

# Introduction

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## *Welcome to the Wanna Play Program*

**W**e are very thrilled for the opportunity to put together this revised edition of *Wanna Play: Friendship Skills for Preschool and Elementary Grades*. The Wanna Play Program was developed as the result of our experience in early intervention and social behavior development. Both of us have had personal journeys with the development of this program. It has been inspired by our own children's growth and that of all the children we have been lucky enough to join for a part of their journey. We found that children were not applying the social skills they had learned in school and community settings. There were few programs dealing with socialization that accommodated children on many different interactive levels. We have directed social groups in our Pennsylvania location as well as running groups and training professionals in schools and other therapeutic environments. We began developing a meaningful approach to these skills and realized the need for this type of supportive, instructional programming. This led to the creation of Wanna Play, Inc. in 2001. The program is proud to be celebrating 10 years of providing social skills development and behavior support. Over the years, this program has been used with success by everyone from teachers to babysitters. Developing interactive social ability and an understanding of social norms in children is the responsibility of all adults and crosses disciplines.

We have reworked this edition to be more effective and added to the program's strengths for a more enriched social experience. There has been new research into the importance of social skills and the acquisition of these skills. Most children's programming includes a social and behavior element. The understanding that a child's social and behavioral development is necessary for the development of cognitive and physical skills is becoming more and more readily accepted in educational models. Therefore, we have strengthened the program's effectiveness in inclusive classroom settings. We have seen that when these topics are used in inclusive settings, the strategies used by adults and the behaviors and social skills taught become part of the school culture and all children benefit. We have made this edition more user-friendly for teachers by adding more detail to the activities themselves. There are details guiding teachers with lesson objectives and goals. More suggestions have been added for compensating for different cognitive and developmental levels. Specifics about lesson preparation and implementation time have been added to help the flow of lesson planning. All of these changes will help teachers provide a strong social development program in their schools. It is very important for children to develop an emotional vocabulary to express their feelings and frustrations. Many negative behaviors come from children's inability to communicate what they want and how

they feel. We have addressed this with the addition of a new chapter that helps children with understanding emotional expression. The chapter looks at emotional expression from the perspectives of (1) personal expression and (2) interpreting others' emotions when we are interacting. It is important for children to be able to not only express themselves appropriately but also understand others' feelings and respond to them in a meaningful way.

Even though the new focus is on the inclusive classroom, there is a wide audience who would benefit from utilizing this program and incorporating the lessons and activities into their work with children. Many of the activities will still work with small groups, and we have put suggestions in place to help those using the curriculum to adapt them to many models. Other educators working with children in school settings, including school psychologists and school counselors, can incorporate the curriculum by using the lessons with individual children, small groups, or classrooms. Therapy professionals whose area of specialization impacts social development, such as occupational therapists, speech therapists, and behavioral specialists, can also utilize the program and use it with their clients. Mental health professionals including psychologists, psychiatrists, or social workers can use the lessons as part of their therapy sessions that concentrate on the development of social awareness. Caregivers including parents, childcare providers, and in-home support staff who are concentrating on their children's social development can use the program, particularly those with special needs children who have home therapy programs.

Based on our experience, a child with social challenges does not learn the skills necessary for successful interaction by observing typically developing peers in the classroom. More direct instruction on how to socially interact is needed in order for them to learn these abstract skills. A child does not need to have a diagnosis in order to have challenges in developing social skills. We provide the training to teachers and professionals and instruction to children in a child-centered curriculum to encourage success in all areas of social interaction.

The underlying intention of all of the attitudinal approach strategies is to be in touch with our own positive playfulness. We need to be aware of outside influences that affect our affect. When we are working on anything as important as children's social development, the time spent working on our own attitude is as important as the time spent instructing the children. We need to make sure that the children's time is their time and that we put our own concerns aside during this time. If you are reading this curriculum, it is because you love children and want to help them. Enjoy what you are giving them, enjoy what they are giving you, and enjoy seeing the benefits of both your efforts. A universally accepted belief in education, therapy, and any developmental discipline for children is that modeling skills and behaviors is the best way for children to internalize them—therefore, we say to you, above all, *have fun*.