

## **The Effectiveness of Social Skills Training Program for the Students with Mild Mental Disabilities**

**Nayef Ali Wahsheh**

Ajloun National University

The study intended to define the effect of a training program on developing social skills among students with mild mental disabilities using a one-group-experimental design. A purposeful sample consisting of students ( $n = 18$ ) including men ( $n = 11$ ) and women ( $n = 7$ ) was selected. The researcher administrated a training program for developing social skills and a Social Skills Scale consisting of (30) items distributed equally on two domains (Sharing personal relationships with others, and work performance-related social skills) after developing them. The Results showed that the level of social skills among students with mild mental disabilities was low. No statistically significant differences at ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ) were found in the responses of students with mild mental disabilities on the pre-test social skills scale in light of gender on all domains and the total score. Statistically significant differences at ( $p < 0.05$ ) were found between pre and post-test of social skills scale on all domains and the total score in favor of post-test. The researcher recommends that all the efforts of parents, educators and officials must be combined to increase interest in this group of students, and to provide all material, moral, and training means to develop the social skills of students with mild mental disabilities and modify them for the better.

*Keywords.* Training Program, social skills, students with mild mental disabilities

There is a huge increase in the amount of research and medical information which enables a better understanding of the problem of mental disabilities, which in many ways led to the development of this field through addressing the causes, methods of prevention, treatment and skills training; developing new caring styles related to the needs of the individual with mental disabilities in the welfare institutions or the community (Nawasreh, 2019). The ability to socialize is essential

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Nayef Ali Wahsheh, Ajloun Department of Special Education, Faculty of Educational Sciences, Ajloun National University, Ajloun /Jordan.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Nayef Ali Wahsheh, Ajloun Department of Special Education, Faculty of Educational Sciences, Ajloun National University, Ajloun /Jordan Email: wahshehnayef@yahoo.com

for effectively navigating and functioning with society. Socialization involves values, attitudes, and skills. Social skills are important for initiating relationships, fostering friendships, and achieving social adjustment. Issues with social skills can lead to a range of further problems, including maladaptive behaviours, lack of confidence, antisocial behaviour, anxiety, and depression. A lack of social skills can also lead to poor academic performance and challenges in social interactions. In addition, teachers have a crucial role in cultivating social skills among mentally challenged children, with the curriculum serving as a key tool for developing these skills (Selvaraj & Christopher, 2022).

A mental disability is one of the subjects of interest to psychologists, education, and social and mental health. It is also a complicated multifaceted phenomenon that needs the efforts of the caregivers. Hence, sponsorship of these sectors is a humanitarian and civilized principle that confirms the importance of the rights of individuals with disabilities and their families. In light of the limited abilities of these individuals which do not allow them to fully benefit from the activities of other average children, they will be in need of special care to help them to invest their limited abilities to the maximum (Wahsheh, 2019).

Safari and Deyreh (2021) mentioned that the education of individuals with mental disabilities is designed to prepare them for social integration and equip them with the necessary skills for independent living or at least reduced dependence. A key requirement for these individuals is to create opportunities for them to develop their abilities to support themselves.

Social skills have a significant role in the life of the individual with mental disabilities and in improving his chances of achieving success in the tasks he faces. Additionally, social skills provide him with the ability to perform tasks easily, the tendency for education, make him able to develop his relations with others, and adapt to society. Therefore, Al Bablawi (2016) confirmed that to benefit from appropriate educational programs for individuals with mild mental disabilities in regular education, it is essential to focus on developing social skills, such as language skills, reception skills, writing, and basic arithmetic operations. Additionally, the lack of social skills among children with mild mental disabilities, as they face deficiencies in interacting with others, and their social skills development is slower than that of their peers.

As highlighted by Aldakhil and Mohammad (2019), social skills are essential for individuals with mild mental disabilities, as these

skills are linked to many challenges they face in educational environments. A lack of these skills can lead to behavioral and psychological issues, negatively impacting their academic success and social interactions.

In Pakistan, the Directorate of Special Education in Punjab and the Federal Special Education Department have created a curriculum for children with mental disabilities. This curriculum focuses on six key areas: motor skills, social skills, daily living skills, cognition, language skills, and communication skills, as well as vocational skills, which include social interaction, social etiquette, table manners, and religious manners (Majeed et al. 2022).

Al-Oufi (2023) investigated the effectiveness of a training programme, focusing on modifying the behaviours to develop some social skills for educable mentally handicapped. The sample of the study consisted of simple educable mentally handicapped children. To achieve the objectives of the study, a training program scale and mental disabilities scale were employed. The findings of the study showed that a statistically significant differences between the average of the experimental group and their degrees in the telemetric measurement and its proportions at the level of social skills, a statistically significant differences between the average of the experimental and the control group member degrees on the scale of social skills, and the proportions for the experimental group's telemetric measurement, there are no statistically significant differences between the average of the experimental group member according to their gender (male/female), there are nonsignificant differences between the average of the experimental group member according to their age, and there are nonsignificant differences between the average of the experimental group member according to their family's economic and social level. At the level of social skills, there are nonsignificant differences between the average of telemetric and tracking measurement for the experimental group (two months after applying the programme).

In Pakistan, a study by Majeed et al. (2022) sought to determine the development of social skills among mentally challenged children. The sample of the study consisted of (168) teachers. To achieve the objectives of the study, a quantitative approach was adopted. The findings of the study showed that that curriculum is useful for mentally challenged children to develop social skills and to interact with society effectively but there are certain weaknesses in terms of content and structure.

In Saudi Arabia, using experimental design, Al-Matt'hami and Al-Matt'hami (2022) sought to examine the effectiveness of a training

program for developing language skills for learnable children with mental disabilities and its relationship to social communication. The analysis showed a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the children before and after administrating the training program on language skills and social communication, in favor of post-test, while no statistically significant difference was found between the mean scores of the children after administrating the training program and the follow-up measurement on language skills and social communication; indicating the effectiveness of the training program for developing language skills for learnable children with mental disabilities on social communication.

In Iran, a study by [Jadidi and Fard \(2021\)](#) sought to investigate the effect of social skills training on social development among intellectual disabilities. Results indicated that social skill training is effective on social development. The study also found that social skills training is effective on social development and family functioning in students with intellectual disabilities.

A study by [Ibrahim \(2021\)](#) determined the effectiveness of a cognitive-behavioural program to develop some social skills for learnable mentally handicapped children. The study employed the quasi-experimental approach, designing one group (pre-measurement, post-measurement). The findings of the study showed that there is an effectiveness of the cognitive-behavioural program in developing the social skills of children with mental disabilities who are able to learn in Gezira State in the two applications, before and after, in favor of the post application; The level of social skills degree for children with mental disabilities who are able to learn in the state of Gezira in the post application is high.

Additionally, [Aldakhil and Mohammad \(2019\)](#) identified the effectiveness of a training program in developing some social skills for students with mild-mental disabilities. The findings of the study showed that a statistically significant differences at the level of (0.05) between the means of pre and post-measurement, in favour of post; and statistically significant differences at the level of (0.05) between the averages of the pre and post-measurement, for all dimensions of the scale according to the skill type. [Abed et al. \(2018\)](#) aimed to develop the social skills of students with mental disabilities in primary schools of inclusion via a training program. The study employed the Social Skills Scale which includes three domains (collaboration skills, self-affirmation, and acting in social settings) in addition to a training program. The study results revealed that the students in the experimental group were able to develop their social skills better compared to the control group after administrating the program.

In order to check the effectiveness of the Montessori program and the Portage program in developing social skills among students with mental disabilities. [Al-Sayed et al. \(2017\)](#) found that the two programs were effective in developing the social skills of students with mental disabilities. However, the Montessori program was more effective compared to the Portage program. Social skills play a key role enable average children and those with mental disabilities to maintain social interaction with people in surrounding environment. Special education specialists have recognize the importance of developing interventions aiming to help children with mild mental disabilities use their social skills to communicate with others so as they can live a relatively normal life. Studies (e.g. [Al-Matt'hami & Al-Matt'hami, 2022](#), [Wahsheh, 2018](#)) have documented the effectiveness of interventions targeting children with mild mental disabilities acquire the basic social skills that maybe pivotal point in their future success. As one of the special education specialists in Jordan, the researcher noted that there is still inadequate interventions that are designed to help children with mild mental disabilities developed the social skills needed for them to be active people. The importance of the study lies in shedding the light on the social skills of students with mild mental disabilities, and their important role in the successful design and implementation of effective special educational programs. It may urge officials for students with mild mental disabilities to allocate a budget to support the training programs for developing their social skills. This research will help in identifying a scale to assess the social skills of students with mild mental disabilities. This study is considered a complement of previous research regarding the social skills development of students with mild mental disabilities, and it could be a starting point to address this topic from multiple aspects and variables, which will be a starting point for other studies.

### **Objectives**

Present study is planned to achieve the following objectives:

1. To see the level of social skills of students with mild mental disabilities.
2. To see the differences in the level of social skills of students with mild mental disabilities across gender.
3. To see the differences between pre and post-performance (after one month of administrating the program) on the level of social skills of students with mild mental disabilities.

## Method

### Research Design

The study used a one-group-experimental method to define the effect of a training program in developing the social skills of students with mild mental disabilities. The one-group-experimental method uses only one group subject to a pre-test to determine their status before presenting the independent variable (The training program), and then it gets subjected to the variable. After this, the group gets subjected to a post-test (after two months of administrating the program), so the differences in the group's results on the pre and post-tests are due to the effect of the independent variable.

### Measures

#### *Social Skills Scale*

The researcher developed the social skill scale after reviewing the literature, and studies related to the social skills of students with mild mental disabilities in addition to the scales of [Haron \(1996\)](#). The scale included (30) items distributed equally on two domains: Sharing personal relationships with others and work performance-related social skills. Three-point Likert scale (*often* = 2, *sometimes* = 1, *never* = 0) was used in analyzing the data, (2) points that the level of social skills of students with mild mental disabilities is at its highest level, while (0) points that the level of social skills among these students is at its lowest level. Thereby, the level of each item, each domain, and the total score can be calculated for the social skills of students with mild mental disabilities. As for the discussion of the results, the following scale was adopted.

The scale developed by [Haron \(1996\)](#) was validated using face validity by giving the initial version to a panel of ten experts. The scale included (90) items distributed equally on two domains: Social skills related to interpersonal relationships with others (1-50) and Social skills related to job performance (51-90). The correlation coefficient of the items and the total score ranged between (0.49-0.72). Four-point Likert scale was used in analyzing the data, 4 points that the level of social skills of students with mild mental disabilities is at its highest level, while 1 points that the level of social skills among these students is at its lowest level. Thereby, the level of each item, each domain, and the total score can be calculated for the social skills of students with mild mental disabilities. Mean score of 0 to 0.66 reflect low level, 0.67 to 1.33 represent medium level, while 1.34 to 2.0 indicates high level of social skills among students with mild disabilities.

### **Phase 1: Validity and Reliability of Social Skill Scale**

To check the validity of the instrument, it was presented to a jury of (12) specialized faculty members in special education, psychology, measurement and evaluation, to check the level of clarity of its items, the authenticity of its phrasing, the item representation of its domain, and adding or deleting any item. The jury recommended making some changes regarding the clarity, the authenticity of phrasing, and item representation of its domain. The final format of the instrument included (30) items distributed on the abovementioned domains.

Correlation coefficients of the items with the total score were calculated through a pilot sample consisting of (15) students with mild mental disabilities. The value of Correlation Coefficient indicates validity significance for each item in the form of a correlation between each item and the domain it belongs to on the one hand, and between each domain and the total score on the other hand. The correlation coefficient of the items and the total score ranged between (0.53-0.92), and with the domain (0.52-0.92). All correlation coefficients were statistically significant and acceptable, so none of the scale items have been deleted. In addition to that, domain correlation coefficients have been calculated to the total score and between the domains.

Sharing Personal Relationships with Others and Work Performance-Related Social Skills domains are positively correlated ( $r = .95, p > .01$ ) indicating an appropriate degree of construct validity. To verify the reliability of the instrument, the Test-retest method was used by administrating the instrument and re-administrating the instrument after two weeks on a pilot sample consisting of (15) students with mild mental disabilities. After that Pearson's correlation (i.e., .79 for Sharing Personal Relationships with Others and .83 for Work Performance-Related Social Skills) was calculated between their responses at both times. Additionally, Cronbach Alpha Coefficient for internal consistency reliabilities was calculated i.e., .71 and .80 for Sharing Personal Relationships with Others and Work Performance-Related Social Skills respectively.

### **Phase II: Implementation of Social Skills Training Program**

#### **Sample**

The population of the study includes students with mild mental disabilities enrolled in centers of special education at Ajloun governorate in the first semester of the academic year (2022-2023). Total 51 students including Male ( $n = 29$ ) and female ( $n = 22$ ) distributed in 6 centers of special education. Based on the direct

observation by the researcher through repeated field visits to special education centers in Ajloun governorate, a purposive sample was selected from one of the special education centers consisting of 18 students including Male ( $n = 11$ ) and Female ( $n = 7$ ) as it was noted that most of these students have low levels of social skills.

### **Procedure**

The researcher developed a training program after reviewing the previous literature and studies related to social skills. The researcher also gathered all activities that contribute to the development of social skills of students with mild mental disabilities and selecting what is appropriate, analyzing and formulating them in a way that is appropriate for students. The researcher trained two teachers on the training program for two days from the ones who teaches the students with mild mental disabilities in the selected center, this included explaining the sessions of the training program, how to administrate each skill, and then practical administration of the sessions by the teachers. The training program is presented to students with mild mental disabilities in order to train them in different activities that provide them with the necessary social skills to integrate into society. The training program included the following activities: Social activities based on training on greeting, apology, gratitude, collaboration, slowing down, and not rushing. Physical activities concentrate on team play and cooperation. Cultural activities based on short drama that contains different stories addressing cooperation, altruism, and responsibility. Artistic activities based on how Students assist each other while drawing by loaning and borrowing tools from each other. These activities concentrate on the behavior of the student during drawing, not his drawing performance.

The program consists of (48) sessions, the duration of each one is sixty minutes, and three sessions are presented pre week for four months. These sessions are presented in the form of cognitive and behavioral situations using multiple strategies and methods such as explanation, group discussion, brainstorming, group work, videos, picture cards, role-playing, modelling, effective practice, repetition of a behavior, reinforcement, and feedback. Before the field implementation, the program was presented to a jury of (5) specialized faculty members in special education and (3) specialized faculty members in psychology. The jury indicated the validity and relevance of the program in order to achieve the objectives for which it was developed.



## Results

The current study used Pearson's correlation factor, T-Test, test-retest, Cronbach Alpha Coefficient for internal consistency reliabilities, means and standard deviations, Mann-Whitney, and Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test in the analysis process.

### Social Skills of Students with Mild Mental Disabilities

Means and standard deviations were calculated for the level of social skills of students with mild mental disabilities.

Table 1: *Mean and Standard Deviations of the Level of Social Skills of Students with Mild Mental Disabilities in a Descending Order*

| # | Social Skills Domain                       | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | Level |
|---|--|----------|-----------|-------|
| 1 | Sharing Personal Relationships with Others | 0.57     | 0.145     | Low   |
| 2 | Work Performance-Related Social Skills     | 0.52     | 0.144     | Low   |
|   | Total Score on Social Skills               | 0.54     | 0.111     | Low   |

Table 1 shows that the means scores ranged between (0.52-0.57), where sharing personal relationships with others ranked first ( $M = 0.57$ ), while work performance-related social skills ranked second ( $M = 0.52$ ). Regarding the total score of social skills level, it was low ( $M = 0.54$ ).

### Difference on Social Skills Among Male and Female Students with Mild Mental Disabilities

To see the gender differences, Mann-Whitney was used for the students with mild mental disabilities on the pre-test of social skills scale. Results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: *Mann-Whitney Test to see the Differences in the Scores of the Students with Mild Mental Disabilities on Social Skills Scale across Gender*

| Domains     | Gender | #  | Average Ranks | Total Ranks | <i>M</i> | Mann-Whitney U | Wilcoxon-W | Z     | <i>p</i> |
|-------------|--------|----|---------------|-------------|----------|----------------|------------|-------|----------|
| SPRO        | Male   | 11 | 8.91          | 98.00       | 0.55     | 32.000         | 98.000     | -0.60 | 0.54     |
|             | Female | 7  | 10.43         | 73.00       | 0.60     |                |            |       |          |
| WPRS        | Male   | 11 | 8.73          | 96.00       | 0.50     | 30.000         | 96.000     | -0.78 | 0.45     |
|             | Female | 7  | 10.71         | 76.00       | 0.54     |                |            |       |          |
| Total Score | Male   | 11 | 8.68          | 95.50       | 0.53     | 29.500         | 95.500     | -0.82 | 0.41     |
|             | Female | 7  | 10.79         | 75.50       | 0.57     |                |            |       |          |

Note. SPRO = Sharing Personal Relationships with Others; WPRS = Work Performance-Related Social Skills.

Table 2 shows nonsignificant differences at ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ) in light of gender in all the domains and the total score. This can be attributed as the researcher sees to the fact that gender is not a factor that can lead to differing levels of social skills of students with mild mental disabilities, and that their mental disability and its consequences in terms of characteristics and problems have a significant role in affecting the level of social skills among them whether they are male or female, alike.

### Pre and Post Results on social skills levels Among Students with Mild Mental Disabilities

Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test was used to find the statistically significant differences in the rank average of the scores of the students with mild mental disabilities on the pre and post-test of the social skills scale as Table 3 shows.

Table 3: Results of Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test to see the Differences between the Average Ranks of the Scores of the Students with Mild Mental Disabilities on pre and post-test of the Social Skills Scale

| Domain      |               | Number | Average Ranks | Total Ranks | Z | Sig. |
|-------------|---------------|--------|---------------|-------------|---|------|
| SPRO        | Negative Rank | 0      | 0.000         | 0.000       | - | 0.00 |
|             | Positive Rank | 18     | 9.50          | 171.000     |   |      |
|             | Equal Rank    | 0      |               |             |   |      |
|             | Total         | 18     |               |             |   |      |
| WPRS        | Negative Rank | 0      | 0.000         | 0.000       | - | 0.00 |
|             | Positive Rank | 18     | 9.50          | 171.000     |   |      |
|             | Equal Rank    | 0      |               |             |   |      |
|             | Total         | 18     |               |             |   |      |
| Total Score | Negative Rank | 0      | 0.000         | 0.000       | - | 0.00 |
|             | Positive Rank | 18     | 9.50          | 171.000     |   |      |
|             | Equal Rank    | 0      |               |             |   |      |
|             | Total         | 18     |               |             |   |      |

Note. SPRO = Sharing Personal Relationships with Others; WPRS = Work Performance-Related Social Skills.

As shown in Table 3, there were statistically nonsignificant differences between the means score of the pre- posttest in "Sharing Personal Relationships with Others" domain ( $z = -3.728, p = 0.000$ ), in favor of the posttest. Furthermore, statistically significant differences were found between the means score of the pre- posttest in "work performance-related social skills" ( $z = -3.731, p = 0.000$ ), in favor of the posttest. Finally, the results of the study indicated statistically significant differences between the means total score of the pre-posttest of the social skills scale ( $z = -3.725, p = 0.000$ ), in favor of the posttest.

### Discussion

The researcher discuss the findings of the study based on his educational and field expertise as a special education educator in addition to citing some of the related literature and previous studies to support his own point of view regarding the explanation of the findings he considers suitable to why the interventions employed in this study was effective in developing social skills among children with mild mental disabilities.

Firstly, as noted, the level of social skills of students with mild mental disabilities was low ( $M = 0.54$ ). The researcher attributes this result to the fact that the students with mild mental disabilities faced a lack of social skills, as they showed a moderate level of social skills, which is considered a natural consequence of their mental disabilities. On top of that, these students have difficulties related to strengthening and developing relationships with others and making friends, which is shown in play areas, and affect the different aspects of their interaction with others. These difficulties are also seen through their failure to keep interactive play with others and engage in individual play. They also show inappropriate behaviors such as stalemate and aggression in solving their struggles and problems. A student with mental disabilities is seen as less socially adaptable, and unable to behave in social settings and interact with others, which led psychologists to take adaptive behavior as a base for defining and classifying students with mental disabilities.

As pointed out by [Obeid \(2000\)](#) individuals with mental disabilities rely on others in solving their problems, they attribute their behavior to factors beyond their control, and as a result of their continuous failure, and they develop a fear of failure and anticipation of failure which usually drives them to avoid trying to perform the different tasks. These non-adaptive social manifestations are most prevalent among students with mental disabilities enrolled in special

education centers, as they tend to isolate them and not provide them with inclusion opportunities within society.

By referring to the literature addressing this topic, the reasons behind social skills problems of individuals with mild mental disabilities can be summarized as follows (Al-Khateeb & Al-Hadidi, 2022), Individuals with mental disabilities fear of social interaction with others due to past experiences of failure. The existence of different apparent physical characteristics among individuals with mental disabilities may generate avoidance reactions among average individuals. Average individuals don't have accurate information about disabilities and individuals with disabilities. Some parents resort to overprotecting their children with disabilities in a way that limits their opportunities to develop social interaction skills. Some individuals with mental disabilities show unacceptable and non-adaptive behaviors, such as Recklessness, withdrawal, aggressiveness, hyperactivity, lack of self-confidence, low self-concept.

Secondly, nonsignificant differences were found across gender in all the domains and the total score. This can be attributed as the researcher sees to the fact that gender is not a factor that can lead to differing levels of social skills of students with mild mental disabilities, and that their mental disability and its consequences in terms of characteristics and problems have a significant role in affecting the level of social skills among them whether they are male or female, alike. This result is consistent with the results reported by Ibrahim (2021) indicating that children, both boys and girls, with mental disabilities do not differ significantly in their social skills since they are both exposed to similar social interaction in the various social environments in the Arab countries and this means that there acquisitions of social skills.

Thirdly, there are statistically significant differences between the pre and post-test of the social skills scale in all domains and the total score in favor of the post-test. This result can be attributed to the effect of the training program used in social skills development in its two domains (Sharing personal relationships with others, work performance-related social skills) and the total score, through the improvement that occurred to the members of the study sample, as social skills can be learned and trained on if the appropriate methods and strategies were available. Experimental group acquisition of social skills can be attributed to the use of all components of social skills training in each session of the training, which included activities, tasks, tools, situations and strategies, which were highly appealing and motivational, this allowed the study sample to master the skills of the program. Furthermore, the reason behind the effect of the training

program may be due to the creation of a comfortable and cooperative classroom climate without fear, and the use of training stages for each skill sequentially and orderly, from easy to difficult, which allowed students to interact positively with the program, and this contributed to build confidence, forming positive relationships, cooperation, discussion, following the instructions, and commit to attending the sessions, which led to the improvement and development of their social skills. The result is consistent with the one provided by [Safari and Deyreh \(2021\)](#), indicating that training children with mild disabilities the basic social skills maybe achieve if the intervention design to reach this objective is will structure and is presented to this group of children by an expert in special education. This result is also confirmed by what was found in [Al-Oufi \(2023\)](#) study indicating the effectiveness of intervention in making children with mild disabilities learn some of the simple social skills. This result was also documented in other studies ([Al-Sayed et al., 2017](#); [Al-Matt'hami & Al-Matt'hami, 2022](#)).

### **Recommendations and Suggestions**

In light of the results of the current study, the researcher recommends that:

1. The need for training programs related to social skills development among students with mild mental disabilities.
2. The need to include the training on social skills of students with mild mental disabilities in the individual education plans.
3. Provide a positive environment that works on improving and developing of social skills of students with mild mental disabilities.
4. Future research is needed addressing the effect of training programs on developing the social skills of students with mild mental disabilities and its relationship to other variables.
5. Future research is needed to address the effect of training programs on developing the social skills of students with special needs.

### **Conclusion**

The subject of social skills of students with mental disabilities and developing them is considered one of the significant topics among specialists of special education, hence the interest in developing social skills of students with mental disabilities. Current study, focus on the effectiveness of a suggested training program on developing social skills among students with mild mental disabilities. The Results

showed that the mean scores total score of social skills reflect low level. Nonsignificant differences were found in the responses of students with mild mental disabilities on the pre-test social skills scale in light of gender on all domains and the total score. Statistically significant differences were found between pre and post-test of social skills scale on all domains and the total score in favor of post-test. The researcher recommends that all the efforts of parents, educators and officials must be combined to increase interest in this group of students, and to provide all material, moral, and training means to develop the social skills of students with mild mental disabilities and modify them for the better.

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Received 17 July 2023  
Revision received 29 August 2024