

Did You Know?

What is "Social Thinking"?

Understanding Social Cognition & Identifying Social Learning Delays

We are seeing a new kind of learning disability in many young children in our classrooms today. It appears as a delay in the area of social language or social relationship skills. "Social Cognitive Deficits," as the experts call them, are often tricky for parents to spot, as they can be very subtle. Often, delays are not recognized until young children are observed in a social setting with children their own age.

"Social Thinking is the user-friendly term for Social Cognition,"

(Michelle Garcia Winner)

Preschool teachers are often first to notice problems. Parents get used to living with and responding to their own unique child. Typically, without realizing it, they learn to adapt to their child's "quirkiness," so they may be unaware of their child's difficulties. However, as a child moves out into the bigger world of school and peers, social relationship skills become more and more necessary. In school, challenges in the social area begin to set these children apart from everybody else. Teachers typically say, "She needs help with social skills."

What are the RED Flags?

- Often has very good language skills (speaks and articulates well)
- Shows an amazing ability to learn information—*about topics of his interest*
- Enjoys learning about the *facts* of things, more than people-related things
- Usually shows strong academic abilities in math and language (*recognizes letters, understands math concepts, teaches self to read at a very early age*)
- Prefers talking to adults, rather than peers (because adults will discuss his area of interest)
- When adults are not available to talk, prefers to go off to do an activity by himself
- May find it hard to appropriately *start* a conversation
- May have trouble maintaining a give-and-take conversation (*especially about a topic not of his interest*)
- Doesn't easily 'read' the emotions of others
- Finds it hard to show empathy or respond to others' feelings
- Fails to notice *non-verbal* social clues, such as facial expressions and body language (*may be seen as "bright but clueless"*)
- Displays "mind blindness" (*unable to "mind-read" in order to figure out what another person is meaning*)
- Often experiences social interaction as challenging and may even *avoid* social situations
- May not understand the "unwritten rules"—especially unspoken rules of social behavior (*makes social blunders*)
- The rules he does understand, he applies rigidly--both to himself and to others (*has rigid expectations of what other people should do in a certain situation*)
- Understands *concrete* information best (*can be confused by figures of speech and abstract concepts*)
- May be very protective of his own personal space (*difficulty with boundaries and personal space awareness*)
- May require a long processing time and not respond in the typical time others do

"Social Thinking"



Recognize the "Lingo"

Professionals and parents may use these different labels to talk about the same thing:

- Social Skills Delays
- Social Cognitive Deficits
- Social Pragmatics Delays
- Social Thinking Challenges
- Social Learning Problems
- Social Language Delays
- Social Relatedness Problems

UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL THINKING

WHAT IS IT? Social thinking is our innate ability to *notice and adapt to a social situation and be able to successfully “make our way” through it.* Think of social thinking as “people-thinking.” We determine the meaning behind the messages communicated by others and figure out how to respond to them. Social thinking is

absolutely ESSENTIAL for each of us because all environments are social. After all, any encounter with two or more people is social. Social thinking paves the way for developing social skills.

Social Thinking is “people-thinking.”
Successful social thinkers consider the points of view, emotions, thoughts, beliefs, and intentions of others. This is often called “**perspective-taking.**”

The ultimate success of an adult is determined by his social skills – and *not* his academic skills.
(Brandywine School District, *Developing a Social Thinking Program*, 4/23/09)

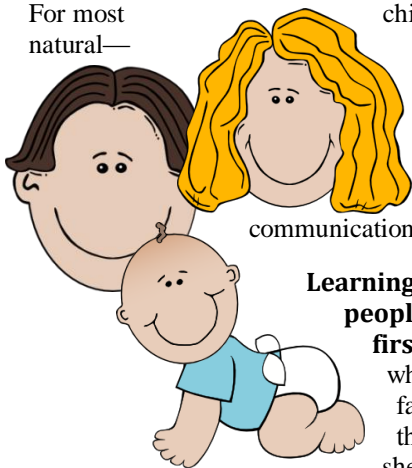
We need social thinking to know how to relate to others and to converse with them. Think about it. Conversation is impossible without social thinking. There is no “faking it” in everyday life. Social thinking is something all of us do every day, all day. It occurs everywhere--when we talk, share space, walk down the street, even when we relate to our pets. When we are alone in our homes, we need social thinking to understand a TV drama or a sitcom or to read a novel. We have to think about a character’s emotions, thoughts, and reactions to understand the story or the plot. We think about people all the time, even when we have no plans to interact with them. We adjust our own behavior based on what we think the people around us are thinking. We figure out when to move, act, respond, or withdraw based on our assessment of what others are thinking.

When we use social thinking, we are considering the *perspective of others.* For most of us, this is an automatic and intuitive process that occurs within milliseconds. Social thinking is something we usually take for granted, but it is a critical intelligence that integrates information across home, work, and community settings. In fact, the ultimate success of an adult is determined by his social skills—and not his academic skills.

Michelle Garcia Winner is one of the leaders in the field of social thinking. She is a Speech Language Pathologist who first coined the term “social thinking.” Michelle has been one of the most creative innovators in the field of social cognitive skills, and she has become internationally recognized. She founded *Teach Social! Silicon Valley* here in San Jose to teach social thought and social skills to children and adults. Michelle and her team specialize in educational strategies for helping persons with social communicative challenges. You may want to check out her website www.socialthinking.com to read her articles and find resources. I have drawn heavily from her thoughts and ideas for this article.

HOW DO WE LEARN IT? Social learning starts in infancy, and it usually develops instinctively.

For most natural—



children, the desire to be social it is completely just like learning to walk. Healthy emotional and brain development depends on a “serve and return” interaction, just like a tennis game. Tots engage parents' attention, prompting parents to respond with words or facial expressions, which stimulate more infant communication.

Learning to read wordless messages on other people’s faces typically develops slowly in the first years of life. Children begin face reading when they are babies as they search their parents’ faces for signs of comfort. They learn to follow their mother’s “eye gaze” to look in the direction she is looking.

Then, during their first year, babies continue to check their parents’ faces for reactions. As they watch their parents’ reactions, they figure out how they should feel about things. For instance, if Dad’s eyebrows go up when he sees a dog run up to him, the baby recognizes surprise or fear. If baby watches Dad reach down to pet the dog, he learns it’s safe, and he will probably want to pet the dog, too.



A milestone of infancy is called “**joint attention.**” This occurs when babies naturally learn to look at people’s eyes and follow what they are looking at to figure out what they are thinking about.

Once this milestone is reached, communication usually develops rapidly.

Play skills, cooperation, sharing, imagination, and working as part of a group all follow from this primary core skill.

(-Michelle Garcia Winner/*Think Social!*)



Between the ages of two to five, children learn to identify other people's feelings by looking at their faces. Children learn to recognize happiness first, then sadness or anger, and then surprise and fear. As they develop, children continue to look at the faces of the people they are talking with, gathering clues from their expressions and using those clues to make decisions. Most of us continue to develop our communication skills as we age, observing and acquiring social information and learning how to respond to the people around us.

For children with social delays, it appears that this “instinctive” learning by watching and reading social cues doesn't happen in the same automatic way.

A SOCIAL LEARNING DISABILITY Some children and adults have great difficulty with this social learning process. They do *not* intuitively learn to absorb and apply social information. This is often considered a social learning disability. Some researchers suggest that the “social brain” needs to be switched “on” with extra stimulation for children with these difficulties. In neuro-typical (so-called “typical-thinking”) people, social thinking is hard-wired at birth and learned naturally from infancy onward. However, rather than learning intuitively, children with a social learning disability need to be intentionally *taught* how to pay attention to other peoples' faces, emotions, and body signals. They need to be deliberately taught how to “*think social*.”

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SOCIAL SKILLS
are those skills needed to engage with a peer in reciprocal social interactions and interpret social situations using both verbal and nonverbal language.

-Laurie Leventhal-Belfer
Creator of The Friends' Program at CHC

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of social thinking.” Our school system is set up to identify children who have difficulty learning to read and write—not children who already have these “facts” but who do not have the social thinking skills they need. Early intervention is typically focused on helping children who have problems getting their learning started—not children with social delays. “Children with social cognitive deficits often have the *reverse* problem learning,” Garcia-Winner has found. She says they tend to acquire their facts or academics *first*, and then they start to struggle later as they have to think through and apply that information in situations requiring social knowledge and abstract thinking.

As they get older, children who have challenges relating to others often have academic struggles in the classroom. Starting in 3rd or 4th grade, when more creative thinking and flexibility is needed to succeed, it is common for these students to stumble a bit. They are seen as “very bright” and grasp factual information with ease, but they lack the critical thinking and social thinking skills they need to interpret the information presented in the classroom and to be successful with peers.

DO YOU NEED A DIAGNOSIS? People can have social thinking challenges **WITHOUT** having any diagnostic label—and they don't need one. In fact, Michelle Garcia Winner says that *treatment is NOT related to a diagnosis, but rather to how a person “processes and responds to information.”* Many children and adults experience social thinking challenges. Social delays are one of the ‘red flags’ seen in children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders, including Asperger Syndrome, and PDD-Pervasive Developmental Delay (www.autism-society.org). Since Autism Disorders have become much more common today, this is certainly one reason we are seeing so many more children with social skills delays. People with other kinds of problems may also have social cognitive delays, including Nonverbal Learning Disability (www.nldline.com), ADHD (www.adhd.com), Hyperlexia (www.hyperlexia.org), Anxiety Disorders (www.childhoodanxietynetwork.org), Depression, Tourette's Syndrome (www.tsa-usa.org), Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Sensory Integration Disorder, Apraxia, and Expressive-Receptive Language Disorder

TEACHING SOCIAL THINKING SKILLS

Michelle Garcia Winner identifies these key concepts in her *Think Social* model as being crucial for being successful in school and throughout life. All children need to learn the social skills listed below. Each of these skills influences a child's ability to both *process complex information* and to *make and keep friends*.

Applying social knowledge during interactions requires:

perspective-taking

+

language processing

+

visual interpretation

+

the ability to make a response within 1-3 seconds.



All Children Need to Learn SOCIAL THINKING SKILLS



They need to learn to ...

- **Initiate Language** - start a conversation with others.
- **Listen with their Eyes and their Brain** - use their whole body to take in information.
- **Understand and Follow the "Hidden Rules"** - grasp the unwritten rules of social behavior.
- **Use Flexible Thinking** - be able to "shift gears" and transition easily from one idea or activity to another.
- **Wonder About Others** - develop a social curiosity about others.
- **Think Abstractly** - recognize the *intended* meaning of a message, rather than taking it at face value.
(Note: Most language is not meant to be taken just literally.)
- **Make Inferences** - make smart guesses; recognize verbal and non-verbal cues.
- **"Think of You--as well as Me"** - understand the perspective of others and grasp that "you see things differently than I do."
- **Get the "Big Picture"**- understand not just the parts, but the *whole*.
- **Keep Their Body and Their Brain in the Conversation** - pay attention to the person in front of you.

SOCIAL TEACHING—WHAT WORKS? When children are not learning these skills instinctively on their own, then they need to be taught them intentionally. Children can be taught a "social thinking vocabulary." Children can practice and learn rules for social situations. They can learn exactly what is expected of them when their teachers and caregivers learn how to explain it to them. Some examples of social thinking vocabulary used at *Teach Social* include: "Think with your eyes" (instead of saying "use eye-contact"), "Keep your body and eyes in the group" (instead of saying "pay attention"), and "Make a "smart guess rather than a "wacky guess" (instead of saying "think about it"). This teaching technique goes deeper than teaching a social behavioral response pattern. It teaches children to think flexibly.

There are two current approaches to teaching social skills. The first is more unstructured, and the second is quite structured.

- (1) **Unstructured Inside-Out Learning Approach** ("Flexing an underdeveloped muscle."):
 - Includes: *Floortime, Relationship Development Intervention (RDI), Theater and drama*
- (2) **Structured Outside-In Learning Approach** ("Designed to provide rule based instruction using social scripts in a structured environment"):
 - Includes: *ABA, Behavior Therapy, Didactic Instruction, Modeling, Role playing, Structured practice*

HELPFUL RESOURCES BOOKS

For Parents:

TalkAbility by Fern Sussman.

For Kids:

Tobin Learns to Make Friends by Diane Murrell

WEBSITES

www.socialthinking.com

www.polyxo.com/floortime/buildingplaypartnerships.html#intro (Introduction to Floortime)

GETTING STARTED – GETTING HELP

Talk to a professional. Find a Social Skills Group. There is no such thing as an association of social skills therapists and no official certification in the field. However, with the increase in Autism Spectrum Disorders, there has been a kind of industry growing up around teaching social skills. Practitioners can come from a variety of backgrounds. While Speech and Language Pathologists tend to be the first generation of practitioners, you will find that Occupational Therapists, Psychologists, Social Workers, Behavior Therapists, Drama Therapists, and Teachers also teach social interaction and relationship-building skills as a specialty they have developed. Social skills groups offer a fun way for children to learn new skills and practice with peers, while being coached by professionals. They learn everything from basic skills, like making eye contact, to more subtle skills, like how to initiate a friendship.

Educate yourself. Use props, prompts, rules, and social stories. Parents can also educate themselves and teach their children social skills, too. In fact, parents can be some of the best teachers because they can coach their children "in the moment," using every opportunity to be a social facilitator. There are many excellent "do it yourself" social skills teaching tools for parents on the market. You can find books and videos that model different types of interactions and offer guides for teaching you how to help your stay child engaged. Many offer ideas for role-play, scripting social scenarios, and social story-telling. These visual and drama-techniques help teach children what the "social rules" are and what to expect in new social situations.

WHAT CAN YOU DO AT HOME?

♦ Help your child learn social skills ♦

- **“Hook” your child in to look at you** any way you can. Be playful. Put a puppet on your shoulder.
- **Highlight what you say without words:**
 - **Say less** (use fewer words/short and sweet)
 - **Stress** what you say (use more drama/exaggerate your happy, sad, excited emotions)
 - **Go Slow** (slow down what you do and say around your child)
 - **Show or point** to what you’re talking about
- **Use incidental teaching** by setting up a situation that encourages your child to make a request.
- **Use play dates with peers** to teach and practice skills—a structured playtime facilitated by an adult provides a great setting for teaching turn taking, conversation skills, personal space, language, voice tone/volume, body language, and facial expressions
- **Use friends and peers as teachers**—find your child a buddy to do an activity with, etc.
- **Utilize every opportunity to teach social skills** at meal time, during visits with friends, in interactions with siblings, out in the community, at sleepovers, and/or in play dates.
- **Teach the hidden social rules.**
(Note: The hidden curriculum is everything that typical persons “know” but hasn’t been systematically taught.)
- **Play games with your child that typical kids play** at your child’s age. Do not let him/her win. Children need to learn how to lose gracefully.
- **Script out different social situations and practice.** Use story books and puppets to show what to do.
- **Visit friends and family** and encourage them to teach and support the learning of social skills.
- **Extend your teaching and reinforcing of social skills into the community.** Take your son/daughter shopping or to restaurants. Use *priming* (practicing the activity through role play, pictures, stories, cue cards, videos, and social stories) before going to a new place.
- **Find social skill groups** and programs that provide instruction and practice in your son/daughter’s deficit skill areas. Use evidence based practices such as video modeling, social stories, and other emerging practices that work.
- **Limit video interactions.**
- **Revisit life as it was in the 1950s and 1960s.** Teach how you or your parents were taught (playing games, saying please and thank you, not tolerating bad behavior, giving direct instruction when being rude, not allowing bad table manners, teaching good grooming and dress).



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