How to Infuse Social Skills Training Into Literacy Instruction

ROMEO AND JULIET

William Shakespeare
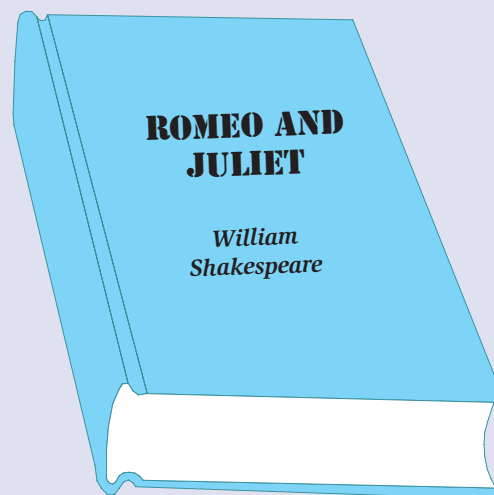
James W. Forgan • **Alyssa Gonzalez-DeHass**

Bill Lafond is a teacher with 6 years of experience teaching students with varying disabilities in kindergarten through fifth grade. During his first 2 years of teaching, he did not recognize the value of teaching social skills to students with mild disabilities and instead emphasized increasing students' academic outcomes. His philosophy, which aligned with the school district philosophy, was that if he increased students' academic skills, their self-concept and behavior would, consequently, improve. At the beginning of Lafond's third year of teaching, he reflected on his previous years of teaching and realized that although his effort to increase student achievement was successful, his students could have made greater gains if he had spent less time dealing with behavior issues.

At that point, Lafond decided to infuse social skills activities into his literacy instruction to teach students how to independently solve problems and to teach specific steps for ignoring inappropriate behavior and completing tasks independently. Lafond implemented principles of bibliotherapy along with a social skills program that used folk literature to teach skills. At the end of the year, students' academic and social gains had surpassed Lafond's expectations, and he decided to continue infusing social skills into instruction in future years.

Instruction and Effectiveness

Teachers like Lafond recognize the importance of social skills instruction and its effectiveness on improving the skills and self-concepts of students with high-incidence disabilities such as specific learning disabilities, behavior disorders, and mild mental retardation. The classroom teacher or school counselor typically delivers social skills instruction to students as part of the school curriculum, and these school-based interventions enhance the self-concepts of students with disabilities. Elbaum and Vaughn (1999) found that social skills interventions using techniques such as self-enhancement (e.g., social problem-solving), combined with skill-development approaches, led to the greatest gains in the self-concepts of students with learning disabilities. This finding is encouraging, considering that students' gains in self-concept occurred from teacher-led interventions that typically lasted less than 12 weeks with lessons occurring two or three times per week.

Although educators and researchers have debated the effectiveness of social skills instruction, most people agree that social skills instruction is effective in promoting the acquisition, performance, and generalization of prosocial behaviors (Gresham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001; McIntosh, Vaughn, & Zaragoza., 1991). In a recent meta-analysis on the effectiveness of social skills intervention outcomes, Gresham and colleagues

reported that six previous meta-analyses on social skills interventions found small to large gains in the overall effect sizes that ranged from .20 to .87 in studies designed to increase students' social skills. By analyzing effect sizes, researchers can compare the results of different research studies in a systematic way. According to Bear, Minke, and Manning (2002), "An effect size reflects the strength or magnitude of a relationship or the impact of an intervention" (p. 2).

Overcoming Challenges

Forness and Kavale (1996) provide insight into potential barriers of effective social skill interventions: lack of sustained training, measurement and research design issues, ineffective training packages, lack of coordination of social skills training with academic instruction, and the possibility that social skills deficits are highly resistant to intervention. Therefore, future social skills training programs must do their best to address these critical areas of effective social skills training: integration of social skills training with academic instruction, more sustained social skills training, cooperative learning, prosocial modeling, and opportunities for practice of social skills (Anderson, 2000; Carter & Sugai, 1989; Cartledge & Kiarie, 2001; Forness & Kavale; Korinek & Popp, 1997; Sugai & Lewis, 1996).

Although research tends to support the effectiveness of social skills instruction and teachers recognize the value of social skills training for students, teachers often report that allocating time to teach social skills is problematic. Many teachers feel pressure to prioritize academic achievement over students' social success given today's environment of high-stakes testing and often feel time for teaching social skills is limited (Cartledge & Kiarie, 2001). One way to overcome this dilemma is to infuse social skills instruction into the academic curriculum (Cartledge & Milburn, 1995; Sugai & Lewis, 1996) and literacy instruction, in particular (Anderson, 2000; Bauer & Balius, 1995; Cartledge & Kiarie).

If teachers infuse social skills training into the academic curriculum, their students receive more time devoted to social skills training than when these programs are offered as an isolated area of instruction traditionally amounting to a total of 30 hours or less (Forness & Kavale, 1996; Gresham et al., 2001). Additionally, as Korinek and Popp (1997) have pointed out, training that is divorced from meaningful settings may result in a lack of transfer of social skills. Literature instruction is an enjoyable academic activity, and it offers an ideal opportunity to teach social skills through a medium that can be perceived as meaningful to students' lives.

Integrating social skills instruction into such a setting allows the teacher to help students interpret story events, empathize with characters' feelings, and propose alternate outcomes (Anderson, 2000; Cartledge & Kiarie, 2001). Follow-up cooperative learning activities allow for student interaction and discussion (Anderson) and opportunities to practice social skills (Carter & Sugai, 1989;

> **Literature instruction is an enjoyable academic activity, and it offers an ideal opportunity to teach social skills.**

Korinek & Popp, 1997). Peer interaction offer opportunities for prosocial modeling and peer reinforcement for socially competent behaviors (Carter & Sugai).

In general, students need to be given time to model and rehearse social skills during opportunities for practice (Cartledge & Kiarie, 2001; Sugai & Lewis, 1996), such as role-playing or follow-up discussion about identifying real-life situations in which learned social skills would come to good use (Anderson, 2000; Cartledge & Kiarie). Therefore, literacy instruction offers a viable avenue for overcoming traditional barriers to effective social skills training.

Three Paths

Teachers can select from three options to infuse social skills training into literature instruction: bibliotherapy (Forgan, 2002; Sridhar & Vaughn, 2000), folk literature (Cartledge & Kleefeld, 1994), and experiential learning activities and games (Forgan & Jones, 2002). Beginning with bibliotherapy, we describe each method of social skills instruction (see box, "Literature Synopsis") in detail.

Bibliotherapy

Using books to help people solve problems is an idea that has received increased attention in recent years. Aiex (1993) defines bibliotherapy as "The use of books to help people solve problems" (p. 1). At some time, most people have read a book in search of answers, and teachers can use children's literature books to help students learn to solve problems. Aiex identified several possible reasons a teacher may choose to use bibliotherapy with students:

1. To show an individual that he or she is not the first or only person to encounter such a problem.
2. To show an individual that there is more than one solution to a problem.
3. To help a person discuss a problem more freely.
4. To help someone plan a constructive course of action to solve a problem.
5. To develop a person's self-concept.

This list highlights five potential benefits to using bibliotherapy to teach problem-solving to students with disabilities. Sridhar and Vaughn (2000) reported that additional benefits from bibliotherapy include increasing students' self-concept and improving behavior.

Bibliotherapy is a social problem-solving approach for teaching prosocial behaviors (Elksnin & Elksnin, 1995) in which general behaviors rather than discrete skills are taught. The philosophy behind this approach is that "once mastered, cognitive-interpersonal problem-solving skills can improve social behavior" (Elksnin & Elksnin, p. 76). A social problem-solving approach is useful for students with high-incidence disabilities who may experience difficulties across settings and who can benefit from learning to solve problems similar to those discussed in children's literature

Literature Synopsis on Infusing Social Skills Training Into Academics

- One approach for overcoming the dilemma of either teaching academics or social skills is to infuse social skills instruction into the academic curriculum (Sugai & Lewis, 1996) and literacy instruction in particular (Anderson, 2000; Bauer & Balius, 1995; Cartledge & Kiarie, 2001; Forness & Kavale, 1996; Gresham et al., 2001).
- By infusing social skills training into the academic curriculum, students receive vastly more time devoted to social skills training than when these programs are offered as an isolated area of instruction that traditionally amounts to a total of 30 hours or less (Forness & Kavale, 1996; Gresham et al., 2001).
- Infusing social skills training with academic instruction allows teachers to apply effective instructional methodology that has been labeled as critical areas for effective social skills training: cooperative learning, prosocial modeling, and opportunities for practice of social skills (Anderson, 2000; Carter & Sugai, 1989; Cartledge & Kiarie, 2001; Forness & Kavale, 1996; Korinek & Popp, 1997; Sugai & Lewis, 1996).
- Training that is divorced from meaningful settings may result in a lack of transfer of social skills. Literature activities offer an ideal opportunity to teach skills through a medium that can be perceived as meaningful to students' lives (Korinek & Popp, 1997).
- Literacy affords students the natural tendency to read a book in search of answers, and teachers can use children's literature books to help students learn to solve problems and enhance self-concept. Bibliotherapy allows students to see that they are not the only ones to encounter such problems and learn that there is more than one solution to a problem. It helps them discuss the problem more freely and create a constructive course of action to solve it (Aiex, 1993).
- *Working Together: Building Children's Social Skills Through Folk Literature,* allows students the opportunity to relate with a folk literature character so that skills are presented in a natural context of literacy rather than as a separate entity; this program has been successfully used to increase the social skills of middle-school adolescents with behavior disorders (Blake, Wang, Cartledge, & Gardner, 2000).

(McCarty & Chalmers, 1997). Additionally, children in general and special education can benefit from a bibliotherapy social problem-solving lesson because it is probable students will encounter similar issues. For example, a student may typically handle anger and frustration well but on occasion erupt and need to self-employ calming strategies.

The situations most teachers explore with students when using bibliotherapy are everyday life problems, such as anger, teasing, bullying, and issues of self-concept. This type of problem-solving is best accomplished through small-group or whole-class readings and discussions of the topic. Doll and Doll (1997) described this approach as developmental bibliotherapy because it focuses on helping children cope with developmental needs rather than relying on a clinical or individualized approach to bibliotherapy. Through this developmental process, students will likely experience identification with the main character in the story, experience a catharsis and release of emotion, and develop insight to solve their problems. Developmental bibliotherapy includes selecting materials to use with students, presenting the materials, and building students' comprehension of the issue.

Anderson (2000) discussed how classical literature can be used to convey critical social skills training to older adolescent students. Paramount to the effectiveness of this technique is choosing literature that is meaningful to the students' interests and experiences. Anderson used the example of Shakespearean literature, *Romeo and Juliet.* Adolescents can easily relate to the issues of dating, parental disapproval, and peer conflict. This is an optimal point to learn about interpreting emotion, resolving interpersonal conflict, and promoting positive peer relationships. The Social Skills Literature Strategy takes students through the steps of interpreting events and feelings, developing alternate outcomes, and participating in thoughtful class discussion on those interpretations. In its entirety, this technique allows for opportunities in cooperative learning exercises and kinesthetic role-playing.

Forgan (2003) described a four-step instructional framework for teaching social skills and problem-solving through children's literature. The instructional framework includes prereading, guided reading, a postreading discussion, and follow-up activities. During prereading the teacher activates students' background knowledge, makes predictions about the book's content, and sets the stage for reading the story. Guided oral reading allows the teacher to help students identify with the character's problem and relate it to their own problems. Teaching students to generate alternative solutions to the

> **Teachers can infuse social skills into literacy using instructional games like Mancala and Sungka.**

character's problem, as well as choosing the most acceptable solution, is accomplished during the postreading discussion. Follow-up activities include role-playing, writing, or playing a game with the purpose of practicing the problem-solving process. A sample bibliotherapy lesson plan and activities from the book *Teaching Problem-Solving Using Children's Literature* is included in the Appendix.

Working Together

A second option for infusing social skills into instruction is using a curriculum developed by Cartledge and Kleefeld (1994) that employs folk literature stories as the primary medium to teach students social skills. The curriculum, *Working Together: Building Children's*

Social Skills Through Folk Literature, is a structured learning program for students in Grades 3-6 that includes 31 specific social skills that are organized into five units. Educators have successfully used this program to increase the social skills of middle school adolescents with behavioral disorders (Blake et al., 2000).

The instructional model for *Working Together* includes the components of defining the behavior, assessing the student's current performance level, teaching the skill, evaluating, and providing opportunities for practice. This program is considered a structured learning program (Merrell & Gimpel, 1998) in which a discrete skill, such as ignoring inappropriate behavior, is task analyzed and each step is taught to students. The structured learning design of *Working Together* is consistent with other structured social skills programs such as those outlined in *Skillstreaming* (Goldstein & McGinnis, 1997) and the *Social Skills Intervention Guide* (Elliot & Gresham, 1991), which use a behavioral approach and contain the four major components of modeling, role playing, performance feedback, and transfer training.

The primary advantage of the *Working Together* curriculum as compared to *Skillstreaming* is that each skill is presented using a folk literature story. Students are able to activate their prior knowledge and relate with the folk literature character so that the social skill is presented in a natural context of literacy rather than as a separate entity.

The skills in the *Working Together* curriculum were identified by the authors as critical to a child's social development. There are 31 skills that are divided into the five units of making conversation and expressing feelings, cooperating with peers, playing with peers, responding to conflict and aggression, and performing in the classroom. Lessons are delivered in classroom settings during literacy instruction and many times are completed within 15 minutes. The curriculum is complete with a teacher's guide, skill posters, and reproducible activity pages, and all stories are presented either in print or by listening to an audiocassette.

> **In experiential activities, such as the Project Adventure curriculum, students learn a general set of behaviors that they can subsequently apply to any circumstance.**

In *Working Together,* Cartledge and Kleefeld have directly addressed some of the criticism of teaching social skills by providing generalization and maintenance activities that are used across a variety of conditions and settings through writing and role-playing activities. In addition, middle school peer mediators with disabilities can use the *Working Together* program to increase their own and other's skill maintenance and use (Blake et al., 2000).

Experiential Learning Activities

The third option for infusing social skills into literacy instruction involves experiential learning activities (Forgan, 2002) and games (de la Cruz, Cage, & Lian, 2000) that help students learn appropriate social skills. Experiential activities are typically classified as a social-problem approach for teaching social skills because students learn a general set of behaviors that they can subsequently apply to any circumstance. The Project Adventure curriculum (Schoel, Prouty, & Radcliffe, 1988) employs the use of a "full value contract" that serves as the guiding principles for the students to follow during all activities. The full value contract guiding principles require students to agree to follow these general principles:

1. Work as a team member.
2. Give and receive honest feedback.
3. Do not devalue others.
4. Keep each other physically and emotionally safe.
5. Get over it.

Throughout each experiential activity, students focus on the core values as well as reflect on the group's performance at the conclusion of the activity.

The group's self-reflection permits students to discuss the game in a context that allows the identification of real-life situations in which the social skill can be applied (Cartledge & Kiarie, 2001). Forgan and Jones (2002) found that when used consistently, experiential activities increase students' positive behaviors.

When teachers infuse experiential activities such as "Body English" (Rhonke, 1994) into literacy instruction, students collaborate to plan and spell words using their bodies. For instance, the teacher featured at the beginning of the article, Bill Lafond, divided his class into groups of five during spelling instruction. Each group used one of their spelling words or brainstormed a word with five letters, such as "plays" or "Mario." Members of each group discussed how to create the letters with their bodies while standing, as well as who would form each letter. The groups took turns forming their letters and guessing each others' words. Through this activity, Lafond's students practiced spelling as well as important social skills such as cooperation, negotiation, and taking turns.

A second experiential social skills activity the students in Lafond's class enjoy is called "Indian Chief." When beginning this activity, Lafond has the class discuss what value from the full-value contract should be the group's primary focus. Next, he explains the activity and sets the parameters for playing. In this case, Lafond has the students transform themselves into an Indian tribe in which students use their observation skills and take turns being the tribe members and chief. One student is chosen to be the tribe member who departs from seeing or hearing the group. Lafond then chooses one student to be a chief. The chief's role is to make different hand motions that the tribe members imitate in unison. When the tribe member returns, he or she has three guesses to identify the chief. If the student cannot identify the chief after three guesses, the group members point to the chief. Throughout this activity, Lafond has students problem-solve and strategize ways of identifying the chief, as well as working to keep the chief's

Figure 1. Print Resources for Infusing Social Skills

		Print Resources			
Title	Author	ISBN#	Publisher	Web Site	
Children's Literature: An Issues Approach (3rd ed.)	Masha Kabakow Rudman	0-8013-1469-0	Addison-Wesley	www.aw.com	$25.00
Adventures in Peacemaking: A Conflict Resolution Activity Guide for School-Age Programs	William J. Kreidler and Lisa Furlong	0-93438-711-7	Project Adventure, Inc.	www.pa.org	$25.00
Teaching Conflict Resolution Through Children's Literature	William J. Kreidler	0-590-49747-2	Scholastic	www.scholastic.com	$29.00
Teaching Problem Solving Through Children's Literature	James Forgan	1-56308-981-5	Teacher Ideas Press	www.teacherideas-press.com	$25.00
Silver Bullets: A Guide to Initiative Problems, Adventure Games, and Trust Activities	Karl Rhonke	0-8403-5682-X	Kendall/Hunt Publishing	www.kendallhunt.com	$30.00
Quicksilver	Karl Rhonke and Steve Butler	0-7872-0032-8	Kendall/Hunt Publishing	www.kendallhunt.com	$30.00
Problem Solver	Patti Waldo	0-930599-05-5	Thinking Publications	www.thinkingpubli-cations.com	$35.00
Communicate	Patty Mayo and Patti Waldo	0-930599-04-7	Thinking Publications	www.thinkingpubli-cations.com	$35.00
Communicate, Jr.	Patty Mayo and Nancy Gajewski	0-939599-68-3	Thinking Publications	www.thinkingpubli-cations.com	$35.00

identity unknown. At the end of the activity, Lafond discusses other instances when students must use keen observation skills, such as knowing the right time to interrupt if two people are talking and the student wants to ask them a question. Figures 1 and 2 show many print and Internet resources for teaching experiential learning activities.

Special education teachers can also infuse social skills into literacy using instructional games. According to de la Cruz and colleagues (2000), ancient multicultural games such as Mancala and Sungka can be useful for teaching social skills. Mancala is an African term that describes strategy games, and Sungka is a Malaysian game of riddles. These games can be researched on the Internet or purchased in stores. Both of these games can be infused into literacy or mathematics instruction as teachers relate problem-solving strategies found in the games to real-life events. Student benefits from these games include face-to-face social interaction through peer tutoring, a focus on cooperation, and multiculturalism (de la Cruz et al.). The authors conclude that students with mild disabilities benefit from Mancala and Sungka because both are instructional strategies packaged as games.

Final Thoughts

Infusing social skills training into literacy activities serves as a gateway for linking social skills with activities in the natural environment in which children find the skills meaningful. It also

Figure 2. Internet Resources on Social Skills

	World Wide Web Resources	
Title	Social Skills Genre	Web Site
Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh	Bibliotherapy	www.clpgh.org/kids/booknook/bibliotherapy/
ERIC Digest on Bibliotherapy	Bibliotherapy	http://eric.indiana.edu/ieo/digests/d177.html
International Reading Association Bibliotherapy Special Interest Group	Bibliotherapy	http://www.reading.org/dir/sig/sigbibli.html
Project Adventure, Inc.	Experiential Social Skills	www.pa.org
National Association of School Psychologists: Infusing Social Skills	Social Skills in Academics	www.naspcenter.org/factsheets/socialskills_fs.html
Infusing Social Skills	Social Skills in Academics	www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/envrnmt/drugfree/sa300.htm
Learning Disabilities On-Line	Social Skills in Academics	www.ldonlilne.com
American Guidance Service	Social Skills Curricula	www.agsnet.com

enables the teacher to devote more time to social skills instruction since the teacher does not have to search for a dedicated time to teach social skills. Infusing social skills into literacy instruction makes sense in today's school environment in which academic success often overshadows social success. Bibliotherapy, *Working Together,* and experiential learning activities are methods that promote the acquisition and generalization of social skills and help students with mild disabilities find social success.

References

Aiex, N. K. (1993). *Bibliotherapy* (Report NO. EDO-CS-93-05). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, Office of Educational Research and Improvement. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 357 333)

Anderson, P. L. (2000). Using literature to teach social skills to adolescents with LD. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 35*, 271-279.

Bauer, M. S., & Balius, F. A. (1995). Storytelling: Integrating therapy and curriculum for students with serious emotional disturbances. *TEACHING Exceptional Children, 27*(2), 24-28.

Bear, G. G., Minke, K. M., & Manning, M. A. (2002). Self-concept of students with learning disabilities: A meta-analysis. *School Psychology Review, 31*, 405-427.

Blake, C., Wang, W., Cartledge, G., & Gardner, R. (2000). Middle school students with serious emotional disturbances serve as social skills trainers and reinforcers for peers with SED. *Behavior Disorders, 25*, 280-298.

Carter, J., & Sugai, G. (1989). Social skills curriculum analysis. *TEACHING Exceptional Children, 22(1)*, 36-39.

Cartledge, G., & Kiarie, M. W. (2001). Learning social skills through literature for children and adolescents. *TEACHING Exceptional Children, 34*(2), 40-47.

Cartledge, G., & Kleefeld, J. (1994). *Working together: Building children's social skills through folk literature.* Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Service.

Cartledge, G., & Milburn, J. F. (1995) *Teaching social skills to children and youth: Innovative approaches* (3rd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

de la Cruz, R. E., Cage, C. E., & Lian, M. G. J. (2000). Let's play Mancala and Sungka! Learning math and social skills through ancient multicultural games. *TEACHING Exceptional Children, 32(3)*, 38-42.

Doll, B, & Doll, C. (1997). *Bibliotherapy with young people: Librarians and mental health professionals working together.* Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, Inc.

Elbaum, B., & Vaughn, S. (1999, May). Can school-based interventions enhance the self-concept of students with learning disabilities? Paper presented at the 1999 Keys to Successful Learning Summit. Retrieved May 4, 2004. from www.ncld.org/research/ncld_self_concept.cfm

Elksnin, L., & Elksnin, N. (1995). *Assessment and instruction of social skills* (2nd ed.). San Diego: Singular.

Elliot, S. N., & Gresham, F. M. (1991). *Social skills intervention guide: Practical strategies for social skills training.* Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Service.

Forgan, J. W. (2002). Using bibliotherapy to teach problem-solving. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 38*(2), 75-82.

Forgan, J. W. (2003). *Teaching problem-solving through children's literature.* Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited.

Forgan, J. W., & Jones, C. (2002). How experiential adventure activities can improve students' social skills. *TEACHING Exceptional Children, 34*(3), 52-58.

Forness, S. R., & Kavale, K. A. (1996). Treating social skills deficits in children with learning disabilities: A meta-analysis of the research. *Learning Disability Quarterly, 19*, 2-13.

Goldstein, A. P., & McGinnis, E. (1997). *Skillstreaming the adolescent: New strategies and perspectives for teaching prosocial skills.* Champaign, IL: Research Press.

Gresham, F. M., Sugai, G., & Horner, R. H. (2001). Interpreting outcomes of social skills training for students with high-incidence disabilities. *Exceptional Children, 67,* 331-344.

Korinek, L., & Popp, P. A. (1997). Collaborative mainstream integration of

social skills with academic instruction. *Preventing School Failure, 41,* 148-152.

McCarty, H., & Chalmers, L. (1997). Bibliotherapy intervention and prevention.*TEACHING Exceptional Children, 29*(6), 2-17.

McIntosh, R., Vaughn, S., & Zaragoza, N. (1991). A review of social interventions for students with learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 24,* 451-458.

Merrell, K. W., & Gimpel, G. A. (1998). *Social skills of children and adolescents: Conceptualization, assessment, treatment.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Rhonke, K. E. (1994). *The bottomless bag again* (2nd ed.). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.

Schoel, J., Prouty, D., & Radcliffe, P. (1988). *Islands of healing: A guide to adventure-based counseling.* Hamilton, MA: Project Adventure.

Sridhar, D. & Vaughn, S. (2000). Bibliotherapy for all: Enhancing reading comprehension, self-concept, and behavior. *TEACHING Exceptional Children, 33 (*2), 74-82.

Sugai, G., & Lewis, T. J. (1996). Preferred and promising practices for social skills instruction. *Focus on Exceptional Children, 29,* 1-16.

James W. Forgan, *Associate Professor of Special Education; and* **Alyssa Gonzalez-DeHass,** *Associate Professsor of Educational Psychology, Florida Atlantic University, Jupiter.*

Address correspondence to James W. Forgan, Associate Professor, Florida Atlantic University, 5353 Parkside Drive, Jupiter, FL 33458. (e-mail: jforgan@fau.edu).