

The 'Social' component of WS comprises the following areas:

- Sociability
- Peer Relationships
- Child Protection

Sociability

Profile: Sociability is one of the characteristic features of WS. Every parent and every teacher in the Irish study described the child as very friendly and sociable. This sociability is multi-faceted and is both a strength and a weakness as it poses dangers for the child. Individuals with WS tend to greet everyone they meet, or they try to make some type of contact so they are noticed by a new person. This usually involves a wide smile, moving in closer proximity to the person, gazing at their face and using very 'charming' language. Some teachers note that the learner's language register changes when they are meeting someone new; they use a register normally associated with very polite adults, almost aristocratic! Sociability is an area of evident parental pride because it makes their child stand out for positive reasons.

Teachers describe the very positive impact this sociability has on both the class and the school. The learner with WS tends to be known by EVERYONE in the school. She is often adored by older pupils because she lacks social reserve and will approach groups of older pupils in the yard or on the corridor. In one school the teachers implemented a new rule that older pupils were only to greet the learner with WS with a greeting of hi as she was giving a high-five to everyone she met in the corridor and a new trend had started across the school!

Another aspect of this sociability is a deep care for others. Most parents go so far as to say their child can read the emotional state of others. This means she can become distressed to see another person in distress, she may continually ask questions to ensure the other person is okay and she will act to console anyone who appears to be in need of support. This empathy makes her very endearing but it also can increase her anxiety.

Despite such a strong social drive the learner with WS is likely to have difficulty making and sustaining peer relationships. This is addressed in the next section. Another difficulty with sociability is the child protection issue that it presents. This is also dealt with separately.

Strategies:

- Sociability is a huge driving force for most learners with WS. Use this as a motivator whenever you can. Let her go on messages to the principal or to another teacher as a reward. Going around with the secretary for roll numbers etc. can serve as a movement break as well as a reward for good behaviour.

- The learner should be taught appropriate social greetings that enhance class and school life. All pupils actually benefit from this type of direct teaching. The child with WS could be used to model appropriate language, thus showing everyone in the class that she has strengths as well as learning needs.
- See also anxiety, peer relationships and child protection.

Peer relationships

Profile: Learners with WS are likely to have difficulty maintaining peer relationships. Their initial friendliness can make them endearing to their peers and, indeed, they are likely to seek out the friendship of others in the classroom. However, certain behaviours make them 'different' and may be off-putting to peers: tactile sensitivity, emotional outbursts, poor tolerance and 'being in trouble' for poor concentration and over-activity may create an avoidance by peers.

The learner with WS usually prefers adult company over that of children. She is likely, at break times, to seek the company of older pupils or teachers on yard duty than that of her peers. This appears to be because she gets more attention and the interaction centres on her. As she gets older she may be more likely to seek the company of younger children. This is a trend commonly seen in learners with a general learning difficulty (GLD): they seek peers at the same intellectual level. Some teachers have noticed that the conversation of peers may be around interests which the learner with WS does not have: certain television programmes or certain games which are above her physical capacity can impede her peer socialisation. The learner with WS is likely to want the conversation to centre around her interests only, she may be able to ask questions and give information but it is unlikely to have the 'flow' one expects with a conversation. In a break-time situation the learner with WS is likely to stand back in a game and not be assertive about her turn, or else she becomes aggressive because she wants it all! It is important to know the learner and her ways of reacting as this will be key to the strategies you need to implement.

Strategies:

- It is **ESSENTIAL** to implement a structured break-time socialisation intervention to encourage the learner with WS to play with peers. This benefits all pupils. It can be organised and run by older pupils. Specific games are played which have clear rules. The emphasis is on fun and participation. Different peers may play with this social group on different days. It should not be a break-time activity for learners with needs alone.
- It is important to teach tolerance among all learners. All pupils need strategies for expressing displeasure with peers and for helping peers to behave in socially acceptable ways. One teacher consistently used the script of 'some children in our class are younger and need our help'. This worked very successfully in ensuring peer understanding of difference.

- It may be necessary to build up the child's interest in a hobby that her peers like. One teacher described how she bought her pupil a Chelsea football as most boys in the class were Chelsea fans. She then created opportunities for her to have conversations around this interest with her peers. This should be done in tandem with parents who can also promote a certain interest.
- You may need to teach assertiveness skills to the learner with WS so they don't stand aside during break-time games and seek to please peers by letting them go ahead in the line or to take her turn.
- Similarly, you may need to teach skills of waiting or turn-taking to ensure the learner can play appropriately.
- A buddy-system is sometimes used where two children play with the learner with WS during break-time. This changes every week.
- The learner should be discouraged from trailing the teacher or SNA on yard duty during break-times. Similarly, the learner should not be left with nothing to do at break time.

Child protection

Profile: as mentioned in the section on sociability, learners with WS are very friendly and extroverted. They seek the company of others and do not discriminate between people known to them and strangers. This places them at great risk. Parents describe the way their child can go missing through their distractibility. Something might catch their attention and they will follow it. This also places them at further risk. On top of all this, they seek to please and have poor skills of expressing emotion so they are at a high risk of abuse. This means that the Social, Personal and Health Education programme is of particular worth for learners with WS. Child protection issues are one of the greatest concerns for parents of children with special educational needs.

Strategies:

- Implement the full Social, Personal and Health Education curriculum. While the Stay Safe programme may only be taught every second year the learner with WS (and indeed any learners with needs) should participate in this programme every year. Many special schools teach these modules every year. Parents should be informed of the programme and the strategies so they can reinforce them at home.
- Direct teaching of social skills for meeting new people should be undertaken. However, this in its own right is often successful in the teaching situation where the learner can recite the 'rules' but cannot transfer them to a social situation. It is imperative that when these skills are taught that the learner is put in situations where they meet new people and have to follow the rules. In school this may link to social outings. In one case, as part of the learner's IEP, she worked with the school secretary for 15 minutes

every morning. When parents etc. came to the office she had to alert the secretary but not strike up a conversation beyond a greeting. This was found to be effective but requires a home-school link also.

- Social stories can be useful to highlight dangers to learners with WS. This approach can give them information on appropriate social strategies e.g. for using public toilets, for coping when lost etc.