

# Social Skills Autopsy

By Richard D. Lavoie MA, M.Ed

Excerpted from: ***“Helping the Child with Learning Disabilities Find Social Success --- It’s So Much Work to Be Your Friend”*** with Richard Lavoie 2005

## Social Skills Autopsy Steps 1-5

1. ***Ask the child to explain what happened.*** You will want to have him start at the beginning, if possible. However, some children give a more accurate and complete accounting of an incident if encouraged to begin with the climax of the event and work backwards. Don’t interrupt or be judgmental. You want *his* clear recollections.
2. ***Ask the child to identify the mistake that he made.*** This is an important and interesting part of the Autopsy process. Many times, the child will be unable to determine when and where the error occurred or his interpretation is inaccurate.

Tom initially felt that borrowing the toothpaste was his error. It wasn’t. Had I merely punished Tom (“Give Chip three dollars for a new tube of toothpaste”), Tom would have erroneously felt that his mistake involved borrowing the toothpaste.

Often, a child will get in trouble with an authority figure, but the child will have no idea what he has done wrong. “I got in trouble at practice today.” “What did you do?” “I dunno. But I got the coach mad!”

How can a child stop repeating a social error if he is unable to determine or understand what the error is?
3. ***Assist the child in determining the actual social error that he made.*** Discuss the error and alternate social responses. At this point in the discussion, the adult should avoid using the word *should*. (“You *should* have waited your turn,” “You *shouldn’t* have asked the principal if he wears a toupee.”) Rather, use the word *could*: You *could* have asked if you could take your turn next because Mom was coming to pick you up early,” “You *could* have asked the principal about his new car or complimented his ties.” This strategy underscores the concept that children have options in social situations.
4. ***The scenario is the part of the process wherein the adult creates a brief social story that has the same basic moral or goal as the social faux pas.*** The scenario should have the same basic solution as the incident. It should require the child to generate a response to the fabricated situation that demonstrates his ability to generalize and apply the target skill.
5. ***Social homework is strongly recommended by Syracuse University psychologist Arnold Goldstein as a strategy to ensure the mastery and application of the target skill.*** This step requires the child to use the target skill in another setting and report back to the adult when this had been done. This technique causes the child to seek out opportunities and apply the social skill that he has learned. In the toothpaste scenario, I assigned Tom the task of using the **skill of appropriate borrowing**. A few days later, he excitedly told me that the dormitory counselor had lent him her large snowman mug when the dorm students had cocoa on a wintry night. As Tom was rinsing out the mug, another student asked if he could borrow it. Tom told him that he was not at liberty to lend the mug, but encouraged his dormmate to ask the counselor if he could use it. Tom’s application of the “borrowing concept” demonstrated that he is well on his way to mastering this skill.