm excited to do another solo show where I talk about social skills. Next podcast, we are, I am interviewing Ashley Rose, who is an expert at teaching social skills within groups to children within her area of New Jersey. And she's also an expert at teaching others about how to teach social skills.

But after two decades being in the autism world, I have identified at least three big mistakes that both professionals and parents are making when teaching social skills to children with autism. So today I want to talk about those three mistakes. And the first mistake is I see a lack of focus on a child's assessment, preferably a verbal behavior assessment, before setting goals and making a plan for where the child should go to school if they go if they should have a one-to-one, if they should be included.

Those kinds of decisions are a lot of times made without an accurate assessment. So I think the failure to use an assessment and really figure out what the child needs leads to mistake number one. I see this often. I see kids that are three or four years old and they have very little skills on the VB-MAPP for instance, which is the assessment that I use most of the time and they are

placed in inclusion settings or they are the goals within the treatment plan or the IEP or such that they should be working on turn taking and they should be greeting with "hi" and the person's name, and even picking a placement. Like I had a client who was about four years old and he was going to a special education setting for four days a week, four mornings or four afternoons, and in addition his mom thought it would be good to put him in a typical daycare setting so we would have exposure to other kids his age.

But what I saw when I went to see this little boy in the, in the special education setting where he wasn't making any progress for a year, but then when I went to the typical preschool or daycare situation, this little boy who was four years old was literally trying to lick the walls. He had no idea what was happening around him. He had no language to interact with the kids. He had no imitation skills. He had no group responding skills. Even if that little boy would have had a one-to-one standing by his side, which he did for part of the time I've served, that one-to-one wouldn't have been able to do much to include this little boy.

I also had a client, she was in, and I think second grade, and she was included. She had pretty high language, you know, she was at the top of the VB-MAPP assessment, so even though she was, say eight years old, she was functioning at a four or five-year-old level for language, still significantly behind, She was in language for learning or language for thinking, which is a direct instruction curriculum, and we were working on synonyms with her. Like, that a couch was another name for the sofa, and you know those kind of language skills we were working on within a direct instruction setting.

And she went to library inclusion where the librarian read this pretty elaborate book called Gumption, and after the librarian read this whole book, the little girl sat there, no problem behaviors, she didn't understand it though. And then they did a library activity where they were coming up with synonyms for gumption. And this is a very elaborate word, very uncommon, and she couldn't even do synonyms for easy words, let alone talk about the meaning and synonyms for gumption.

So we have to really be careful. Like she didn't hurt anything being included in that library class, but she certainly didn't get much out of it. And so there was 30 minutes of her sitting there probably daydreaming and not really understanding the language. So we have to be careful when we are basing our goals and our placements on not on what the child actually needs. I saw a t-shirt once, I was presenting at a conference and they were selling these t-shirts, and on the front it said, the t-shirts said, I have autism and on the back it said, don't waste my time.

Our kids, whether it's your child or your clients, are significantly delayed in terms of language and social skills and we need to not just put them in a typical setting and expect these skills to just transmit somehow in some way.

I know my own son, he started out in typical preschool when he was two before he was diagnosed. And um, once Lucas was diagnosed with autism, he had a full ABA program in place in our home, but he also continued to go to preschool just two mornings a week with a shadow,

with a behavior specialist at the time because there wasn't behavior analysts back in 1999. And you know, it didn't hurt anything. And he was exposed to kids and he was safe because he had one-to-one and we were able to work on some skills to like prime him, his skills so that he could participate more fully.

I think whenever you include kids we have to think about safety. We have to think about the child's safety, the other kids' safety and really what the child with autism is going to benefit from. A lot of kids that are level one or even level two of the VB-MAPP may need more one-to-one teaching, certainly cannot be replaced by just pushing them into an inclusive setting.

Even sometimes a lot of parents are like, well, if I can just get my child to one-to-one, that one-to-one, who's going to train the one-to-one? Is this child at a level where they can understand the language around them? Are they going to benefit? Are they going to catch up in terms of their language and social skills? All of these things, and who is going to be providing ongoing training and supervision? What data is going to be collected to see if the child is, is being successful in whatever setting they're in? All of these things need to be thought about, not just, you know, put the child in inclusion and see how they do.

So the number one mistake I see is not focusing on the individual child and their assessment. Even I sometimes see, I recently saw something where the child had a VB-MAPP and then they had social skill goals that weren't in alignment with their VB-MAPP. So the number two mistake, which kind of goes along with this, is trying to set goals or teach social skills that are too high. Like in this case recently I saw turn taking and greetings with "hi" and the person's name before other prerequisite skills are mastered. So teaching social skills that are too high and will become rote and not very functional.

There is a speech and language pathologist by the name of Michelle Garcia Winner. I saw a presentation she did probably back in the year 2000, I would think. And I was very impressed with her and I'm still very impressed with her. She is a speech-language pathologist and she's done a lot of work. She has a white paper on um, different profiles and levels of social competency and really ties that to language. I presented a keynote presentation in Australia. I've been to Australia three times to present, so I forget which presentation this was, I think it was at least five years ago, and Michelle gave her keynote the one day, I gave my keynote the next day, but I went to Michelle Garcia Winner's keynote and she was very much saying that children with very poor language, in my mind, I'm thinking the VB-MAPP level, one kids, kids at that level really shouldn't have social skill goals within their IEP. They should have engagement with adult goals. They should have just an awareness of other kid's goals and those sorts of things.

So if I can in the show notes for this episode, [marybarbera.com/17](http://marybarbera.com/17), I'm going to put a link to Michelle Garcia Winner's white paper, which I found fascinating after I saw her speak. I did, I was directed to our white paper, but she agreed. I talked to her after her note presentation and she agreed that we really need to be working on VB-MAPP level language skills before there's a

heavy focus on any kind of um, social skills, especially skills like turn-taking, manners, pretend play is a very complex skill, I think Ashley Rose will address that next episode of the podcast.

We want to work on early social skills that are a part of the VB-MAPP, such as putting in, stacking, following one-step directions, sitting at a table calmly, sitting on the floor, cause and effect type toys. And then maybe teaching, pointing, teaching, potentially waving, greeting without a person's name. Um, these are all procedures and things that I teach within my online courses where I teach people how to teach a child to point. And that's totally possible. I have a whole procedure about how to teach kids to greet with, with names, um, to say, "hi Johnny", "bye mommy", but there's procedures that have to be used, otherwise kids and up not mastering those skills, and it gets very rote and weird language comes.

Also responding to their name. You know, a lot of these lack of social skills are actually red flags for autism; lack of pointing, lack of responding to your name, lack of joint attention showing. These are skills that are very, very not in place in many situations and we have to program for them, but not just put goals in for turn taking or pretend to play things that are too high. In many situations, kids are going to need intensive instruction which is mistake number three.

So mistake number one, again, is not focusing on the individualized assessment and making a plan specific for that child and the plan for goals, the plan for placement, the plan for what social skills you're going to be teaching.

The second mistake, again, is teaching social skills that are too high. I see this almost across the board.

And mistake number three is not explicitly teaching social skills by assessing, planning, intervening and taking data and using that data to evaluate and to make database decisions.

Expecting social skills to just develop naturally is like expecting language skills to develop naturally and it just doesn't happen in kids who are very impaired language-wise with autism. Now I have found a couple of resources over the last two decades that have proved to be really useful to me in my teaching of social skills, and you may not have heard of any of them, so I'm going to link them in the show notes at episode number 17.

So the first book is actually free to download. It wasn't free for download when I purchased the book years ago, it was probably the year 2000 or 2001, I attended a lecture by someone from the University of Minnesota who wrote a book called Play Time, Social Time. At the time the book was uh, for purchase about \$40 but since then it's become available free for download as a pdf. This is a pretty robust book, and I particularly like it for young kids under the age of five, any level of autism or even typically developing kids and then older kids with more moderate to severe language delays and autism.

So the middle part of the book starting around page 91, and you'll be able to get that at the show notes at [marybarbera.com/17](http://marybarbera.com/17) so you can download the book. You can print it out or just

look at it online. Page 91 for about 20 pages are basically scripts for natural environment teaching with toys and tells you what materials to gather. So one of the activities is a birthday party, so you're going to pretend to have a birthday party. So the materials you gather are play-dough, you're going to gather little plates, little teacups, a teapot, birthday candles. And so you would put everything in a, I usually put it in a clear plastic bin, and then there's scripts for you to begin to teach children, oh, give Johnny the plate, or let's make the play-dough into cake and let's put the candle in. Let's blow out the candle.

Not that that's going to be appropriate for every child. If they are a level one learner on the VB-MPP, they probably might be too low for that. But I think it's a great start, especially those natural environment teaching lessons starting at page 91. Also in the back of the book, starting at page 136 of the Play Time, Social Time book. There are direct instruction scripts for teachers like language for learning and reading mastery. There are scripts to teach things like sharing things like being persistent with a peer and those scripts might be helpful, especially for kids at level three or beyond on the VB-MPP.

And finally, the third resource that I've.... that actually is the first resource. The second resource that I've found helpful is um, Steve Ward, who's a behavior analyst, I'm hoping to have him on the podcast soon, but he wrote a great book um, several years ago. I think it was published right around the time my book was published in 2007, I believe. And the book is What You Need to Know About Motivation and Teaching Games. And Steve is pictured on the book with a big red wig and that is a great book to break down the skills of games like, um, uh, go fish and those kinds of games.

Also, Steve is really expert at teaching games like um, hotter, colder, red light, green light, those sorts of games to teach, um, awareness and breaks everything down. It's just an awesome resource, Steve Ward's book.

And the third resource that I have used, especially with higher language kids, VB-MPP level three or higher, is a book called Acting Antics by Cindy Schneider, who's a special education teacher. She lives and works about an hour from my home and I've seen her present, it's a great presentation, really does a lot of role modeling, a lot of social skills through acting and I just love her work. And her book is excellent, Acting Antiques.

So within these resources, and we'll be hearing from Ashley Rose next time about how to group kids for group social skills, I also think that older kids with moderate to severe autism need to learn leisure activities that aren't necessarily turn-taking or interactive with other kids. They need to learn how to turn on the TV, how to play video games if they're at that level, how to play board games, how to, you know, play the piano or go outside and shoot baskets, a basketball into a net. Those sorts of things to keep them busy so that they're not just playing on the iPad continuously from morning till night on the weekends.

My son benefits from Yoga, special needs yoga classes, and music therapy groups for older kids and adults. There are some exercise activities for special needs kids or even for typically developing kids and adults that your child or client could benefit from, too.

So, in the end, you are going to have to teach social skills and teaching them is a lot more complex than most people think. So the three mistakes not to make is um, we can avoid these three mistakes by we always want to start with an assessment and we want to make the social skills goals correspond with that assessment. We don't want them in a vacuum. We don't want to decide on placement before we do the assessment and before we decide on the goals that the team agrees on. We don't want to teach skills that are too high or put goals down that the child won't be able to master for a while. We want to make everything as easy as possible for the child to be successful.

And the third thing we want to do is we want to focus on uh, teaching social skills explicitly. But a lot of times for level one and level two VB-MAPP learners, that's going to involve a lot more teaching language and a lot less focus on actual social skills.

So, um, we want to realize that there are prerequisites and we want to avoid placing kids in social settings for socialization purposes only. Like the little boy who is licking the wall. We, we want to avoid putting kids in situations, especially if they don't even have a shadow to keep them safe. We really have to think about their time, what's the best use of their time? The little girl with the library inclusion, we think about, it's not just about them interacting potentially with kids, it's about the language. Can they understand it? Does it make sense? Maybe they could go to the inclusive library part of the time when they are picking out books when they are doing more hands-on activities.

I know for Lucas he used to be included with the hands-on part of music, the maracas, the tapping, those sorts of things. But then when they started to talk about Mozart or they started to talk about the C note goes below this, or this is called a staff line or whatever complicated language that was, the aid would bring Lucas back to the special needs classroom.

So we have to think about... now it's not always possible to think about every minute and is this really truly beneficial? But just in general, we have to think about what's the best use of our child or client's time. What, everything we do, we need to start with assessment, make a plan, make sure that the goals on the treatment plan on the IEP make sense for that child and are based on that child's assessment. We want to teach systematically and always make database decisions as much as possible.

I'm a big proponent of looking at the forest, not the trees to take a step back. See, is does this make sense for this child? And try to try to collaborate with the family as much as possible to encompass family values and the whole child's world. You know, what are they doing on the weekends? What are they doing in the evenings, and how you can help this child reach their fullest potential.

So I hope you enjoyed this episode of the Turn Autism Around podcast on how to teach social skills and the three big mistakes that you should try to avoid. For the show notes with those great resources that I talked about, you can go to [marybarbera.com/17](http://marybarbera.com/17) and I'll see you right here next week.

*Thanks for listening to the Turn Autism Around podcast with Dr. Mary Barbera. For more information, visit [marybarbera.com](http://marybarbera.com).*