Foreword

When asked to write the foreword to Friendship 101, edited by Juliet Hart Barnett and Kelly Whalon, I began to reflect on my own journey as a teacher and researcher in the field of developmental disabilities (DD) and autism spectrum disorder (ASD). My early experiences in an institutional setting in 1970 as a teacher of adolescent students with intellectual disability (ID) and ASD taught me many lessons about the importance of social skills. I developed a pilot work-study program that enabled these students to leave the institutional school during the day for on-the-job training (Zucker & Altman, 1973). Students were transported to a large office complex where they engaged in various housekeeping tasks. Students had no problem learning the tasks but performed unsatisfactorily due to inappropriate behavior carried over from the institution and lack of proper social skills in the non-school setting. Based on this experience, the program was modified to focus more on the social skills necessary for success in this business environment and less on the actual vocational tasks. We were able to use various modeling techniques to elevate appropriate social skills, which led to increased success for these students with ID and ASD (Prieto & Zucker, 1978; Zucker, 1978). The lesson learned was that social skills were just as important as task skills for our students to experience success. In reading and examining this collection, it is clear that outstanding progress has been made over the past 40 years in research and intervention in this area.

For all students, social communication skills are essential to establishing lasting friendships and relationships with others and enhancing quality of life outcomes. Children and youth with ASD and DD frequently experience serious difficulties with developing social communication skills and present many challenges to their teachers and families. They also experience lower levels of peer acceptance and fewer friendships (Rotheram-Fuller, Kasari, Chamberlain, & Locke, 2010). In fact, problems developing social competence skills tend to be inherent for these students and persist throughout the school years (Eaves & Ho, 2008; Guralnick, 2010). These challenges are compounded by the fact that children and youth with ASD and DD are often placed in the most segregated settings where their opportunities for social skills development are limited. However, we know that children and youth with ASD and DD can benefit from social skills intervention. Thus, fundamental for these students is an explicit, intentional focus on social competence utilizing practices supported in the literature throughout their K–12 careers.

Empirically based and practitioner-focused, Hart Barnett and Whalon’s timely volume is geared toward supporting teachers with their implementation of the most effective and practical strategies on developing social competence, friendship making, and recreation and leisure skills among students with ASD and DD. Friendship 101 includes succinct chapters written by experts in the fields of ASD and DD to address the unique social competency needs of children and youth spanning the ages of early childhood through adolescence. Because of the heterogeneity associated with ASD and DD, emphasis is placed on assessment for instructional planning as
well as evidence-based strategies to support learners with a variety of cognitive, language, and social needs. Moreover, chapters highlight skills essential to building social competence (e.g., organizing and maintaining play, interpreting social situations, joining in activities with others, participating in and maintaining conversations; Conroy & Brown, 2002; Cook & Oliver, 2011). Each chapter also includes a research-based review of applicable literature, a focus on instructional strategies, as well as at least one vignette, instructional plan, or other supplemental material for readers to readily and feasibly implement the strategies in their own instructional context. Importantly, each chapter also provides helpful suggestions to promote generalization (e.g., teaching multiple peers, providing ongoing opportunities to practice targeted skills in multiple, natural contexts, and teaching self-monitoring).

One of the greatest strengths and contributions of this volume is its developmental approach. Although many volumes focus on a specific age or grade level, Friendship 101 addresses the applicable social skills needs of students across the developmental period, with logical social targets that are suitable to children and adolescents according to their age level. For example, at the early childhood level, contributing authors focus on social skills in the context of play, whereas chapters geared toward elementary-age students stress the importance of teacher and peer-mediated strategies as children develop friendships and engage in interactions with their teachers and peers in both academic and social settings. As students move into early and late adolescence, the focus of the chapters progresses to assisting youth with developing peer networks; “hanging out” in recreation and leisure activities; and directing themselves successfully through the world of dating, sexuality, and relationships. Teachers working with students of all age and grade levels would be hard pressed to locate a more practical book to help them provide their students with ASD and DD with the requisite social skills to navigate the world of play, friendship, recreation, and interpersonal relationships.

Although the majority of content is focused on the implementation of social skills strategies in school-based settings, a chapter of the volume is also dedicated to assisting families and caregivers seeking to improve their children's social skills in home- and community-based settings. Parental participation has long been considered a crucial component of special education, particularly for students with ASD and DD. This chapter provides teachers with a guide for how to assist families in implementing caregiver strategies to teach their children social cognition skills, build friendships, and capitalize on natural community supports to enhance their child's quality of life.

Key stakeholders with interest in this well timed volume will no doubt include general and special education teachers and other key service providers of children and youth with ASD and DD. In addition, faculty preparing teachers to address the social skills needs of this population will also find the volume useful in their coursework and internship activities. The majority of states in the United States currently lack specific licensure requirements for teacher preparation in ASD (National Center on Teacher Quality, 2007), and many teachers correspondingly report feeling unprepared to meet the challenges of working with these students (Teffs & Whitbread, 2009). As such, this volume provides teacher educators with applicable, easy-to-understand information to prepare their future teachers of children with ASD and DD on how to use best practices to meet the social needs of their students. Last, researchers interested in enhancing the social skills of children and youth with DD will appreciate the review of current and validated research-based practices as they are applied in naturalistic contexts.
With an emphasis on explicit teaching, *Friendship 101* offers a constructive and practical guide for general and special educators striving to ensure that all of their students develop the social skills needed to be successful across school, home, and community contexts. The editors of and contributors to this volume empower teachers and caregivers to maximize the social potential of their students with ASD and DD by providing lists of resources where readers can access additional information, explaining what constitute effective strategies, and making explicit application of these practices to real-life case vignettes depicting authentic social and instructional scenarios. In so doing, these students can be guided to accomplish the full integration into our schools and communities that in decades past had been considered unlikely if not impossible.

*Stanley H. Zucker*
Arizona State University

References


