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# Acknowledgments

My relationship with this book has been very similar to the relationships I have had with many of the children that I work with. In the beginning, the book was like a lot of my students are when I first start working with them, kind of inconspicuous, yet totally noticeable at the same time. It was smart and said a lot of important things, but it was a little disorganized and sometimes confusing even to me. It needed some tending to, like a garden, and it began to blossom just a little bit more every time I went back to it to help it grow. Once it did develop, it surprised me how beautiful and brilliant it really was. It became more than I ever expected. I hope it will continue to surprise me and exceed my expectations, just as so many of my students have.

There are many people I would like to thank for their help and support as I worked on this book. First, I would like to thank Kirsten McBride from AAPC, a wonderful and extremely talented editor, who saw the importance of this book and guided me expertly toward perfecting it into a "cohesive" useful tool. Her expertise in editing and her background knowledge about autism spectrum disorders is an awesome combination. Thank you to my early reviewers, Dr. Margaret Meth, director of William Paterson University's Communication Disorders Clinic, AAPC authors Kari Dunn Buron and Sue Diamond, and Allyson Castelli, special education teacher, Paterson Public Schools.

It has been most rewarding for me that so many of my Social Skills Group clients and their families are still in touch with me after many years. Too many to mention, but you know who you are, and I thank you greatly for believing in the process and in my abilities. An extra-special thank-you goes out to Diana Cicchino and her son, Marco Antonio Cicchino, for trusting me with so much. The work we have done together has been rewarding in so many ways, and without a doubt it has contributed to this book as well.

I have many supportive friends and colleagues. Many I see on a regular basis, and some I don't see often because they live far away. I know everyone in my life has lent their support in one way or another, and although I would like to name every one of you, that would be challenging. Look carefully through the book because I may have acknowledged you somewhere.

Specifically, I would like to thank the following people, Nicole Mitarotonda, for her amazing psychological consultations; Faith Bell, for her rave review, her creative contributions to the cover of this book, her beautiful photographs, and for listening to me complaining.

I would like to make one more very special mention of a very special friend, Serenity Marie Dolan, the most beautiful angel in heaven. I think of you every day. Further, to my closest friends, really my extended family, who listened to and learned from me whether they felt like it or not, and all of their children who have unknowingly served as "research subjects" at one time or another, Michele Kaplan, Melissa Siegel, Meryl and Michael Budnick and "kids": Emily, Avery, Rebecca, Hayley and Marisa the Great.

A huge thank-you goes out to my "second mother," Sandy Collucci. You are a wonderful grandmother to my son and a fabulous "personal assistant" and laundry fairy to me. Without your help in so many areas, I don't think I would have been able to complete this project. Thank you for being my friend.

Another huge thank-you goes to my mother, Susan Zeitz, for all of her expert proofreading and suggestions. It is duly noted that without your contributions, I probably would not have known what to do with this manuscript in the first place. Thank you for being my mom and friend even when it's been difficult. Evan, Susan, and Samantha Zeitz, miles are meaningless, and I love you all more than words can say. Some day I hope we will have the freedom to see each other much more frequently.

Last, but never least, to my boy, Cary Alexander Collucci. It is with great pleasure that I tell you this … I'm finally, really and truly, done with the book, so I will be more than happy to play with you. You are my life, beautiful boy. I love you.

# Central Coherence Theory and Big Picture Thinking:

## An Introduction for Parents and Educators

Learning how to deal with social situations is a lifelong task. As children grow and develop, they continue to encounter new social challenges, in increasingly complex contexts. A preschooler needs to navigate and master simple things like sharing a toy, whereas school-age children have to negotiate more complicated things like “sharing” friends. High-school students need to have insight into which of their friends they trust enough to share their science notes with, or which of their friends they trust enough to share personal secrets with. As adults in work environments, we need to be able to work cooperatively and support our coworkers while simultaneously accommodating the needs of our boss, our boss’s bosses, and so on.

**Being able to negotiate social interactions successfully is a life skill essential for future success.** Without this ability, one will have considerable difficulty getting along with others, forging friendships, finding and keeping a job, and much more. For example, learning to drive a car and being a safe motorist requires essential attention, prediction and perspective taking skills, not to mention many other abilities that are social and interactional in nature.

## Central Coherence Theory: “Big Picture Thinking”

Interpreting social situations requires first an understanding of the context, or the “whole” of a situation, as it is happening. One must then be able to “add” all of the parts together and arrive at a “sum total” quickly and effortlessly. If we are limited in our ability to make sense of the main idea of what is happening around us, our social interactions will be less fluid than those of our peers, and this can make it difficult to participate in the give-and-take of everyday situations.

Many people who have difficulties with social cognition, including those on the autism spectrum, are not able to see the Big Picture of a situation, described in the literature as a weakness in central

coherence (Frith, 1989). That is, they tend to focus, or even "hyper-focus," on the details within the larger whole of a concept, conversation, story, picture or situation, and, therefore, have difficulty recognizing the main idea. In his work *The Extreme Male-Brain Theory of Autism*, Simon Baron-Cohen (1999) states that while central coherence is difficult to define, "The essence of it is the normal drive to integrate information into a context, or 'Gestalt'" (p. 17).

Statistics show that boys are 4 times as likely as girls to develop autism and 10 times more likely to be diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome (Goleman, 2006a). Baron-Cohen (1999) describes the neurological profiles of people with these disorders as "an extreme form of the male brain" (pp. 35-36). He relates that this "extreme" male brain is not well equipped for emotional empathy, but it has intellectual strengths such as understanding systems like the "stock market, computer software and quantum physics." In contrast, the "extreme female brain excels at empathy and understanding others' thoughts and feelings," which fits very nicely into professions like teaching and counseling. They have more difficulties with "systems," such as applying directions when driving (Baron-Cohen, p. 34; Goleman, p. 139).

Baron-Cohen's discussion directs us to understand important differences in processing styles and how tasks related to recognizing information that is best processed as a whole, such as understanding the emotional states of others, have a neurological basis. The "polar opposites" of men vs. women are highlighted, but we know that a spectrum of abilities in processing style is possible. In general, most people fall somewhere in the middle of that spectrum, not to mention that many women are gifted with systematizing and many men are brilliant at showing empathy (Goleman, 2006a).

... we cannot lump together all people who have strengths in understanding details as having a weakness.

Related to teaching social skills, what is most salient here is that the ideas of Baron-Cohen and others remind us that we cannot lump together all people who have strengths in understanding details as having a weakness. It also helps us recognize the differences between males and females. Those experienced in working with girls on the autism spectrum are well aware that they are more challenging to diagnose and treat, mainly because they don't "look" as strikingly impaired or fit the same "model" of symptomology as boys.

Most important, the findings of Baron-Cohen and others give us a solid beginning point for assessment and intervention. We can examine a client's processing style and determine if there is a weakness in gestalt thinking that needs to be accommodated or supported to help the person recognize social information in context. Having a balanced brain, where both holistic thinking and more analytical thought processes are present, is an important goal. We know from the growing research on

neuroplasticity, for example, that if we provide the brain with appropriate experiences highlighting a more effective processing style, we will be able to help the brain habituate to that processing style (Schwartz & Begley, 2002).

## Identifying Students With Weaknesses in Central Coherence: Can They See the Forest for the Trees?

Several writers (Baron-Cohen, 1999; Wieder & Greenspan, 2005; Winner, 2006) have suggested that part of being successful with social cognition is related to having effective information-processing skills that focus on the whole rather than the sum of its parts. How then might we identify such thinking patterns in an individual so we can effectively support him or her in being more successful in the social realm? What does this processing style look like in individuals who have social-cognitive deficits?

As mentioned, sometimes clients are too focused on individual details and, therefore, have difficulty "getting to the point" in a conversation. At other times, they are only concerned about their own thoughts. Or maybe they are overly attentive to sticking to the rules, not only on their own behalf but also by acting as the "rule police" for others. In doing so, they not only annoy and alienate peers but are missing out on the fun of a game or experience with friends.

A great example is the student who is asked to talk about a specific event, such as a trip he took with his family. Rather than giving a brief overview of the highlights, many students with social-cognitive deficits respond by giving a lengthy monologue that includes every single detail about the trip and never gets to the main idea. It might look a little bit like this:

> **Teacher:** So how was your spring break vacation to Mexico?
>
> **Student:** Well, first we woke up at 6 a.m. and finished packing our clothes. Then we ate breakfast. I had pancakes because it was Saturday. I always have pancakes on Saturday mornings. After that, we put our luggage in the car. My mom packed my clothes for me, but I also brought a book, my Nintendo, and three games to play. Then we got in the car and drove down the Garden State Parkway to get to Newark Liberty International Airport, where we parked the car in the long-term parking lot because we were going to be gone for 10 days. We walked for a little more than 5 minutes to get to the entrance to Continental Airlines. Then we had to check in our suitcases and show the lady behind the counter our tickets. Then we looked at the departure screen to find out what gate we needed to go to. Then we went through the security thing and boy was I mad. I had to take off my shoes. And those security officials looked so mean …

So far, there is a lot of "answer" but almost no information about what the listener was **really** interested in hearing about: the trip as a whole. It is important to note that from the child's perspective, he is responding appropriately, because that's how the memories have been stored in his brain.

Now, consider the conversational partner in this instance. Her feelings and comfort level with the discourse situation, as well as her feelings about the communication skills of the other person, will most certainly be affected.

I currently work with an 18-year-old young man with a diagnosis of high-functioning autism who loves watching the show "America's Next Top Model." Of course, this didn't totally surprise me since he is an 18-year-old male, and the show features beautiful young women. Nevertheless, it was not a typical choice. I told him I had never seen the show and wasn't sure what it was about. I asked him to tell me about it, and he was more than happy to elaborate on his interest.

> ... sometimes clients are too focused on individual details and, therefore, have difficulty "getting to the point" in a conversation.

He began to explain the episodes and tell me about who was currently on the show, using the show's jargon and specifics that I couldn't follow. When I started asking clarifying questions, he decided it would be easier for us to look it up in Wikipedia "where he could show me what he was talking about." I actually thought this was a brilliant idea since all I knew was that the host was Tyra Banks and that at the end of the season someone probably becomes a fashion model.

I expected that he would start at the top of the Wikipedia entry, as I would have, and that we would read through it together so that at the end, I would have a better idea about how the episodes worked. But I had forgotten that I frequently arrive at unexpected places with my students. In this case, the student scrolled down through the entry and clicked on one of the charts that listed every season (called "cycles" on this program) of the show, 1 through 15. He moved right to the spot in the chart labeled Cycle 14. "We are in cycle 15 now, but I will show you cycle 14," he explained. One more click, and we were on a new page, where he scrolled quickly down to another chart that listed the vital statistics of all of the contestants featured in that season. Then he proceeded to read the list out loud to me.

Sitting there next to him and listening, it occurred to me to ask the question, "What is it about this show that you like so much? Are you interested in modeling, fashion or photography?" "No," he replied, "I just like the 'call-out' order (how the models are eliminated) and the 'destinations' that the finalists get to go to." Then he proceeded to recite, from memory, each and every cycle of the show and which destination was featured. This was exhausting for me, but enjoyable for him. Not to mention that it was very hard to bring him back into the reciprocal nature of true conversation.

We generally tell children in need of "social" help, particularly those who need to work on expanding their social circles, that a good way to make new friends is to find people with common interests. Asking about "favorites" is a way to start to determine if you have a similar interest to someone else. You can get to know someone by asking questions like, "What's your favorite TV show?" and see if you have that in common. However, the example above shows that a "favorite" can be a favorite for an entirely different reason to someone who has difficulty with holistic processing and storing memories in an episodic fashion. Imagine my 18-year-old client attempting to engage a peer about his favorite TV show. Most certainly, it would be difficult for him and the peer to move any further than simply finding out that they both liked the same show. Having a conversation, enjoying the show together, or delving further into interests around the show would be difficult, especially if engaging with a neurotypical peer.

If you take a minute and think about the clients, students, or children that you work or live with, you will probably recognize some of these other examples:

- They frequently become over-focused on their own thoughts or ideas.
- They are easily distracted by a small detail that appears inconsequential to others but gigantic to them.
- They have difficulty moving on from challenging moments with peers, and they might even hold "grudges."
- They have a hard time engaging in conversations with others and always seem to be "off topic;" however, they are great at practicing "staying on the topic" during a structured lesson.
- They are constantly hyper-aware of rules and abide by them completely. They also act as a rule enforcer with their peers or even with adults.
- They remember specifics about past events that are sometimes even more specific than necessary, like what day and time it was when you last played a particular game.
- They have difficulty with reading comprehension and tasks that require understanding the main idea of what they are reading. They are "early readers," or fluent readers because of excellent decoding skills, but they have a lot of trouble understanding what they have read. Making mistakes with reading homonyms is common, reading the sentence with the word "tear": "there was a tear in her eye" as "there was a tear in her dress" (Baron-Cohen, 1999, p. 17).
- They have difficulty giving directions or providing a verbal or written summary about something that they know a lot about.
- They may have difficulties with writing assignments in general.
- They confuse facts and opinions, when they are expressing themselves or when others are speaking to them.

- They often have difficulty making inferences, predictions or solving problems, as well as other critical thinking tasks, and abstractions like humor and figurative language. In many cases, they are unable to determine the meaning of certain idiomatic expressions, even when presented in context.
- They like to play or do the same things over and over again.

They have difficulty with reading comprehension and tasks that require understanding the main idea of what they are reading.

Although this is not a complete list of *every* behavior, it clearly gives examples of weak central coherence, or the difficulty with gestalt thinking, that is typically observed in our clients. People with these types of information-processing difficulties do not always have cognitive deficits or challenges related to understanding the rules of social interactions, but they do exhibit a performance deficit. This means they can tell you exactly what you want to hear about doing things the "right" way, but they have difficulty enacting those rules in the moment. In school settings, these are the kids who are challenged by working in groups, cause interruptions in class discussions or lectures, and run out of time on projects and tests. Overall, they are generally isolated from others because their difficulties cause them to alienate friends or co-workers.

## Becoming Connected

I have worked as a speech-language pathologist for more than 20 years. For the most part, I began to gain experience working with children with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) while employed at a private special education school in New York City. At the time, autism was becoming a concern for many parents of young children, and professionals in the field were responding with research. Words like *spectrum, pervasive developmental disorder-NOS* and *Asperger Syndrome* were being introduced and entered into the fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

As professionals, we responded by utilizing these new descriptive terms to help educate parents. As speech-language pathologists, we focused on pragmatic language development and the precursory behaviors that are necessary to develop reciprocal communication, the one aspect that seemed to be the biggest challenge for our students.

In 1997 I became connected with another speech-language pathologist, who "recruited" me to do social skills groups with children in her private practice in New Jersey. She and a colleague had observed a need

for social intervention with the "autistic" population, and they had responded by putting together a program of "co-treatment" groups that included both a speech-language pathologist and a mental health professional. When I joined the team, we offered four groups, but within a short time, word got around, and our numbers began growing. At the height of our program, we were running between 15 and 20 groups per week, with an average of about 6-8 children in each group.

Shortly after I began working there, I took responsibility for running the group program, creating intervention plans, working with parents, and leading groups. I became increasingly involved in researching methods and programs and adapting and implementing them into my lesson plans. I recognized that as the children were learning, I too was improving upon my understanding of social processes as they occurred in my own life. I read books, watched movies and television programs, and constantly observed in order to pick up on the "hidden curriculum" (Myles, Trautman, & Schelvan, 2004) that my students were missing.

The work I was doing developing the curriculum turned into a 24-hour-a-day job, much like learning social skills is a 24-hour-a-day job for those with social-cognitive deficits. In order for students to learn, they needed to constantly be thinking about social skills, not just "turning it on" once a week for an hour in group. Similarly, in order for me to be an effective clinician, I had to focus on thinking about social skills 24 hours a day.

## Building an Effective Intervention Program Using Evidence-Based Practices

In addition to central coherence theory, theory of mind (Baron-Cohen, Leslie, & Frith, 1985) and executive dysfunction theory (McEvoy, Rogers, & Pennington, 1993) have been researched extensively as two other core deficit areas that may be present in individuals with social-cognitive deficits. While this book focuses on understanding and teaching gestalt thinking, the other areas of need should not be overlooked in intervention planning.

Some researchers have indicated that there is a continuum of ability with regard to central coherence, indicating that there are weaknesses at both "low" and "high" levels (Happé, 1999; Plaisted, Saksida, Alcantara, & Weisblatt, 2003). These students are exhibiting a weakness in their ability to "draw together or integrate individual pieces of information to establish meaning" (Plaisted et al., p. 375). In my experiences working with these types of clients, they are lacking in their ability to process the "whole" of an experience, or the overall context, which is necessary in order to integrate oneself into a social situation.

... a large part of a social learning curriculum should focus on helping students "see" how individual pieces of information fit into a larger context, so that they may begin to become more of a gestalt thinker, or "big picture thinker."

Therefore, it makes sense that a large part of a social learning curriculum should focus on helping students "see" how individual pieces of information fit into a larger context, so that they may begin to become more of a gestalt thinker, or "big picture thinker." Skills may be broken down in order to get a student started thinking about behaviors. Then, these skills must be put back together again, into a manageable whole, in order for them to efficiently process the social situation. This book does just that – it highlights some important social processes and reinforces the importance of putting it all together – the long-term goal of a social learning curriculum.

In addition to the research of Frith on central coherence theory, this book and my intervention methods rest on the written work of many other professionals in the field of social-cognitive deficits. In no particular order, Mel Levine, Daniel Goleman, Simon Baron-Cohen, Uta Frith, Carol Gray, and Tony Attwood have all been influential. Their understanding of how to better support students on the spectrum has laid the groundwork for building a better curriculum. Each of these professionals has elaborated to some extent on the following points:

1. **People need to have good perspective taking abilities in order to be successful in their socialization efforts.** Referred to as theory of mind, frequently abbreviated as ToM (Baron-Cohen et al., 1985), this describes the ability to understand the thoughts and beliefs of another person. Such understanding and the ability to recognize others' intentions and points of view are critical aspects of socializing and communicating. That is, it permits us to monitor our responses and adjust our behaviors, as needed, during an interaction (Winner, 2006).

   The ability to successfully recognize what is happening in someone else's mind is referred to as "mindsight" by neuroscientists (Goleman, 2006a). This means people are able to use the contextual clues around them, such as facial expressions, tone of voice, or gestures, as well as other visual clues from the situation, such as where the interaction is taking place, to infer what the other person is thinking. Without mindsight, we are unable to engage with others in meaningful relationships, including displaying empathy. Mindsight is the understanding that others have thoughts and feelings that are different from our own. The ability to make inferences about what those thoughts and feelings are requires gestalt thinking.

In individuals with autism and similar disorders, weaknesses in perspective taking can vary in severity and must be assessed accordingly in order to formulate appropriate goals. Deficits in ToM run the gamut from what is called "mindblindness," or the complete inability to recognize the point of view of another person, to what Michelle Winner refers to as "impaired interactive perspective taking" (Winner, 2007a, p. 9). The latter term describes individuals who are not "mindblind" but have weaknesses in perspective taking.

***Goals for social learning should reflect the importance of understanding the perspective of others and how their thoughts, feelings, and interests differ from our own.***

2. **Emotional relatedness is at the core of interpersonal interactions and is necessary for truly meaningful connections with others.** Many people with social difficulties display weaknesses in their ability to connect emotions to experiences and then store memories of such events in a holistic manner. It has been shown that the emotional significance of an event has an effect on our memory of the event (Kensinger, 2004) and that we are more likely to remember personal experiences that contain some emotional relevance for us (Conway et al., 1994). It has also been shown that emotions have an effect on attention to details. Our emotions affect our attention processes, whereby we are more apt to have the capacity to attend to the emotional arousal we feel and have less attentional resources available for information processing. Consequently, information central to the source of the emotion is stored in memory and the peripheral details less so (Easterbrook, 1959; Kensinger). In other words, we remember the "feeling" we attach to a past experience as a whole and then uncover more detailed information as we start to think more about it. This is typically the way most people store and retrieve their personal experiences. It is also a more socially acceptable way to relate such memories to other people, by giving a main idea statement first and then waiting to see if the person we are speaking with is available and interested before we divulge further details. As the conversation moves forward, and the discourse partner asks more questions, we begin revealing even more details, possibly even peripheral information that we may not have recalled initially.

   **Episodic memory** is the storage of personal events. This includes the where and when and other context-relevant information and their associated emotions. The example earlier in this chapter where the student talks about his family vacation does not reveal any emotions that he may have connected to being with his family, having a new experience, or his enjoyment of it. Instead, we see a listing of temporal events that would be better titled "How to Take a Vacation."

**Procedural memory** refers to the long-term storage of how to do things like tie our shoes or drive a car. It helps us remember step-by-step directions about the cognitive and motor skills we need to complete such tasks. It often does not even require us to have conscious control or attention during retrieval. Our vacation student appears to store his personal experiences in a procedural manner, and, therefore, his explanations are exactly that. In addition to weaknesses in central coherence, weaknesses in emotional connectedness to people and experiences, and in overall emotional understanding, impact our ability to store memories in an episodic fashion. Engaging relationships and a solid understanding of our own emotions and those of the people around us are important aspects of social interactions. Highlighting how experiences are stored related to emotions is also essential when teaching social skills.

> ***Goals for social learning should reflect emotional understanding and encourage, as naturalistically as possible, the enjoyment of simply having relationships with others and connecting memories to emotions and people.***

3. **Communicative competence is a large part of successful social interactions.** Communicative competence refers to how we use our language skills to verbally interact with others. It involves a person's **pragmatic knowledge** and the awareness of when to use particular types of linguistic constructions (Phelps-Terasaki & Phelps-Gunn, 2007). More specifically, pragmatic knowledge refers to comprehension of the social conventions of communication, such as turn-taking and staying on the topic. Being aware of when to use certain linguistic constructions allows us to use language for different social purposes. Examples of communicative competence include things like being able to produce an interrogative statement or question at an appropriate time in a conversation in order to gain information or being able to construct a narrative in an organized way to tell a listener about a personal experience.

   Communicative competence includes understanding the following contexts within an interaction:

   - **Situational context** – refers to the ***physical environment*** and the ***audience*** involved in the interaction. Where is the interaction taking place, and who is present? People use different types of linguistic constructions and rules based on these things. For example, we speak differently to someone we don't know very well versus a close friend, and a student speaks differently to a teacher versus a peer. We also speak differently when we are in the library versus in the gym.
   - **Discourse context** – refers to the functions of the language used and how effective it is for conveying a particular intent. This includes ***topics*** of conversation and management of the topic(s), as well as ***purpose***, which refers to the goals of the conversation and the

type of linguistic structures that are utilized to achieve those goals. For example, recognizing that there are different reasons for communicating with others. Are we trying to get information or share our thoughts and feelings? Are we interviewing someone or engaging in a shared conversation? Are the topics that we are referring to appropriate for the audience and situation?

- **Semantic context** – refers to the meaning of a discourse interaction and certain aspects of language that can convey concepts or ideas. This includes ***visual-gestural cues*** (nonverbal aspects of communication), ***abstractions*** (communication of symbolic forms that are not direct), such as metaphors and figurative language and humor, and ***pragmatic evaluation*** (a speaker's ability to self-monitor his or her pragmatic skills throughout an interaction).

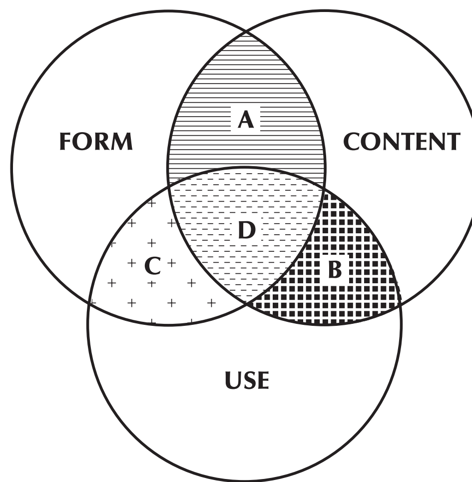
... pragmatic knowledge refers to comprehension of the social conventions of communication, such as turn-taking and staying on the topic.

Many children in need of support in the social arena have what might be considered age-appropriate language skills, yet they are not able to use these skills to complete the full range of social functions. Many are children who are frequently overlooked by educators and professionals, sometimes even speech-language pathologists, because "they talk so much" when, in reality, their talking is not always directly connected to the discourse situation around them. They have difficulty with initiating with others, taking turns, or monitoring the timing of their verbal contributions. Or they have challenges with simply using language for different purposes.

Additionally, some children have true linguistic deficits that impact on their pragmatic (social) language abilities. In other words, their challenges with expressive and receptive language is a large part of what causes problems for them in the social aspects of communication.

The true weakness is not in the amount of language that is produced; instead, it is the *interaction* between expressive language form, content, and use. **Form** refers to the shape and sound of the basic units of language and their combinations such as word endings, words, or sentence structure. **Content** refers to what individuals talk about or understand. Finally, the **Use** of language refers to why an individual is speaking and the ways in which he constructs conversations, depending upon what he knows about the listener and the context (Lahey, 1988). A breakdown in one area has an effect on the others. If somebody is not able to use the correct sentence structure, he probably won't be able to communicate his intent, or what

he means to say, to someone else. Or, if a person is limited in the types of things he wants to say or talk about, he probably won't be able to engage effectively in conversation with others. The figure below exemplifies how these three areas of expressive language interact.




From *Language Disorders and Language Development* (p. 18) by Margaret Lahey, 1988, Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon. Used with permission.

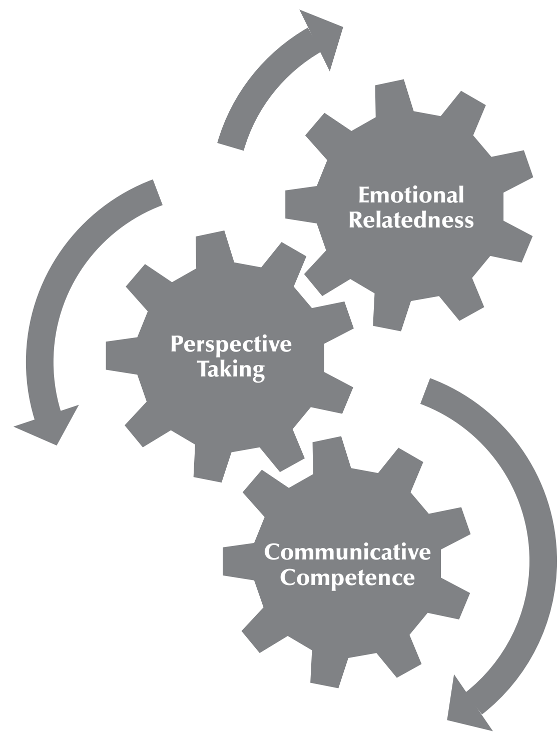
***Goals for social learning should target communication skills, including knowing and understanding the "rules" of conversational interactions and being competent enough with language to communicate intentions appropriately.***

In the social skills groups that I work with, I illustrate all three of these areas: perspective taking, emotional relatedness, and communicative competence. I also emphasize the significant interrelationships among them. For example, weaknesses in perspective taking have an impact on communicative competence. If we don't understand what others are thinking, we might not give enough information to a listener when conversing. Furthermore, we won't be able to self-monitor communication breakdowns and make repairs as necessary. Or, if we have a limited ability to understand our own emotions in a situation, this will clearly affect how we understand the emotions of others.

In addition to those three points, I attempt to highlight the importance of self-awareness. I provide support for students and clients as they examine questions about themselves such as …

- What is your learning profile?
- How do you self-regulate?
- What are your stressors?
- What are your strengths?
- What are your weaknesses?
- What motivates you?
- What are your goals?

Understanding oneself solidifies work in the area of perspective taking, and it contributes greatly to progress in many other social areas. It also helps one to become a more successful self-advocate. Self-advocacy is an important aspect of achieving independence and success as an adult.




As children become young men and women, their emotional, social, economic, and physical well-being will be determined, in part, by their ability to grasp the Big Picture in social situations. As described above, there are many particulars involved, all of which are necessary aspects to include when creating an effective social curriculum. This book is written to help students to better understand social behaviors, perspective taking, communication, emotions, and the intricacies of relationships. Most important, it highlights the need to recognize that there are **many** parts that make up an experience and that each of these parts needs consideration when we are involved in and interpreting social experiences – a common area of challenge among individuals on the autism spectrum.

## What Age Range Does the Book Target?

It is difficult to specify an age range for whom this book is most suitable. No two children with an autism spectrum diagnosis are exactly the same. This is so blaringly obvious that a higher-functioning student I once worked with wondered out loud, "Why do they call it Asperger Syndrome anyway? I mean, why do they lump us all together under the same name when we are all so different?" In many ways, he was correct.

Even with the increased interest in better serving students with ASD, many educators and professionals still frequently make the mistake of grouping all "autistic" youngsters together, without assessing what their needs truly are. Different students need different intervention strategies. Without the flexibility to use many different learning strategies, an intervention plan in any area, not just socialization, will most certainly be less effective. This happens often in a lot of educational settings, where resources are limited or prescribed by district administration personnel who have little clinical understanding of the population they are trying to service. This leaves teachers, or specialists, with nothing but the one "curriculum" that they are directed to use. Successful social-cognitive intervention strategies are generally a combination of many different types of goals, materials, and activities.

In order to ensure success, work with the ideas in this book requires guidance from an adult who knows the skill level of the student and how he or she learns. Most of the students I work with have considerable difficulty with carryover and generalization of the skills they learn. That is why I recommend either reading this book with the student or allowing the student to move through it independently, one chapter at a time, and then following up to determine how much, or how little, the student has learned and internalized.

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This is especially important for children who tend to memorize information but fail to integrate what they know and demonstrate it in their everyday experiences. For example, many students with ASD can answer every social question correctly, yet they make mistakes in real life over and over again.

I work with a 13-year-old boy with high-functioning autism who has great academic skills. He is very bright, particularly in mathematics, and has a fantastic memory for factual information. This has helped him attain straight A's on his report card every year he has been in school. However, despite his abilities, he has a great deal of difficulty in the critical thinking areas, especially with inferential thinking, predicting, and applying the things he has learned in new situations. These weaknesses impact negatively his ability to take what he has learned about social skills and put those skills into practice.

We have the same conversations over and over about the mistakes that he continually makes when interacting with his peers. An area of great challenge for him is controlling his impulse to monitor the behaviors of other students in his class. He is the classic "rule police officer," letting everyone know, in various ways, what rules they are not following. When we get together for a session, he frequently relates stories about how this behavior has gotten him into "trouble" with teachers and students alike. When I ask him about what went wrong, he is always able to tell me the right answer. He recognizes, **after the fact**, that he was "too focused on the details" and not thinking flexibly, and that it's not his job "to be the rule police." Even so, he continues to have a great deal of difficulty integrating these things into a "social" situation.

While we struggle with "taking the show on the road," so to speak, I know from my observations that our work together has produced changes in his processing style, increased his abilities in the critical thinking areas, and improved his understanding of himself. What has made the most difference for him, aside from his work with me, is the involvement of his mother and other family members. They

understand that working on social skills is a “24-hour-a day job” and that one group, once a week, is not enough. In order to support changes in the neurological profile of a child on the spectrum, practice is necessary. The students with the most familial involvement, those whose families understand their strengths and weaknesses, are the students who make the most progress.

Within my practice, I have successfully used this book with students between the ages of 6 and 24 years, with those who read and those who have limited reading abilities. After first assessing the student and making a determination about his or her abilities in each of the areas I intend to reinforce (ToM, emotional relatedness, and communicative competence, as well as abilities in holistic thinking), I determine if the presentation of the material within the book needs to be modified in some way. I have had to make adjustments for children who have difficulty with reading comprehension and language processing. These adjustments have included ...

- Adding more visual support to accompany the written material. This generally involves including more “pictures” or using photographs of the student and his or her personal experiences.
- Limiting the amount of information that is reviewed; for example, reading only one chapter at a time or even one or two skills within a chapter at a time.
- Adjusting the questions or providing verbal prompts to help the child to understand and answer the questions within the text.
- Reading the written material out loud to the student with appropriate pacing, emphasis, and emotion. Also, changing the “level” of the language and vocabulary (for example, substituting vocabulary words that are beyond the student’s comprehension level) for better comprehension, either before reading or while reading.

While you might choose to use this book *with* the student, it is actually written for the students *themselves*. If you, as a parent or educator, decide to let a child read through the book on his own, a grade range of approximately fifth grade through high school is generally appropriate, depending on the student’s developmental level and interest in the way the material is presented. Other things to consider include the student’s reading comprehension level, overall language abilities, and ability to utilize critical thinking skills to respond to the examples and questions. If you are a parent and are unsure of whether your child can benefit from this book on a more independent level, consult a professional you trust and who knows your son or daughter, such as a teacher, a speech-language pathologist, or a psychologist.

# How to Use This Book

Reading this book with the student or students you would like to support is an excellent way to help them internalize the material. Here are some things to remember when reading together:

- **Don't be a "teacher."** Think of this work as "shared" reading. Your job is to be the mediator between the student and the material. You won't be reading ***to*** them; you will be reading with them. You may be the only one reading if reading is difficult for the student you are working with, but you will need to stop along the way to discuss and check for comprehension.
- **Be familiar with the material ahead of time.** Read it to yourself first and be sure you fully understand the material. Think about how you will read it aloud to the student. Develop extension questions or comprehension questions as you prepare.
- **Use appropriate pacing, emphasis, and emotion.** Read the sections clearly and carefully to let the points sink in. Many words are in bold print, and these require more affect in order to highlight their importance for the student. Using appropriate affect while you read can help a student naturalistically obtain information about emotions.
- **Pay attention to the language.** Within the text, you might find vocabulary that you think may be difficult for the student you are working with. As these words come up, stopping to define or describe the words may be necessary. Keep track of the words and use them in context for the student to support thinking holistically. Also, highlight figurative language and words that have multiple meanings as they are used. These aspects of abstract language are generally difficult for our students. Again, focus on them as they appear in the context of the text and translate them into a context that is familiar to the student in order to encourage carryover.
- **Stop and ask questions.** Many questions are embedded within the chapters that you will be able to use, and you may create your own as you move along in order to check for comprehension. Use both open-ended and closed-set questions as you see fit. Give the student time to think about each question, but not so much that he forgets the point. Emphasize by pausing and making a "fresh start" when you are leaving one point and shifting topics. Otherwise, the student might mistake your words and think they are in response to his answers when, in fact, you are moving forward.
- **Think like the student.** The book is full of "thinking stories." Your presentation and attitude should reflect to the student that the important thing is to "think carefully" about the questions as opposed to knowing the answers immediately. For many questions, the answers will vary from student to student. And for many questions, there is more than one correct answer. See if students can think flexibly enough to come up with multiple responses on their own. If not, take the time to show them that there are possibilities they haven't considered.

- **Give positive reinforcement for thoughtful answers.** Many questions that you will be asking are "open-ended," meaning that there might not be *one* correct answer. Let students know what that means and explain that they won't get such answers wrong as long as they are thinking about it. Should students have a great deal of difficulty converging on an appropriate answer, point out to them, using visuals if necessary (this is where quick drawing skills come in), how they might "think about the question differently." Remind them that they are not "wrong" and praise them for doing a great job of following along and making an effort to come up with an answer.

Reading this book with the student or students you would like to support is an excellent way to help them internalize the material.

- **Think about thinking.** Ask students how they arrived at their answers to questions or what made them think about certain comments. Meta-cognitive skills (that is, thinking about thinking) are very important to the social skills process and to improvement in many learning areas. Students need to know how they arrived at an answer so that they can remember the process for the next time. Allow higher-functioning children to debate their answers with you or with each other. Working through challenging moments is important to the thinking process and also just good practice at handling differing opinions.

The way you interact with students when you read the material with them can make a big difference in how they attend, listen, retain, and recall the information.

If you choose to let your child, or a student you are working with, read this book independently, I urge you to still consider yourself a partner or mediator to the student throughout the process. Follow up with the student after he has read each chapter, or between concepts within a chapter. This will help to confirm the student's comprehension of the concepts and encourage generalization. **Repeated practice and reinforcement of the material is the best way to make changes in thought processes.**

Explain to students that they should think of this book as an ongoing project. Although it has a beginning, middle, and end, be sure to reinforce the idea that the dynamic nature of socialization frequently requires that you add to, subtract from, or, in other ways, alter the words and ideas presented. For example, you may find that the student you are working with becomes distracted or has difficulty with comprehension when reading some of the lengthier passages within a chapter.

In such a situation, it is helpful to focus on a visual and change the narrative into a bulleted list that includes the most salient information. Such simple adjustments can be done within a blank note-

book or be prepared ahead of time on the computer. Also, adding relevant pictures or photographs with the student in them is also often helpful.

The activities at the end of each chapter allow students to practice the skills that have been introduced. Although some pages in and of themselves are "practice" worksheets, these activities are included as another way to support this type of social curriculum. These activities are appropriate for:

- One child to use independently and then review with adult support (parent or teacher)
- A teacher or other professional to use with a student on an individualized basis
- A professional to use within a social skills group

It is particularly important to review these practice ideas both before and after they are attempted and completed by the student(s) you are working with. Some things to remember:

- **Make sure that the student is clear about the directions for the activity.** Read the idea in the book and then clarify it with simpler language or visuals if needed.
- **Make sure that the student has all of the materials she needs, index cards, markers, pens, a notebook, journal, or whatever else is necessary to complete the activity.** This is especially important for students who have difficulty planning and organizing. You don't have to get everything for them, but you can prompt them to make a list of things they need before they get started.
- **Do some of the prep work ahead of time if you think it is necessary**. If the practice idea requires finding pictures of emotions on the Internet, you can make the activity easier by finding them yourself and providing choices to the student. If the student is able to, let her search and find pictures, which will make the activity a little more challenging.
- **If an activity says "with a partner," consider yourself the partner.** You can and should participate in the activity or game with the student, especially the first time around. Once the student understands the idea of a game, for example, you might try to facilitate him "playing" it with a peer. Participating in games with peers is generally more difficult for students than practicing with an adult. However, when they are working or playing with a peer, they are practicing the skill and also practicing "real-life" social interactions simultaneously and that is the true test of their skills.

The ideas presented in this book can and should be used in conjunction with other materials. As discussed above, no **one** curriculum, book, or methodology is appropriate for any **one** specific child. The works listed in the bibliography are useful to include in the intervention process.

## Special Considerations for the Adults Using This Book

Although this book is written for children, it is also useful to adults who work or live with children who are diagnosed with autism or a similar disorder by providing information about what kind of skills to target and how to talk to students about them. In addition, practice exercises and suggestions for carryover activities are included, and these are critical ingredients for success.

I encourage parents and educators to use this book as a resource in the following ways:

- Use the book to help you gain a better understanding of what goals might be necessary to target and how to do so, for your child or the children you are working with.
- Use the book to help structure a social skills program. Use the activities at the end of each chapter as exercises within your program.
- Explain to the students you are working with what the book is about and how it can teach and help them remember what they need to know about social interactions. This will support their self-awareness, as well as be a good learning tool for them to refer to when needed.
- Read the book with the child and talk about the topics on each page. Use examples from the child's own real-life experiences to help her further understand the application of the material. Also, use examples from your own experiences to show how you solved similar problems.
- Make the book available for future "planning" moments. For example, use it to review skills and situations ahead of time, such as before a play-date for a young child or before a school dance for a teenager. Hopefully, this will make their social attempts more successful.
- Use the book when the child has faced challenging moments with friends, in school, or other activities, to review what he or she might have done differently.
- Make new pages for the book to personalize it. Add topics that are specific to a given child's needs. Use the format of this guide to help you write the additional information.

Using visual supports with the students in my groups has been a very effective way of helping them retain and internalize the information presented. In addition, students often become so connected to the visuals that they themselves begin to draw or write as a tool to communicate about experiences that they have had. This can further engage them in conversation and the learning experience as a whole. The written word, pictures, drawings, and meaningful colors further reinforce verbal information and often serve as a record to refer back to and to provide further opportunities to connect.

If you are a parent or professional working with a person or a child with social challenges and you are using this book, I highly recommend keeping a blank notebook or sketchpad and a set of markers of various colors close at hand. This way, as you discuss situations or work through the book, you can personalize the material, using information about the students themselves. Drawing pictures is very helpful for those who have more significant problems with auditory comprehension of language. You don't need to be artistic; stick figures work just fine. For more details about how to make this work, use the words and pictures in this book as a model or refer to Carol Gray's excellent resources, *The New Social Stories™ Book: 10th Anniversary Edition* (2010) or *Comic Strip Conversations* (1994).

## How the Book Is Organized

The organization of this book reflects a developmental approach, and the order of certain topics is not arbitrary. For example, developmental information tells us that babies begin to pick up on non-verbal communication as early as 5 months of age. So, information about these important precursors to verbal communication appears within this book prior to the information about verbal communication skills.

However, social learning is a parallel, not a sequential, process. That is why the skills and ideas in this area overlap and need to be continually reinforced to encourage generalization. Social learning is ongoing. Creating and recognizing teaching moments should be an active part of life for the adults who support children with social skills deficits, and these should reflect the ever-changing nature of social interactions. This too supports the child's understanding and integration of the social environment as they get older.

Creating and recognizing teaching moments should be an active part of life for the adults who support children with social skills deficits, and these should reflect the ever-changing nature of social interactions.

## The Big Picture

Arriving at the Big Picture is not as easy as adding up each skill and then automatically knowing what to do. For a child with social deficits, it can be a painstaking task. While it may be harder for some and easier for others, it is effortful for all. The level of impairment in other areas further complicates weaknesses in central coherence, including theory of mind, motivation, emotional regulation, language skills, sensory difficulties, and self-regulation. All of these factors contribute to the relative success of the child.

This book alone does not provide all the answers to the questions we have about the children we work with. But the information and examples presented here can serve as an essential "road map" to finding social success. Most important, it will enhance a child's self-understanding, which is an invaluable tool for success all future endeavors.

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