

Theory of Mind Part II: Social Thinking in Autism Spectrum Disorders

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In Part 1 of this two-part article, the development of theory of mind in both typically developing children and those with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) was discussed. Theory of mind refers to a human's ability to infer mental states in others. It is our ability to "think about thinking" and to understand that other people have different and unique thoughts, feelings and experiences. The current article will address intervention strategies that are designed to enable children with ASD to develop a more complex and thorough understanding of social thinking.

Eye Contact: One of the most fundamental aspects of theory of mind is eye contact and social attention. Before any child can learn and understand the higher levels of social thinking, he/she must be able to understand the purpose of eye contact and the social information that is being conveyed. For very young children, it is important to immediately reinforce them each and every time they make eye contact. When you are playing with the child and eye contact is made, no matter how brief, the child should receive an immediate social reinforcer, such as tickles, or a natural reinforcer, such as continuing to play the game with them. As a child gets older, it is important to explain the purpose of eye contact; to let the child know what information they can "read" from the eyes and why they will need to read it. A teacher may say, "I'm going to look right at Sammy so he knows that I'm going to call on him next." This clearly identifies for the child what the message of your eye contact is at that moment. In a similar vein, a teacher may look directly at one student as then ask a different student, "Who do you think I am going to call on right now?" Another fun game to play is the "I spy with my eye" game, but as the facilitator, you should play the game poorly at first, and clearly have your eyes directed at the chosen target. When the child guesses correctly, ask them how they knew the answer.

For older children, it is equally important to explain the purpose behind why we make eye contact. You can point out examples of the hidden message of the eyes in any situation. For instance, while watching any TV show or movie, you can discuss why characters are looking at each other, or looking away. You can also discuss the movement of the camera as a parallel to the movement of the audience's eyes.

Gestures: Research has indicated that nearly 90% of a message is communicated through body language rather than spoken words. Therefore, if a child is to be good social thinker, they must be able to "read" the unspoken language of the body. The easiest way to begin to teach an understanding of gestures is to play "Charades." Another activity is to "people watch" at such places as the mall or an airport. Here, children must look at the gestures of people without being able to hear what is being said and then try to guess what is going on. Watching TV with the sound off and guessing the thoughts and emotions of the characters is another fun way to get children to begin to read body language. Finally, watching documentaries about animal behavior, where nearly all

communication is non-verbal, is an excellent way to help children understand why they need to read the cues given through gestures.

Emotions: Learning to understand the emotions of another person can be very complicated. Children must first be able to identify facial expressions, and they need a vocabulary of “emotion words” to help express how they or someone else may be feeling. In order to increase a child’s emotional vocabulary, have them generate a synonym book for simple emotional words. For instance, under “happy” they child may list “glad, joyous, pleased, jubilant, elated, euphoric, chipper, ecstatic.” Then, the child rates each of these words as to their “happiness level.” On a scale of 1-10, “pleased” may be a 2, while “euphoric” a 9. This allows children to begin to see the depth and diversity of emotions and get them to see beyond the simple concept of “happy.”

As children develop their emotional vocabularies, you can begin to relate simple situations to them and ask them how they would feel in that situation. Then you ask them how someone else may feel in that situation. As an example, if you are working with a child who loves peanut butter, you ask them to describe how they would feel if they found out that every day that week, they were going to get a peanut butter sandwich and a peanut butter cup for lunch. Then ask them how they think a child who hates peanut butter would feel in that situation, and follow that up with how a child who didn’t love or hate peanut butter would feel. As children develop competence in this area, you can move to more emotional situations and ones for which they may have no experience (such as a story about a person who loses all his/her luggage on a flight to attend a brother’s wedding).

Social Thinking: The last step in teaching theory of mind is focus directly upon social thinking-putting all the pieces together to react and respond appropriately. Take the example of a child who has a special interest in the *Titanic* and loves to talk about all things related to it. Before beginning to discuss the topic, a socially adept child would take into consideration the level of the “listener” (you speak differently to a five-year-old than you do your Dad’s boss), their interest level (a kid at a soccer game versus at a screening of *Titanic*), their eye contact (if they aren’t looking at you, maybe they aren’t interested), their body language (if they walk away, they don’t want you to follow them) and the listener’s experiences/emotions (they hated the movie). Each one of these facets can be taught to a child with ASD to assist in developing theory of mind. A child would need to be taught to first determine if the people around him want to hear about the *Titanic* (and stop if they do not), to see how familiar they are with the topic (letting the child know not to talk over their head or repeat details they already know), to pick the right tone of voice and use interesting words and, finally, to keep monitoring how the listeners are reacting and change accordingly (if everyone is bored, it’s helpful to stop and think of something more interesting to say).

Understanding social thinking is the key component to social competence. The earlier you can begin to teach children with ASD to be social thinkers, the more innate this skill becomes. However, it is never too late to begin to teach theory of mind skills. Since social thinking and interaction is going on around us at all times, any situation can lend itself perfectly to teaching theory of mind.

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