



Erin Sappio

SOCIAL SKILLS GROUPS IN THE VIRTUAL WORLD

The use of technology in the classroom is growing rapidly, with considerable advancement from year to year. School counselors have increased their use of technology to help students plan for and apply to college. As a School Psychologist my primary interactions with students, parents, and teachers are still face-to-face or over the telephone. Increasingly, communication with parents has occurred over email. Email consultation with teachers regarding student academic or behavioral interventions has also surged. But the newest technological advance within mental health in schools is running counseling groups in a virtual world.

During the current school year, counselors in my school district ran an 8-session social skills training program through a virtual world called InWorld Solutions. Students with disabilities and general education students who needed social skills improvement were excited to meet with counselors in the virtual world, represented by avatars. They were eager to learn to interact appropriately and have fun while gaining new skills in this new, virtual forum.

InWorld Solutions is a software program where participants create an online avatar to manipulate through a virtual world. [InWorld Solutions](#) is a HIPAA compliant program in that only participants who have written forms of consent and are invited to participate by the facilitator can access the program. This is a controlled virtual world to conduct therapy through role play, modeling, training, education, and simulation. Participants are able to speak in their own voices and hear the voices of the other participants. The program allows for sessions to be recorded and reviewed by participants so that they can learn through real-time interaction with others as well as watch interactions and react after-the-fact.

In InWorld, students are able to change their avatar's appearance to look as much or as little as themselves as they prefer. Students change the avatar's clothing and add or delete preferred objects from the world as they desire. Counselors have found that participating as an avatar increases the student interest and motivation to participate in social skills group.

Social skills lessons begin with an "ice-breaker" period. During

this time, students enter the world, greet one another, and talk about their day. They are then encouraged to play a game such as Simon Says to orient themselves to the action functions of the avatars and give students a general feel of the environment. The next phase of the session is the social skill lesson presentation and practice. As the lessons are introduced that require role plays, the students choose which world they want to act out the role plays in. For example, if the role play addresses a bullying scenario that occurred in the hallway, the students meet in the hallway in the virtual world. If scripts are required for the role play, they are typed into an Instant Messaging box by the counselor. Students have reported that they are more comfortable role playing in the virtual world as opposed to being in person because they don't feel self-conscious. Since most students are comfortable in the video game world, the avatars are an extension of that everyday leisure activity. With decreased inhibitions, they engage more in the activities suggested by the counselor and therefore, they can better access and participate in the target lesson. The sessions wrap up with a discussion of



what the students learned that day and how they can apply the lesson to their daily lives.

The virtual format allows for the students to play while they learn. From time to time, the students would get distracted by the virtual world itself and disappear from the world everyone is in and a counselor may find him/her playing on the virtual playground or driving a virtual car. Typically, the students come back to the lesson when called. If they do not, they may get "banished" to the virtual desert for a virtual "time-out!" A virtual recess is

included in social skills lessons as reinforcement for on-task behavior. This may include allowing students to race one another while driving cars, chase one another, or have their avatars perform silly stunts such as jumping around or crawling through furniture.

Meeting in the virtual world has allowed access to a larger number of students in a shorter amount of time. As a counselor, I have been able to meet with students in two different buildings in the same virtual world. Meeting in the virtual world has also

allowed interactions that may not be appropriate in a face-to-face setting. For example, having two students who had a physical altercation with one another in the same group could be stressful and uncomfortable in a face-to-face environment. Working with them in the virtual world allows students to safely resolve the conflicts.

The 8-session program that were run in the Fall of 2012 were part of a larger study comparing the effects of the social skills program implemented through a

virtual world verses the effects of the social skills program implemented through the traditional face-to-face world. The data from these groups is still being analyzed. However, plans are underway to administer the groups again with a social skills program focused on building empathy skills in students who were disciplined for being in violation of the New Jersey Harassment, Intimidation, and Bullying Law (NJSA Statute 18A:37-17.)

The virtual world is also used in an unstructured format with students who need help processing events that have happened in their lives.

Students who may have difficulty sequencing events or students on the Autistic spectrum who have difficulty relating person-to-person can walk the counselor through events in their lives with their avatars, allowing them enough social distance where they are comfortable, yet still socially engaging them.

Although the virtual world is new to our district, it has already been effectively implemented with a number of students. The feedback from both the students and the counselors using the program is positive. Students are excited to learn to act in a prosocial manner. Counselors do not

have to worry about wasting time settling disinterested students in order to present the social skills lessons because the students are naturally motivated to be in the virtual world. Therefore, social skills groups in the virtual world are presenting themselves to be a win-win for our school. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erin Sappio, Ph.D, is a New Jersey Licensed Psychologist and Certified School Psychologist, working full time in a public school district in a suburb of New Jersey for the past 8 years.



Pictures approved to be included in this article by Jeanine Miles, MS, LPC, Director of Business, Development, and Marketing for the Center for Guidance Health Network.