

Madison Metropolitan School District
Department of Educational Services

Social Thinking®

One in a series of mini-reference modules developed to support the
needs of students with autism spectrum disorders

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Check out our blog at:

<http://www.madisonateam.blogspot.com/>

NOTE: Social Thinking has been developed by Michelle Garcia Winner and her colleagues. She and others have written extensively on the topic. Information about the topic is available on Michelle's website: www.socialthinking.com where you can read about the topic, sign up for Michelle's email newsletter, subscribe to her blog, register for conferences, and purchase books and other resources related to Social Thinking. Information in this mini-reference module was taken from Michelle's website and other published resources on the topic.

The following mini-reference modules are available to staff and families working to support students with autism in their classrooms, schools, communities, and/or homes:

- Accessing Autism Community Resources
- Early Childhood
- Social Skill Groups
- Social Thinking
- Transition to School to Work

What are social thinking® challenges?

Michelle Garcia Winner (courtesy of www.SocialThinking.com)

A classic example of a person with a social thinking challenge is that of my friend Ian who is entering into 4th grade. He has excellent language skills and has amazing abilities to learn information about topics of his interest, such as American History. He enjoys learning topics that are factual in nature and in fact excels in these academic tasks. Regardless of his strong academic abilities in most areas of math and language he struggles considerably focusing his attention in his mainstream classroom, participating as part of a group, explaining his ideas to others in writing and making friends during recess and lunch. He prefers talking to adults, rather than his peers, since adults will discuss with him his areas of interest. When adults are not available to talk to, he goes to the library to read a book. While his teacher enjoys his knowledge, she is mystified by his difficulties at school given that he scores in the fine to superior on academic testing. It is difficult for his teacher to understand that he does not have a behavior problem; instead he has social thinking challenges, which makes it difficult for him to deal with all aspects of the expectations across his school and home day. His mother describes him as "bright but clueless"

Simply put, social thinking is our innate ability to think through and apply information to succeed in situations that require social knowledge. Social thinking is a form of intelligence that is key to learning concepts and integrating information across a variety of settings; academic, social, home and community. Limited abilities for learning and/or applying socially relevant information can be considered a social thinking learning disability.

The great difficulty encountered when trying to determine if a child has social thinking challenges is that standardized tests available through educational, psychological and/or speech and language evaluations fail to reveal problems in this area. Thus a child's ability to do well on testing in no way proves or disproves the possibility that he or she may have a significant learning disability in the form of social thinking. The reason that standardized tests lack in their ability to illuminate deficits in this area is that testing needs to be highly structured in order to cleanly measure the very specific skills that the test or subtest was designed to evaluate, however social cognition requires the complex integration of multiple skills. Thus, standardized test formats, as we currently know them today, are often counter to the evaluation process for exploring social thinking skills.

Social thinking challenges represent a social executive function problem. The ability to socially process and respond to information requires more than factual knowledge of the rules of social interaction, it also requires the ability to consider the perspective of the person you are talking to. Perspective taking can be defined as considering the emotions, thoughts, beliefs, prior knowledge, motives and intentions of the person with whom one is communicating as well as one's self. This ability then allows one to not only better determine the actual meaning behind the message being communicated but also how best to respond to that message. Thus applying social knowledge and related social skills successfully during social interactions requires the complex synchronicity of perspective taking along with language processing, visual interpretation and the ability to formulate a related response (verbal or non-verbal) in a very short period of time (1-3 seconds).

Finally, social cognitive deficits do not only reveal themselves during social interactions, but instead they are present during many academic tasks that require highly flexible abstract thinking such as written expression, reading comprehension of literature, organization and planning of assignments and some students have tremendous difficulty learning math skills. Thus persons with significant difficulties relating to others interpersonally often have related academic struggles in the classroom particularly as they get older. Typically, we start to require more creative thinking, flexibility and organizational skills to succeed in the classroom curriculum starting in 3rd/4th grade. Some students begin to show struggles at that time, while others students manage to hold it together until middle school. It is very common for students to develop academic problems only when they get older even when it is determined that this person is "quite bright" according to psycho-educational measures.

Unfortunately, our academic system is set up mostly for the "early intervention" model of specialized education. This means that traditionally we have understood that many students have difficulty getting their structured learning started, thus we have a number of specialists who work with younger children to help them learn the more traditional academic skills of reading and writing. Students with social cognitive deficits often have the reverse problem of learning in that they acquire the more factually based academic skills with relative ease and then only begin to struggle once they are required to use complex critical and social thinking skills to interpret the information presented in the classroom. Given that most educational systems do not account for this type of learning disability, few have developed an educational plan for educating these children with regard to their abstract/social cognitive learning needs as they get older.

It is vitally important that we explore how best to provide social cognitive educational lessons to children across all of their school years!

What is Social Thinking®?

Social thinking is a term for social cognition. Social thinking is required prior to the development of social skills. Successful social thinkers consider the points of view, emotions, thoughts, beliefs, prior knowledge and intentions of others (this is often called perspective-taking - considering the perspectives of others). This is for most of us an intuitive process. We can determine the meanings behind the messages communicated by others and how to respond to them within milliseconds to three seconds! Social thinking occurs everywhere, when we talk, share space, walk down the street, even when we read a novel and relate to our pets. It is an intelligence that integrates information across home, work and community settings - something we usually take for granted!

In neurotypical (so-called normal-thinking) people, social thinking is hard-wired at birth and learned intuitively from infancy onward. While most of us develop our communication skills as we grow up, steadily observing and acquiring social information and learning how to respond to the people around us, many have great difficulties with this process. These difficulties with learning and applying social information is often considered a social learning disability.

A Challenge for Individuals with Asperger Syndrome, High-Functioning Autism, ADHD, Nonverbal Learning Disorders and Other Social and Communicative Challenges. Many people can score high on IQ and standardized tests and have quite limited social skills. In fact, the research published by the [Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders](#) indicates that Social Thinking methodologies are successful at teaching the ability to interact socially in people with social limitations who have *near-normal to way above-normal* intelligence. In addition, the Social Thinking strategies that have helped children and adolescents have also helped adults. Because social thinking is so important to learning throughout life, professionals and parents are using social thinking methods to assist an increasingly broad range of individuals.

Social Thinking strategies teach individuals:

- How their own social minds work - why they and others react and respond the way they do;
- How their behaviors have emotional affects on those around them;
- And from this, how behaviors are affecting their own emotions, responses to and relationships with others across different social contexts.

For individuals being treated, the objectives of these strategies include the ability to:

- Recognize the different levels of their own and others' social minds;
- Navigate their behaviors for more rewarding social outcomes, which include considering how others perceive and respond to these behaviors;
- Learn to adapt to the people and situations around them, across contexts, from formal (classroom, workplace, etc.) to casual settings (hanging out, recess, etc.).

Michelle has written extensively on the topic of Social Thinking, but these three books are considered the core books on the topic. If you are interested in reviewing these books, the Autism Program Support Teacher assigned to your high school attendance area can make these and other resources available to you for a 4-6 week check out period of time.

1. Inside Out: What Makes a Person with Social Cognitive Deficits Tick?

This book introduces a framework of how to more specifically understand the deficits of persons with social cognitive disabilities. The I LAUGH model is presented, which describes many of the key areas of cognition and related skills that are weak in person with "social skills deficits".

I = Initiating novel activities

L = Listening actively

A = Abstracting and inferencing

U = Understanding perspective

G = Gestalt: the big picture

H = Humor and Human Relatedness

Michelle encourages us to realize that teaching students "social skills" first requires us to understand more about the supporting social cognitive components and then work with students to increase their social thinking concepts and related social skills. Worksheets and sample IEP goals are provided to demonstrate how to teach these concepts.

2. Thinking About YOU Thinking About ME, 2nd Edition

Perspective taking is crucial to the development of advanced social thinking and related skills. Yet, individuals with social-cognitive challenges are often “in the dark” when it comes to understanding the ebb and flow of verbal and nonverbal communication that contributes to social understanding within different social situations.

Up until now, this realm of assessment and teaching has been nebulous and undefined, with little concrete material available to help parents, educators, or service providers in understanding social thinking learning challenges and then devising instructional programs to help these children and adults.

Think about YOU and Thinking about ME, 2nd Edition, comes to the rescue of anyone who has stood and scratched their heads, wondering just how to explain the complex topics related to social understanding. Michelle illuminates perspective taking and its impact on a student’s ability to interact socially, be part of a group, as well as comprehend academic assignments often laden with social themes. Topic include:

- A review of social cognition and related theories. Perspective taking is defined and its impact on students of varying functional levels is discussed.
- A hierarchy of therapeutic activities that introduce and explore perspective taking with individuals, school-aged through adults. Includes perspective taking, physical proximity, “thinking with your eyes”, and finally language use.
- Concrete strategies that break down complex verbal conversational language and social interactions to help students become aware of the impact their words and actions have on other people’s thoughts, emotions, and actions.
- Sample IEP goals and benchmarks, along with complete lessons that can be used in a school or therapeutic setting.
- Extensive information related to assessment of social thinking impairments in children and adults. Discusses strengths and weaknesses of existing diagnostic and assessment tools, and introduces a qualitative tool, The Social Thinking Assessment Protocol™ to more accurately gauge a student’s level of social thinking impairment. An article that describes and discusses this protocol currently is available on the social thinking website (http://www.socialthinking.com/images/stories/pdf_files/st_scp_1.26.10.pdf).

3. Think Social! A Social Thinking Curriculum for School-Age Students

This curriculum publication documents how lessons are introduced at Michelle's Center for Social Thinking clinic. It demonstrates how to develop a social thinking vocabulary with which to teach children, parents and teachers across the years. It starts with lessons on 'Being Part of a Group' and continues into self-monitoring behavior, the development of language-specific skills, awareness of language meaning, and the development of imagination and wonder towards play/conversation. It introduces ways to explore complex issues of problem solving, hidden curriculum, and social rules as they change during our lifetimes. Eight sections incorporate more than 100 detailed lessons that can span years of treatment.

The following list identifies some of the social thinking vocabulary that are introduced and taught via this social thinking curriculum:

- Expected behavior
- Unexpected behavior
- Size of the problem
- Whole body listening
- Thinking with our eyes
- Thinking about what people are thinking
- Body in/out of the group
- Brain in/out of the group
- Good thoughts/weird thoughts
- Smart guess/wacky guess
- Body language & spoken language
- Literal and figurative language
- Flexible brains
- Imagination
- Wonder
- World wonders
- Social wonders
- Whopping topic changes
- Initial questions
- Follow-up questions
- Supporting comments
- Bridging or baiting questions
- Bodies are part of communication
- Clarifying needs
- Asking for help
- Initiating topics
- Rude interruptions
- Acceptable interruptions
- MORE

Additional Social Thinking resources written by Michelle and her colleagues are available for your checkout and review. Please remember that these and other resources available from our Autism Lending Library should not be kept out for longer than 4-6 weeks, thanks!

- A Politically Incorrect Look at Evidenced-based Practices and Teaching Social Skills: A Literature Review and Discussion
- Eres un Detective Social. El Pensamiento Social Explicado a Los Ninos
- Superflex..A Superhero Social Thinking Curriculum
- Superflex Takes on Rock Brain and the Team of Unthinkables
- Superflex Takes on Glassman and the Team of Unthinkables
- Social Behavior Mapping. Connecting Behavior, Emotions, and Consequences Across the Day
- Socially Curious and Curiously Social - A Social Thinking Guidebook for bright teens and Young Adults
- Social Fortune or Social Fate. A Social Thinking Graphic Novel Map for Social Quest Seekers
- Worksheets! For teaching Social Thinking and Related Skills
- You Are a Social Detective! Explaining Social Thinking to Kids
- DVDs:
 - Growing Up "Social - Exploring How Social Communication Develops and Strategies to Help
 - Social Behavior Mapping
 - Social Making Across the School Day
 - Strategies for Organization - Preparing for Homework and the Real World

For a complete list of social thinking resources developed by Michelle and her colleagues, visit www.socialthinking.com. NOTE: A copy of Michelle's The Social Thinking---Social Communication Profile™ is posted as a separate mini-reference module on the MMSD's Autism page: <https://specialweb.madison.k12.wi.us/node/110>

