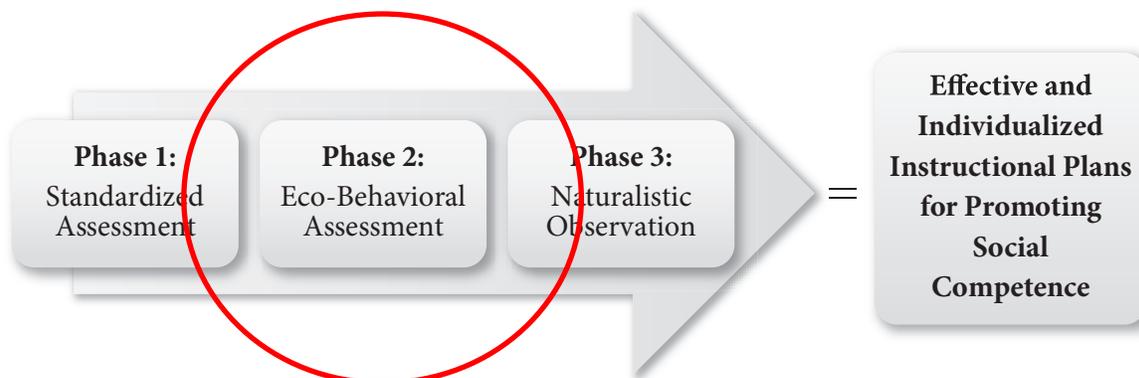


**Figure 1.1**  
**Assessment-Based Social Competence Instructional Process**



### **Phase 1: Standardized Assessments**

Assessment of social competence for students with ASD or other DD should begin with a comprehensive evaluation of their strengths and needs across all developmental areas and domains: vision and hearing abilities; intellectual abilities; speech, language, and communication abilities; fine and gross motor skills; and social, emotional, and behavioral deficits and excesses. Because all of these developmental areas may influence the development and display of social skills, it is important to know in which areas the student may demonstrate deficits or delays. Typically, during this initial phase of assessment, standardized measures are used. In the area of social competence, several standardized assessments are available that provide a broad picture of how a student is performing in the area of social competence in comparison to similarly aged peers (See Cunningham, 2012; Sigafos, Schlosser, Green, O'Reilly, & Lancioni, 2008).

Because social skills may vary across settings and situational learning activities, when gathering formal assessment information in the area of social competence McConnell (2002) recommends using multiple informants and tools to produce an authentic, representative, and accurate assessment of the student's social skills. Once the student's overall strengths and needs are assessed, we recommend using an eco-behavioral and functional approach to assessment to help improve how the student uses these capabilities within social situations and to help the teacher identify contextually situated social skill needs and opportunities.

### **Phase 2: Eco-Behavioral Assessment**

Social skills vary depending on the types of social settings we encounter, and different social contexts require all of us to engage in different types of social skills. For example, in school settings, the social skills needed to be successful at lunch or during recess are quite different from the social skills required for success during a teacher lesson. Engaging in socially appropriate behaviors (that is, reading the social expectations and cues across these contexts) is an important part of developing

social competence. For instance, Riley needs to know that when she is in a group play situation with her classmates, it is socially inappropriate to grab toys and other materials from her peers. Likewise, Joseph needs to be able to listen to and collaborate with his peers during cooperative learning activities without making irrelevant remarks or perseverating on his own interests. He also needs to learn to provide his peers with the opportunity to share their ideas and thoughts. Thus, using an eco-behavioral approach to social skill assessment can help teachers identify the most salient and context-specific skills to target for instruction and appropriate replacement social skills.

Once again, a multicomponent assessment that includes directly observing social skills in naturally occurring social interactions is recommended (Guralnick, 2010; Kaczmarek, 2002; Murdock, Cost, & Tieso, 2007). We suggest using the following steps as part of the eco-behavioral assessment to assist in gathering all essential assessment data needed for designing an individualized social competence instructional plan.

**Step 1: Identifying contexts that provide social opportunities.** To increase the likelihood for success of interventions aimed at increasing social competence of students with ASD or other DD, it is necessary to identify contexts that provide these students opportunities to interact with socially competent peers. A good place to start is by interviewing teachers or caregivers about situations and activities that can be targeted for instruction of social competence and which of these activities are enjoyable for the student. For example, if Riley enjoys playing at the water table, she will be more likely to engage in appropriate social behaviors with peers during water play as opposed to when she is engaging in a nonpreferred activity, such as finger painting. Because there is a strong academic focus in school settings, there are limited times when students are provided structured social opportunities during the school day. However, given the importance of social competence, it is important for practitioners to explore all opportunities that may exist for students to interact with their peers. For example, Joseph's teacher may want to target social skills instruction right before the school day starts, at lunch or recess, or embedded within cooperative learning groups during an academic lesson. In other words, students interact with others, including their peers, throughout the school day; thus, teachers and school staff need to identify opportunities that can help set the stage for learning social competence skills.

**Step 2: Identifying social materials.** Researchers have found that identifying preferences of materials to include in social opportunities can help when designing effective interventions (Boyd, Conroy, Mancil, Nakao, & Alter, 2007). In addition to identifying times or activities throughout the day that set the context for teaching social competence skills, it is also important to identify materials or topics of conversation that increase the likelihood of appropriate social interactions. Students with ASD, such as Joseph, can become preoccupied with a specific object or want to discuss a particular topic for long periods of time, which may interfere with peer interactions. However, with some students, embedding preferred materials within the social activity is more likely to increase interactions with peers. Thus, we recommend that teachers or school staff identify materials that can be incorporated into social competence instruction and are likely to increase the student's engagement in social interactions (rather than interfere with them). Interviewing the teacher or other school staff about students' preferences may help to identify these materials, or the teacher may want to conduct a more systematic preference assessment (see Boyd et al., 2007; Magnum, Fredrick, Pabico, & Roane, 2012).

**Step 3: Identifying socially competent partners.** In addition to identifying contexts and activities that promote social opportunities and interactions, it is important to identify social partners for students with ASD or other DD. Once again, identifying and including socially competent peers within social activities will increase the likelihood of students with ASD or other DD appropriately engaging in social behaviors during the targeted instructional times. Researchers have found that specific peer characteristics, such as the same gender, similar age, familiarity, and possessing the cognitive and social abilities required for social competence, are likely to increase the chances of students with ASD or other DD engaging in appropriate social behaviors (e.g., see Buysse, 1993; Guralnick, Neville, Hammond, & Connor, 2007; Hartup & Moore, 1990). In addition to possessing favorable characteristics, social partners should be motivated to interact with students with ASD or other DD. Increased effort on the part of the peers to interact socially with students with ASD or other DD increases the likelihood of the social interactions, which in turn increases the effectiveness of the interventions (e.g., English, Goldstein, Shafer, & Kaczmarek, 1997; Kohler, Greteman, Raschke, & Highnam, 2007).

**Step 4: Identify critical context-specific social competence skills.** Remember, social competence skills come in all forms and serve multiple purposes. For example, a nod or a smile acknowledges another person in the same manner as saying “hello.” Working together on a puzzle or sharing the same art materials without talking to one another is also a form of social interaction in addition to sustained conversations with others. Many times, the type of activity and the social rules of that activity govern the type of socially appropriate behaviors. To identify critical social competence skills for a particular activity, we recommend directly observing the activity and identifying the skills that socially competent peers display.

For example, Ms. Coffey thinks that Joseph may initiate more often than his peers, so she watches the social behaviors of other students to determine how often they initiate in different settings and contexts. Peers can also be helpful in developing the intervention (e.g., Delano & Snell, 2006; Gena, 2006). If Ms. Rosie wants to teach Riley to initiate, peers are a great source for knowing how to join in or approach each other. By watching peers, Ms. Rosie can identify individually age-appropriate social skills to target for instruction so that Riley can effectively join in or invite peers to play.