



# Video Modeling: Using “Screen Time” to Build Critical Social Skills

By Jennifer Jacobs, M.S. CCC-SLP, and Laurie Jacobs, M.A. CCC-SLP

As both parents and Speech Language Pathologists, we’re fascinated by the allure of “screen time” – television, computers, and even iPhones. Kids of all abilities seem to be hipper than their parents and drawn to technology of varying forms. While technology-based learning has a magnetic appeal, especially for many with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), what about the human-to-human

interaction that is critical for establishing social skills? The answer may lie in video modeling, a research validated way to merge an affinity toward screen time with the opportunity to learn the pragmatic skills needed to thrive socially, especially when used in an interactive and dynamic way.

Research continues to support video modeling as a way to improve social language and behavior. A 2007 University

of Memphis study<sup>1</sup> found that computer assisted instruction used along with direct instruction and role-playing “may improve social skills deficits in students.” Video modeling – having children watch their peers’ behavior in real life scenarios on the television or computer screen – expands both nonverbal and verbal pragmatic skills, which ultimately enhances critical thinking skills.

As professionals working “in the trenches” with clients, we recognized early on the powerful role technology can play in helping children learn social skills. For the past 10 years we have focused on creating software-based tools for teaching social skills to children with ASD and other language and learning difficulties through our company, Social Skill Builder. These programs take the guesswork and labor out of designing and creating home-based teaching tools, and allow adults to quickly start teaching. Topics range from establishing key social vocabulary to the ability to compare and contrast multiple social scenarios to select the most appropriate interaction.

Whether you’re using software like ours with multiple video scenarios in one program or “homemade” videos, we’ve found that a critical element to success is that the parent or educator working with the student knows how to **use** the video and dissect its content to make it a powerful tool in building critical social skills. Regardless of an individual’s ability, you can achieve successful results and maximize social skills development by following five critical steps.

### Level 1.

**Build vocabulary.** For many, the starting point is working with a child who is learning or struggling with the most rudimentary of expressive and receptive language skills. Treat the video footage like a picture book to build basic vocabulary. For example, if the footage includes preschool children playing at the park, describe what the children are doing. “*Boy climbs up ladder. Boy waits until slide is clear. Boy goes down slide.*” At this level, vocabulary and familiarizing the user with simple expectations in different social environments is the primary goal.

### Level 2.

**Use vocabulary to introduce choices.** As the videos become stories, begin to offer choices that encourage your child or student to engage in the scenario. Offering choices allows the child to feel in control within his awareness of core social interactions, a skill important to preschoolers and adolescents alike. Choices build options for those struggling with the knowledge or language to elicit their own response. If we’re using the same video as described in level one, ask the child questions and pause for a response: “*If we see a friend at the park, what should we do? Wave hello or run away?*”

### Level 3.

**Vocabulary exposes feelings.** This level assumes a solid use of basic vocabulary and provides a building block toward the critical social skill of predicting outcomes. At this level focus on feelings, through the video subjects’ words or body language. Let’s assume the child is watching a video of a common elementary school day, much like our *My School Day* software, which shows a scene where a group of students are playing on the blacktop, teasing a girl because of the color of her shoes. Focus on telling the story through emotions. “*What would you do if you saw a friend being teased?*” (Pause for response.) “*Good, ‘tell the teacher’ is right. Do you think your friend is sad?*” (Pause for response.) “*You’re right, teasing is not nice.*”

### Level 4.

**Feelings and body language lead to inferences.** It is important to discuss contextual cues in the video subjects’ body language, behavior and emotions. While this is a seemingly natural progression from what we outline

in level three, it’s critical to teach and reinforce because so many ASD learners struggle with nonverbal communication cues and making inferences. In fact, according to one study, 93% of communication between people is nonverbal actions (Duke University/Emory University, 1992). As outlined in the above video scenario, go further with the discussion: “*How does teasing make you feel?*” (Pause for response.) “*Sad, huh? Hmm. What is she doing with her body to show she is sad? (Head down, shoulders slumped, crying, etc.)*”

### Level 5.

**Expand upon choices.** This level introduces the social nuances that allow one to compare and contrast similar scenarios to determine the most acceptable pragmatic language and behavior in any given situation. Because social awareness is so subjective, this allows the person with whom you’re working to make a detailed analysis of the better versus the **best** outcome. Let’s assume we’re watching a video about grocery shopping. A mother and her middle-school aged son are at the store. The son has his heart set on mint-chocolate chip ice cream. The store has sold out. The boy has a meltdown in the store. “*Wow! What just happened?*” (Pause for response.) “*Yeah, he’s pretty upset. If they didn’t have your favorite ice cream, what flavor would you choose next?*” (Pause for response.) “*Yeah, I like chocolate too. Is that how we behave in a grocery store?*” (Pause for response.) “*No, you’re right. Telling mom that you’re frustrated but talking about a solution is better than a temper tantrum.*”

### Keys to Success

Each person diagnosed with an ASD is unique and part of a spectrum of skills.

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Mastery of pragmatic social skills is a work in progress. While a child may have an immense vocabulary, he may not be able to infer emotions or “read” his classmates. Use the five levels to individualize your program. Always build in time to pause and discuss the verbal and nonverbal parts of the social interaction and always replay scenarios for greater recall. (Often one of the hardest skills for an excited and proud parent or educator to master!) Tailor the scenario to the individual with whom you are working—be it touch, space, voice annotation, or volume. Finally, don’t forget to include other visual supports such as pictures or written symbols to aid comprehension and retention.

If you create your own video, be sensitive to the surroundings and the other individuals involved. Decrease extraneous visual and auditory distractions. Make videos short and simple to highlight one key behavior at a time. Start with an obtainable skill to assure

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success and foster a “buy in” attitude in the child.

The tips we’ve discussed are ways to turn videos, software, and day-to-day life into interactive teachable moments. Such variety among the “everyday” helps those who live with an ASD expand their expressive and receptive language skills to better thrive in social

situations. Teasing out the social behavior and language seen in these real-life scenarios reinforces critical thinking skills. This “letting them in” on social expectations and behavior, especially for visual learners, establishes models essential for lifelong social success. ■

1. “Implementing Technology to Teach Social Skills to Students with Multiple High-Incidence Disabilities,” 2007, University of Memphis, Janna Siegel-Robertson, Clinton Smith, and Robert Williamson.

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**Jennifer Jacobs, M.S. CCC-SLP, and Laurie Jacobs, M.A. CCC-SLP** are co-founders of Social Skill Builder ([www.socialskillbuilder.com](http://www.socialskillbuilder.com)), a company launched in 1999 to provide computer-based tools for teaching social skills to children with ASD. To date, they have created six software programs to meet the varying social skill needs among preschoolers and adolescents. The sisters are both moms and together boast a brood of six cousins.