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Douglas W. Nangle
University of Maine

David J. Hansen
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, dhansen1@unl.edu

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New directions in the application of social-skills interventions with adolescents: Introduction to the special section

Douglas W. Nangle, *University of Maine*

David J. Hansen, *University of Nebraska–Lincoln*

The importance of competent social interactions for adolescent adjustment and successful functioning at home, school, work, and social settings has been well documented (cf. Hansen, Giacoletti, & Nangle, 1995; Kelly & Hansen, 1987; Peterson & Hamburg, 1986). Within a developmental context marked by transitions, establishing and maintaining competent social interactions can be particularly challenging for adolescents. Fundamental developmental changes, including the onset of puberty, the emergence of more advanced cognitive and verbal abilities, and the transition into new roles in society, significantly alter social interactions (Bierman & Montminy, 1993; Hansen et al., 1995). These interactions become increasingly complicated and adult-like, as the peer group becomes larger and more complex, more time is spent with peers, and interactions with opposite-sex peers increase (Csikszentmihaly, & Larson, 1984; Peterson & Hamburg, 1986).

The risks associated with not adapting to the ever changing social environment are many. Social-skills deficits and peer rejection are associated with a number of negative outcomes, including mental health problems, behavior problems, delinquency, substance abuse, sexual offending, loneliness, high-risk sexual behavior, and academic and vocational difficulties (Hansen et al., 1995; Kupersmidt & Coie, 1990; Parker & Asher, 1987). The negative outcomes associated with social interaction problems during childhood and adolescence have led to a great deal of research on the remediation of social-skills deficits. Despite the unique social challenges of adolescence, however, most of this research has focused on young children and preadolescents (Elliot & Gresham, 1993; Hansen et al., 1995).

This Special Section of Education and Treatment of Children calls needed attention to the social interaction problems of adolescents. The four articles comprising this section address the current promise, as well the many challenges, of conducting social-skills interventions with this population. Each invited contribution describes exciting new directions in research and clinical applications. The impetus for this issue was a symposium presented at the annual conference of the Association for Advancement of Behavior Therapy (Nangle, 1994). The value of the information covered in the symposium was such that we felt the opportunity to publish the papers together in a Special Section was ideal.

The field of social-skills interventions with adolescents began in the mid to late 1970's and has changed much over the years (Christopher, Nangle, & Hansen, 1993). The early work in this area focused primarily on aggressive, conduct disordered youth in inpatient or residential settings. These interventions generally consisted of basic skills training procedures, targeting conversational or assertiveness skills, conducted directly with the individual patient in a clinical treatment setting. As evidenced by the articles featured in this Special Section, the field has come a long way since the early days. Social-skills interventions with adolescents now target a very broad range of skills and are applied as components of treatments for diverse populations. The use of basic skills training procedures in clinical treatment settings has been augmented by the development of innovative treatment approaches, such as peer-mediated intervention, social-cognitive skills training, training in the natural environment, and the increased use of technology. In addition, social-skills researchers have become increasingly concerned with generalization and social validity issues (Hansen, Watson-Perczel, & Christopher, 1989).

In the first article, Douglas W. Nangle and David J. Hansen (this issue) present a behavioral framework for understanding the relations between social skills, high-risk sexual behavior, and the many health problems associated with adolescent sexual activity. Although social-skills training is often recommended as a component of prevention efforts aimed at reducing high-risk sexual behavior, we actually know little about how social skills and sexual behavior are related and interest in heterosocial-skills research has actually declined over the past two decades. It is hoped that this contribution encourages behavioral researchers to revisit the construct of adolescent heterosocial competence and expand the existing research base.

M. Cameron Dumas (this issue) then examines the many social and peer relationship problems experienced by adolescents with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Recent longitudinal research has reversed

the once prevailing consensus that ADHD represented a maturational lag that largely remitted in adolescence. These studies indicate that as many as 80% of children with ADHD continue to exhibit symptomatology into adolescence. Whereas numerous studies have documented the social problems of children with ADHD, very few studies have addressed such problems among adolescents with ADHD. Following a review of the literature that includes some innovative pilot research conducted by Dumas and colleagues, the article concludes with a discussion of clinical assessment and treatment issues and suggestions for future research.

In the third article, Aleta L. Meyer and Albert D. Farrell (this issue) describe their efforts to design and evaluate a comprehensive, theory-based intervention program to reduce and prevent youth violence in a high-risk urban environment. Youth violence has reached epidemic proportions in the United States and the impact has been felt in our schools. The authors describe a standardized, school-based curriculum designed to reduce and prevent violence through a combination of team-building activities, social problem-solving training, relaxation techniques, small group work, and social-skills training. A particularly innovative aspect of the curriculum is its system-based emphasis that incorporates the coordinated efforts of student peer advisors, designated teachers who function as violence prevention specialists, and school principals.

David J. Hansen, Douglas W. Nangle, and Kathryn A. Meyer (this issue) conclude this Special Section with a discussion of the major advances in social skills intervention research that focuses on efforts to facilitate treatment adherence, generalization, and social validity. The social-skills literature has moved beyond an emphasis on basic skill assessment and training in clinical settings toward research characterized by techniques designed to assess and promote the generalization and maintenance of an effective interpersonal repertoire. The authors review this literature and summarize what we have learned about enhancing the effectiveness of our interventions with an eye toward bridging the gap between research and clinical practice. Directions for further improvement of our social skills intervention technology, such as the need to further consider gender and cultural influences, are also described.

We are very grateful to the Editors of Education and Treatment of Children for this opportunity to publish the following articles. We are hopeful that readers will find the contributions to be informative and stimulating. Undoubtedly, readers of this Special Section will be left with a strong impression of how much we have learned in recent decades, as well as how much more there is to learn and do.

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