Working with Quirky Girls- Helping Wallflowers Bloom
An INSPIRE session with Dr. Linda Flaga

1. Introduction
2. Overview of definitions and descriptions of socially awkward kids, social rejection, and loneliness vs socially separate.
3. Scenarios- talk and turn using the following guidelines from pages 5-7:
   What can schools do?
   What can parents do?
   What can the child do?

Introduction:
- The rubber band analogy by Joann Deak PhD
- Basic premises:
  - Every child is unique.
  - Every child has strengths and weaknesses.
  - There is a broad spectrum of “normal” development but the ability to form relationships is always important.
  - Outside of our family, peers and friends make up our most important human connections. For children, school provides the framework for most of their friendships and peer relationships.
  - All children want to do well.
  - Most parents are trying to do a good job.
  - Avoid labeling “short rubber bands” as pathology unless helpful.
  - Information is always beneficial.
  - Treatment from professionals should not be avoided if needed.
  - Psychology and neurology continue to make new discoveries. There is a plethora of information and more to come.

Understanding Friendship:
- Intimacy, affection, and loyalty (friends who can be trusted).
- Similarity and proximity (similarities such as age, gender, same classroom).
- Mutual activities and shared interests.
- Reciprocity and support (mutual respect and affection).

( Helping the Socially Isolated Child Make Friends, Rick Lavoie, 2007 )
Definitions and Descriptions:

Social Awkwardness:
- One of the ways we judge a person’s emotional state is by looking at their facial expression and “reading” it.
- Some children may have problems “reading” faces.
- Some children may have problems interpreting emotions.
- Some children may have personal space awkwardness such as stands too close or talks too loud.
- Some children may be socially immature.
- Some children may be missing social norms such as hygiene issues and courtesy issues.
- Result: other children may see them as weird and annoying.
(From Beyond Social Awkwardness: Problems with “reading” faces? www.neurology.org)

Social Rejection:
- Aggressive or withdrawn children are more likely to be cast from peer groups.
- They will be seen as different.
- Acceptance and rejection is one of the ways in which humans socialize each other.
- Vicious cycle- rejection leads to withdrawal to more rejection.
- Having even one friend helps a lot.
(Gerda Wever-Rabehl. July 11, 2006, Who is The Social Outcast)

Loneliness VS Social Isolation:
- Research looked at three groups: 1) socially isolated but did not feel lonely; 2) felt lonely but was not socially isolated; 3) rejected and felt lonely.
- Research indicates that it is loneliness and not rejection/social isolation that co-occurs with emotional problems.
- What does this mean?
  - Friends in multiple arenas help (within the school setting/outside of the school setting).
(Journal of Child psychology and Psychiatry Vol. 43, Issue 2, Page 233-244, feb.2002)
Some Possible Causes of Social Difficulties or Awkwardness

- Simple shyness
- Social Anxiety Disorder
- Attention Issues (ADD and ADHD)
- Learning Disabilities
- Asperger’s Syndrome

Simple Shyness VS Social Anxiety Disorder

- Common times to feel shy vs. “painfully shy.”
  - 80% of adults report being shy sometime in their life, 40% consider themselves shy presently (Stanford Shyness Survey).
- Shows significant and persistent fear of social situations in which embarrassment or rejection may occur.
- Experiences immediate anxiety-driven, physical reaction to feared situations.
- Realizes that his or her fears are greatly exaggerated but feels powerless to do anything about them.
- Often avoids the dreaded social situation- at any cost.
- New in DSM-V: extreme clinging and unable to speak in social situations.

Parent Responses for Shyness-What does not work:

- Tell your child not to cry.
- Tell your child there is nothing to be scared about.
- Become angry and tell your child that he/she was the one who wanted to do this in the first place.
- Force your child to do social activities that cause great distress.

More Effective and Empathetic Parent Responses:

- It is okay to watch first.”
- “You like to check things out before you jump in.”
- “New things are hard.”
- ”I used to feel scared when I tried new things.”

(Markway and Markway, 2005)
Treatment for Social Anxiety:
- Psychological treatment: cognitive/behavioral counseling may be best.
- Medication: antidepressants, anti-anxiety. Make sure you see a specialist (pediatric psychiatrist).
- Therapeutic hypnotherapy.
- Relaxation and visualization techniques.
- Involve the school.
- Just having “tools” available can be helpful.

ADD/ADHD & Learning Disabilities
- 70% of children with learning difficulties report having “major difficulties” with peers in comparison to 15% among non-disabled students. (Lavoie 2007)
- These difficulties may be a direct result of the learning disorder. (Lavoie 2007)
- Keep in mind that 30% do not identify peer difficulties.
- Aggression or hyperactivity may make others uncomfortable. The child needs to understand this.
- Low self-esteem may make peers feel uncomfortable.
- Appropriate treatment for ADD/ADHD is very important.
- Counseling to “normalize” the situation may be helpful for children with learning disabilities.
- Educating family/peers, etc. is important.

Asperger’s Syndrome:
- Changes in DSM-V- no longer a stand-alone diagnosis.
- 10 times more common in boys (Gillberg, 1991).
- Information on the prevalence of Asperger’s Disorder is limited, but it appears to be more common in males. (from All About Asperger’s Syndrome, Marina Benjamen, psychocentral.com)
- “The essential features of Asperger’s Disorder are severe and sustained impairment in social interactions with others, and the development of restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, and activities. A person with Asperger’s often appears to lack empathy toward others, have difficulty with nonverbal behavior (such as making eye contact or
having facial expressions), and may show an intense obsession with very defined, narrow topics of interest”. (from All About Asperger’s Syndrome, Marina Benjamen, psychocentral.com, pg.1)

- Wired differently- not a disease to be treated but a style to be worked with.
- Theories: Neurobiological in nature (mirror neurons), possible genetic component, possible in utero response to testosterone.
- Identification is important to ascertain appropriate intervention.
- It is important to focus on strengths. Have realistic expectations.
- Teach social skills, scripting, etc.
- Get counseling from a professional who specializes in Asperger’s Syndrome.

Social Coaching:
- There are multiple programs, approaches, books, etc. available.
- There are social skills groups available.
- Forced social situations don’t usually work. Look for a natural interest/situation.
- Talk about what went wrong in a social scenario (social autopsy).
- Social scripting can be helpful for some situations.
- Be direct, honest, and concrete.

What can the school do?
- Identify students who are not fitting in or seem socially isolated and let parents know.
- Encourage and teach positive social skills.
- Find every student’s strengths and focus on these as much as possible. Find personal islands of competence in the awkward child, an area of skill and interest that is unique to that child. Celebrate these affinities in a public way.
- Teachers should role model acceptance and kindness.
- Have different activities available to help children find their niche such as lunch bunch, robotics, etc.
- Give the socially isolated child roles that other children covet.
  (Example- taking the attendance down to the office.)
• Be an advocate for the student and provide support for parents.
• Bully Prevention Programs.
• Disability Awareness Programs.

What can parents do?
• Really look and see what is going on with your child. Try to determine the cause. Litmus test: Is your child invited to birthday parties?
• Watch the labels, although the identification of a diagnosis is important (not the same as a label).
• It may look like oppositional behavior. See what is motivating the behavior.
• Make sure simple things are taken care such as hygiene and dress.
• Social autopsies- go backward in the chain of events and see where the “oops” was.
• Discuss desired outcomes related to peer relationships. Brainstorm, problem solve and role play with you child.
• Teasing: Teach coping strategies like comebacks, the use of humor, mentally Xing people out. Help your child learn when it is important go to an adult.
• Find activities that ‘stretch the rubber band” but are not overly uncomfortable or cause trauma.
• Natural situations are better than forced situations. For scheduled activities, start with activities that are not group activities or are solo activities within a group such as tennis, martial arts, robotics.
• Paradoxically, drama seems to be an area of comfort for many shy and socially awkward kids.
• Social skills coaching may be helpful.
• Be careful not to fix it if it is not broken. Have realistic expectations. Choose your battles.
• Involve the school.
• Seek professional help when needed.
What can the child do if they are shy?

• Don’t call himself or herself shy. Stop making it a permanent fixture of his/her personality. Don't equate their identity with shyness. Think differently. (Phillip Zimbado, 1979). This works the same way with other social difficulties.
• Try different activities until you find something that you are comfortable with.
• Have activities inside and outside of the school setting.
• Try to have in-school and out of school peers and/or friends.
• Learn to be an advocate for his/herself.
• Remember the rubber band analogy.

What can your child do if they are socially awkward or “quirky”?

• Recognize what may be putting off peers.
• Do social autopsies and find the “oops” moments.
• Find activities (in and out of school) that he/she is interested in and pursue those.
• Identify areas of strength and build on those.
• Ask adults for help when needed.
The way you overcome shyness is to become so wrapped up in something that you forget to be afraid.” -Lady Bird Johnson

“Too many people overvalue what they are not and undervalue what they are.” -Malcolm Forbes

Portrait of Courage