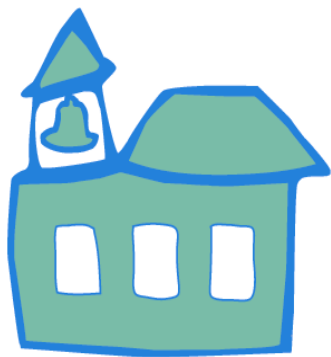

An Evaluation of the Efficacy of a Prosocial Approach to Social Skills Instruction



Safe Schools
Healthy Students

Pinellas County School District
Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative
Evaluation Report #207-3
Prepared by the Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute

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**Ralph Bailey, Ph.D., Supervisor, Psychological Services
Nancy Deane, SS/HSI Project Manager**

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Approach to Social Skills Instruction**

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**Gina Santoro, M.A.
Kathleen Armstrong, Ph.D.
Oliver T. Massey, Ph.D.**

University of South Florida

**Pinellas County School District
Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative**

Prepared by the Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute
University of South Florida, 13301 Bruce B Downs Blvd.
Tampa, FL 33612-3807



Executive Summary

An Evaluation of the Efficacy of a Prosocial Approach to Social Skills Instruction

Four social skills specialists trained 70 elementary school teachers serving 1300 students from pre-kindergarten through third grade. Teachers were instructed to conduct daily social skills lessons with their classes using the “Stop and Think” problem solving process, collect data on class progress, and given materials with which to train and evaluate their classes. Quantitative data were collected using an evaluation tool including ten social skills selected for their alignment with the behavior, social growth, and conduct element of Pinellas County Schools report cards. Qualitative data were collected among participant teachers using a list of four questions to troubleshoot potential problem areas and to ascertain initial feelings about the process. T-tests with a Bonferoni correction were conducted on each of the ten social skills to compare teacher ratings of students’ social skills from September 2000 to May 2001. There were statistically significant improvements for all social skills measured. Overall, teachers rated improved social skills in students over the course of the year. Qualitative data indicated that teachers believed that social skills instruction had simplified classroom management, helped to improve student behavior, and had generalized to other settings outside of the classroom. Teachers reported some challenges with time management during the daily lessons, but noted that the evaluation tool was user-friendly, could be completed quickly, and was helpful in providing feedback to parents regarding their children’s behavior at school and in Individual Educational Program (IEP) planning.

An Evaluation of the Efficacy of a Prosocial Approach to Social Skills Instruction

Introduction

Increasing incidents of aggressive and violent student behavior represent a challenge for schools aiming to provide a safe learning environment for children. The Safe Schools Healthy Students Initiative (SS/HSI) is a federally funded effort to reduce violence and drug abuse and promote healthy child development granted to over 75 school districts around the nation. The Pinellas County School System in Florida is one of the recipients of the three-year grant. As part of the SS/HSI, the Social Skills staff of the Pinellas County School System developed and implemented a social skills curriculum in elementary schools throughout the district. This report describes the preliminary evaluation results from the first year of operation.

Social Skills

Social skills are behaviors that students must demonstrate in order to engage in effective and satisfying social interactions across many different situations e.g., in school, during play, and at home (McGinnis & Goldstein, 1984). Direct instruction through social skills training is one way to increase students' social competence. Social skills training can be conceptualized as a classroom behavior management program for students. In order to provide social skills instruction to students the social skills specialists combined three well-researched programs: Project ACHIEVE (Knoff & Batsche, 1995), Skill Streaming (McGinnis & Goldstein, 1990), and Second Step (Beland, 1989; Committee for Children, 1997), to create a "Prosocial Day Curriculum". Students were taught five steps, along with accompanying gestures, to help them solve

problems or difficult situations. Step 1 is to “Stop and Think” (make a stop sign and point to their head), reminding them to slow down and think about alternatives. Step 2 is “Good Choice/Bad Choice” (Thumbs up/Thumbs down), reminding them that they always have choices about their behavior. Step 3 is “What are my choices or steps” (Hands outstretched to sides), when students think about a solution that they can use to solve the problem. Step 4 is “Just do it” (Point index finger to outline a check mark), when students follow through with their choice from step 3. Step 5 reminds students that they have done a “Good Job” (Pat yourself on the back), to encourage making positive choices.

Teachers are trained to teach students social skills using four components. First, they model the skill for students to show them what to do. Teachers role play the skill steps using verbal instruction. Second, teachers allow students to role play the skill, providing students practice in the classroom setting. The teacher facilitates by coaching the actors as needed. Third, teachers and classmates give the actor(s) performance feedback. Offering corrective feedback is critical and helps children understand why they should make good choices about their behavior. Finally, transfer of training is used to encourage students to use the skill in other situations outside of the social skills lesson.

Method

Teachers must be taught to integrate social skills training with their academic curriculum so that social skills are infused into the classroom. Toward this end, four social skills specialists provided 6-hour workshops to 70 classroom teachers during the Summer of 2000. These teachers served 1300 students from pre-kindergarten through third grade, with a majority teaching kindergarten students. Teachers were instructed in

how to implement “Stop and Think” in their classrooms, by following the 5-step problem solving model using the four components. They were taught that social skills lessons ideally should be delivered daily and last 10-15 minutes each day as part of the curriculum they teach. The social skills specialists encouraged teachers to modify the format of the lessons to serve the unique needs of their classroom. Finally, teachers were provided with a list of social skills and the stepwise components to teach their classes. Social skills specialists reviewed the “Stop and Think” problem solving steps, taught the four components of the social skills lesson, modeled a live lesson, discussed strategies for generalization of social skills, and lead teachers in writing an action plan for implementation into their classrooms. Teachers agreed to collect data on their class regarding their performance of social skills for evaluation purposes.

A mixed methods design was used to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the accomplishments of the social skills program. Because of the developmental nature of the skills, a behavioral rating scale to measure skills acquisition was selected to document progress in conjunction with an open-ended questionnaire assessing the educators experience in teaching social skills.

An evaluation tool was developed that aligned social skills with behavioral elements already contained in the Pinellas County report cards. Ten social skills were selected, because they most closely resembled those requirements in the report cards. Two versions of the Pinellas County Social Skills Rating Scale for Teachers (PCSSR-T) (Mills, Armstrong, & Santoro, 2000) were created, one for use with Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten students and one for students in first through third grades. While both evaluation tools included the same 10 social skills, the order was different to match report

card behavior grades. Teachers used a five-point scale to rate individual student's performance of the 10 social skills, repeated three times during the 2000-2001 school year. The behavioral indicators of the scale were 1)student almost never uses the skill, 2)student seldom uses the skill, 3)student sometimes uses the skill, 4)student often uses the skill, and 5)student almost always uses the skill. Data were collected in September, January, and May at regular report card intervals. As an incentive to participate, teachers who completed this data all three times earned 10 credit towards renewal of their teaching certificates. Evaluators from Florida Mental Health Institute entered these data into a comprehensive database. After the baseline data collection in September, the evaluators created graphs of student performance for each teacher participating. Following January and May data collection, the evaluators created a list of missing data and social skills specialists contacted these individual teachers in an attempt to maintain sample size across the data collection points.

Four questions were developed by social skills specialists to determine teachers reactions to the social skills curriculum. These questions were:

1. How has teaching the social skills curriculum impacted your classroom?
2. Of the lesson components (modeling, role playing, performance feedback, transfer of training), which have been the most challenging to implement during social skills lessons and why?
3. What did you like best about the evaluation tool? What would you change about it?

4. Did you find (or do you anticipate) that completing the evaluation tool (PCSSR-T) was helpful in evaluating students' behaviors for report card grades?

Results

Teacher Questionnaire

Results from the teachers are summarized below for each of the four questions.

1. How has teaching the social skills curriculum impacted your classroom?

Teachers responded that teaching social skills have simplified classroom management by providing a common language and encouraging children to take responsibility for their own behavior by making choices and thinking before they act. Social skills instruction has helped students to improve their behavior by teaching students how to perform behaviors desired in the classroom. Teachers reported that students were generalizing the information because teachers observed students using the "Stop and Think" language with each other during class and parents reported hearing the language used at home.

2. Of the lesson components (modeling, role playing, performance feedback, transfer of training), which have been the most challenging to implement during social skills lessons and why?

Teachers reported facing challenges with each component, but the most commonly reported challenge was with role playing. Teachers had difficulty coming up with content for role plays and often did not have enough time during the lesson to have role plays. Additionally, it was difficult for some children to engage in them. Transfer of training also proved to be challenging. Some students were not using "Stop and Think" in real-life situations when they needed to, for example, in the cafeteria.

3. *What did you like best about the evaluation tool? What would you change about it?*

Teachers responded unanimously that the evaluation tool (PCSSR-T) was user-friendly in that it could be completed quickly and was simple to use. They thought it was helpful to use when giving information to parents (e.g., at conferences) about their child's progress with their behavioral skills.

4. *Did you find (or do you anticipate) that completing the evaluation tool (PCSSR-T) was helpful in evaluating students' behaviors for report card grades?*

Most teachers responded that the evaluation form was helpful in assigning grades and with parent conferences. Some teachers reported that the evaluation tool was helpful with progress reports and IEP development. Few teachers reported not finding it helpful, some reported that it was more in-depth than necessary, but that it provided a nice addition to report card data. Pre-kindergarten teachers suggested developing a pre-kindergarten form aligned with their behavioral grading checklist because they do not use report cards. Overall, most teachers found the tool helpful.

PCSSR-T Results

To address improvement in student social skills over the course of the year, t-tests were conducted on each of the ten social skills to compare teacher ratings of students' social skills from September 2000 to May 2001. A t-test is a statistical procedure that allows for comparisons of group averages. With respect to the PCSSR-T, statistically significant t-values indicated that teachers' ratings of students' social skills improved from September 2000 to May 2001. To control for increased Type I error rates associated with numerous t-tests, a Bonferoni correction was used. A Bonferoni

correction is a statistical way of dispersing the .05 alpha level across the ten t-tests.

Subsequently, in order to be considered significant, each t-value had to have a p-value < .005, instead of $p < .05$. Table 1 displays the results of the t-tests for each of the ten social skills.

Table 1
T-Values and Significance of Social Skills September 2000 – May 2001

Social Skill	N	T-Value	Significance (2-tailed)
Listening	872	-27.264	$p < .005$
Following Directions	870	-27.743	$p < .005$
Dealing With Feeling Mad	855	-25.660	$p < .005$
Using Nice Talk	869	-23.459	$p < .005$
Waiting Your Turn	872	-28.613	$p < .005$
Sharing	868	-27.862	$p < .005$
Trying When It's Hard	871	-29.135	$p < .005$
Asking For Help	871	-28.738	$p < .005$
Ignoring	870	-30.065	$p < .005$
Accepting Consequences	854	-24.872	$p < .005$

When comparing teacher ratings from September 2000 to May 2001, there were statistically significant improvements for all social skills measured. This means that overall, teachers rated students as improving their social skills over the course of the year. Figures 1-5 illustrate the growth in social skills by grade level.

Discussion

There are certain limitations to the interpretations of the results. One limitation is that the results cannot be directly attributed to social skills instruction. Other factors, such as maturation (e.g., students would have improved naturally without the instruction) and idiosyncratic teacher differences (e.g., different styles of teaching social skills, teaching some or all of the 10 social skills being measured) could have impacted the findings. Another limitation is that teachers' ratings are subjective. Teachers may have expected that students would improve their social skills because they were receiving social skills instruction. These expectations could have led teachers to artificially inflate their ratings of students' social skills. A third limitation is that statistically significant findings are not uncommon when large sample sizes are involved. The social skills data set included a large number of participants; therefore, it is not surprising that the results of the t-tests were significant.

Despite these limitations, the results of this data collection are promising for several reasons. Based on the qualitative information, teachers believed that social skills instruction was an effective classroom management technique because it makes students responsible for their own behavior. Statistically significant improvements across social skills indicated that social skills instruction seems to be amenable to teaching styles. It is likely that teachers engaged in different styles of instruction, nevertheless, their ratings of students' social skills improved over the school year. Further, the social skills rating scale provided teachers a tool that they could use to make grading decisions, set IEP goals, and provide feedback during parent conferences.

For data collection during the 2001-2002 school year, some revisions have been made to the data collection tool. First, there are 3 versions of the evaluation tool that will be used, one for Kindergarten, one for grades 1-3, and one for grades 3-5. The social skills on the Kindergarten and grades 1-3 versions of the evaluation tool remain unchanged. The evaluation tool for grades 3-5 includes different social skills aligned with the report card grades for older students. Another change was the addition of a place to record the date on which each social skill was taught. Appendix 1 includes the revised PCSSR-T. The changes will allow for more control over the independent variable being measured (social skills instruction) in that comparisons of skill growth can be made among social skills that have and have not been taught. Finally, a more sophisticated method of analyses will be employed to examine change over time as a result of social skills training.

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Figure 1
 Pinellas County, 2000-2001
 Pre-K Social Skills

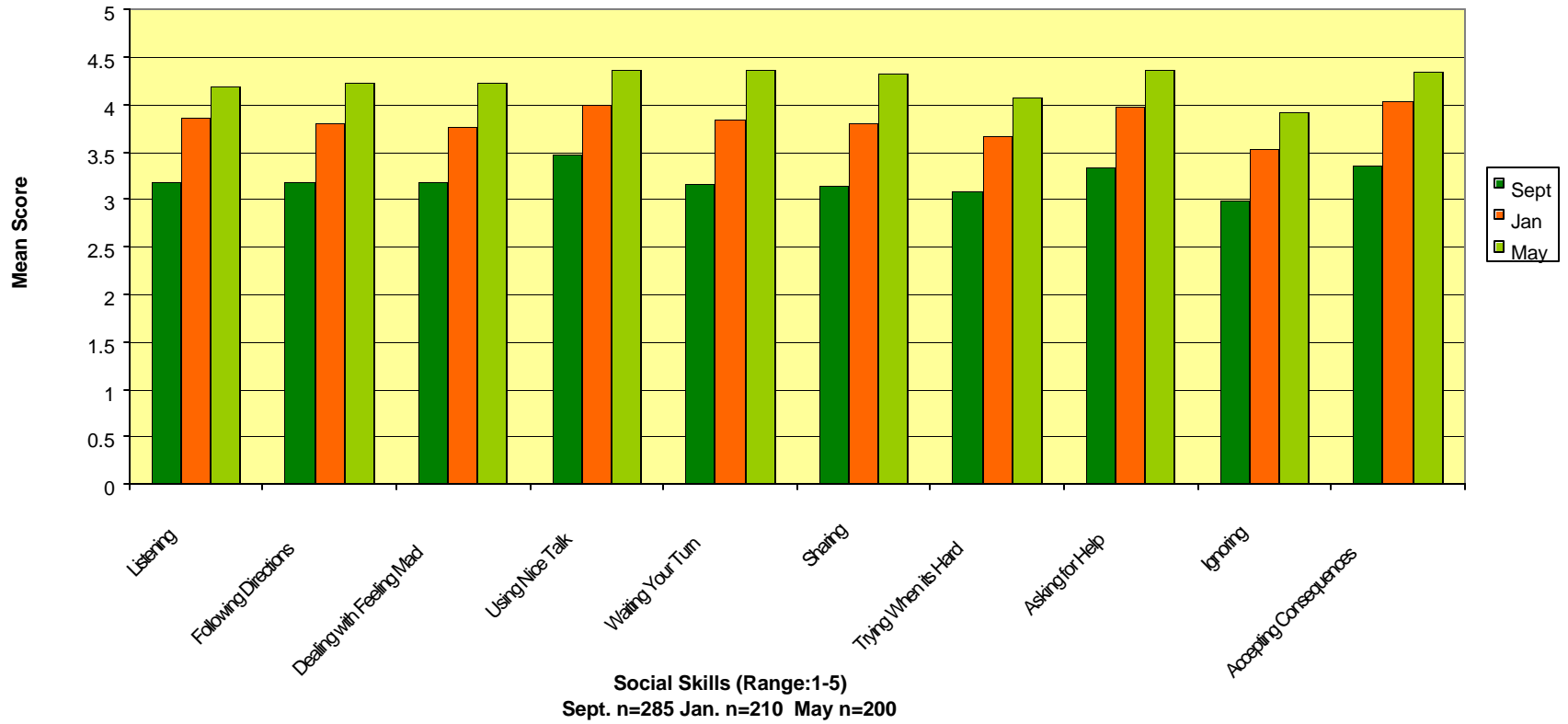


Figure 2
Pinellas County, 2000-2001
Kindergarten Social Skills

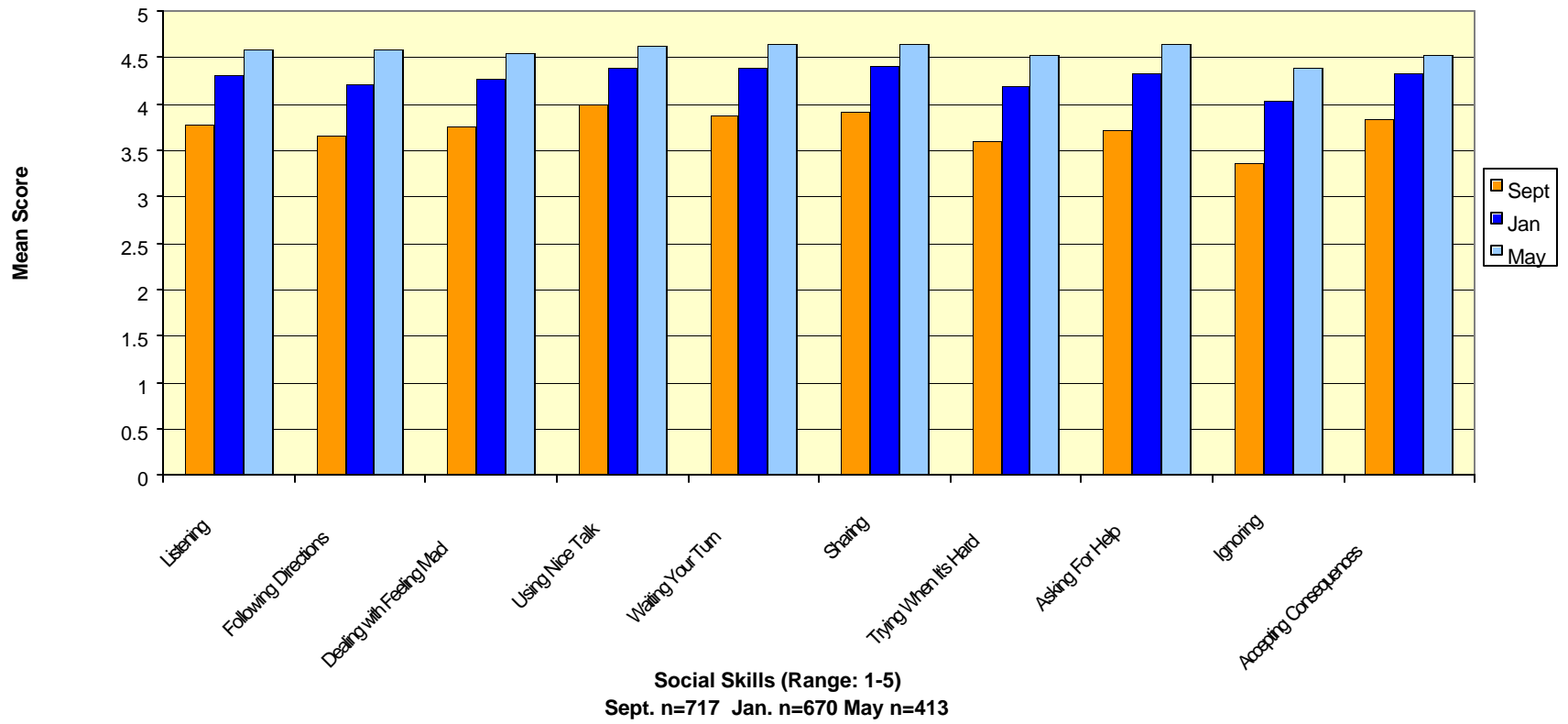


Figure 3
Pinellas County, 2000-2001
First Grade Social Skills

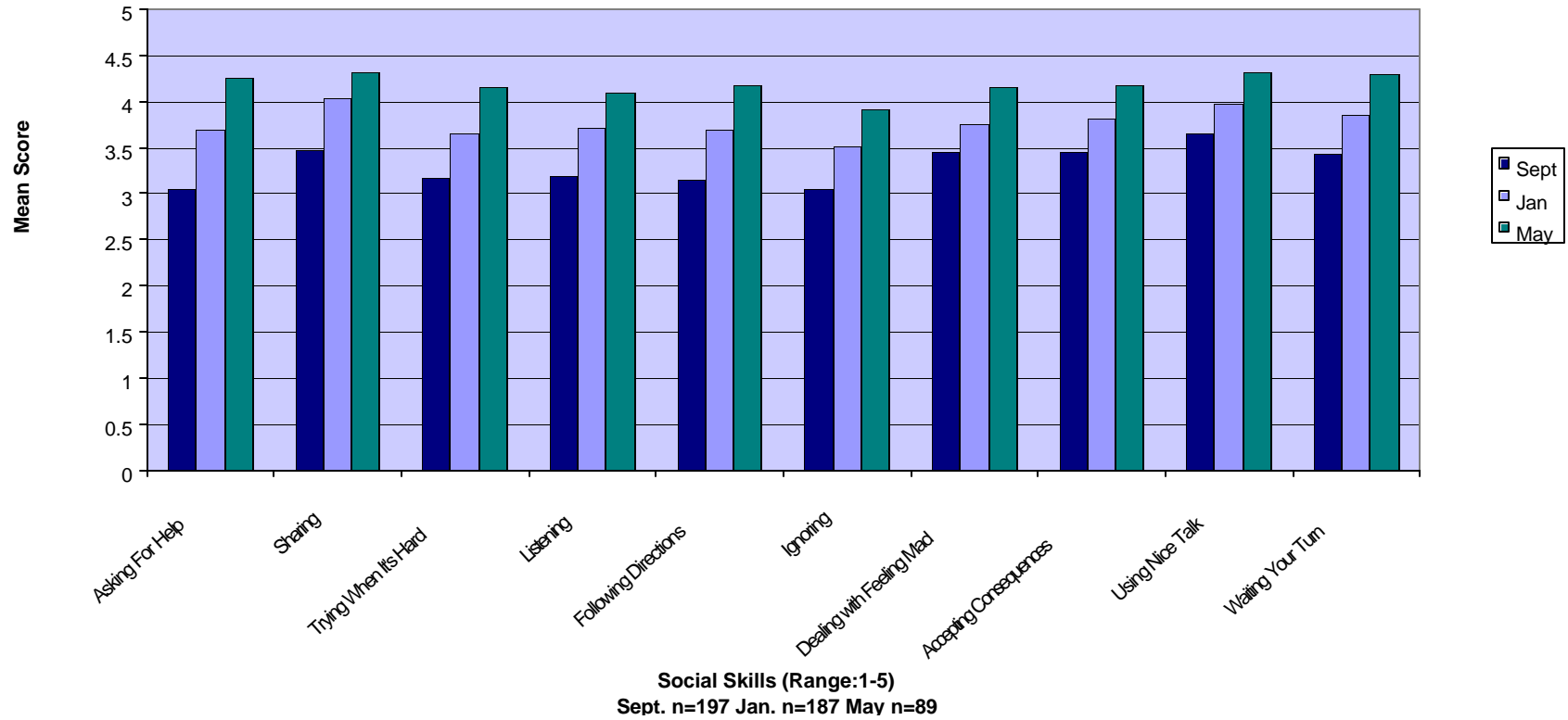


Figure 4
Pinellas County, 2000-2001
Second Grade Social Skills

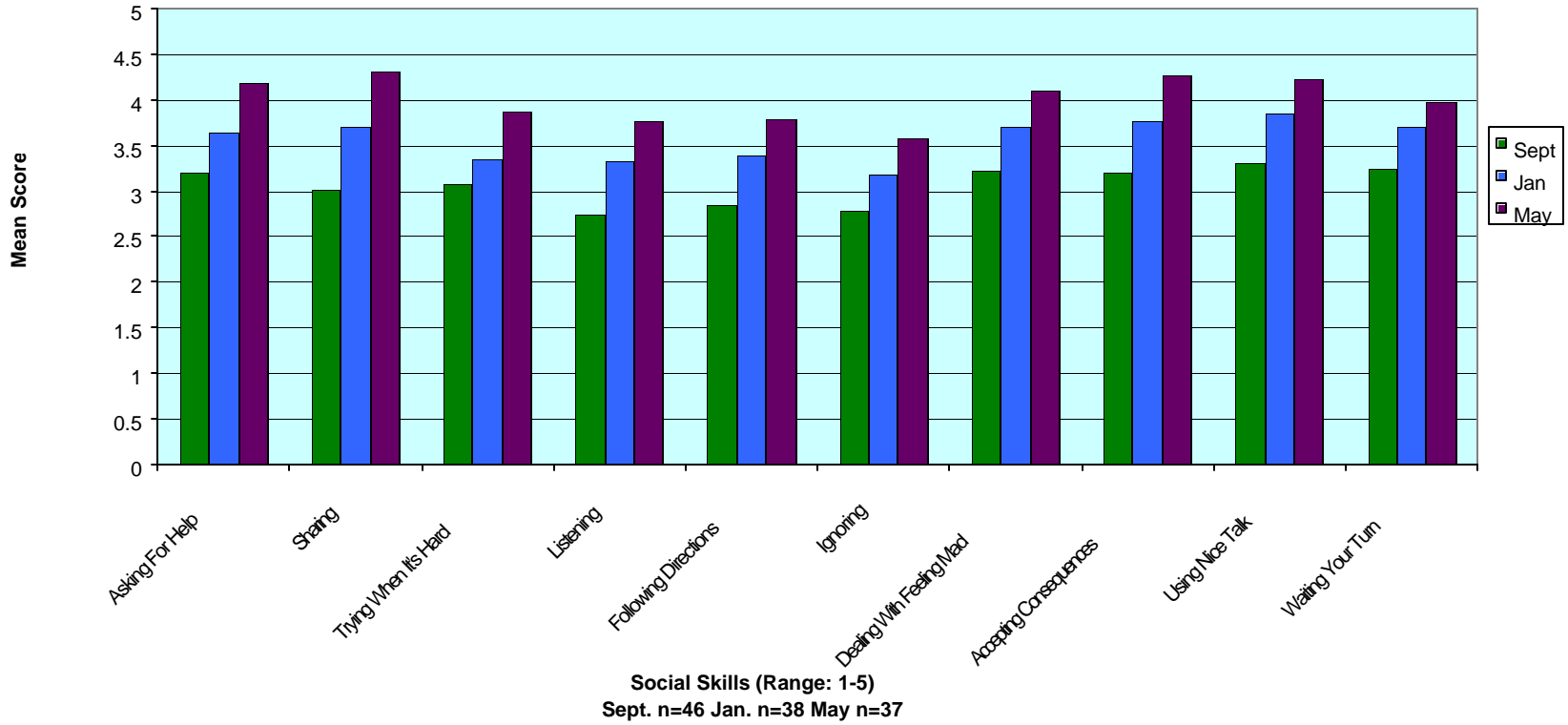


Figure 5
Pinellas County, 2000-2001
Third Grade Social Skills

