

## Social Thinking

Social thinking is the user-friendly term for "social cognition."

1. Social thinking develops from birth, much like walking; it is intuitively "hard wired" into most people to work at learning how the social world works.
2. 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. Communication usually develops rapidly once this milestone is reached. Also evolving from this core skill of joint attention are play skills, including cooperation, sharing an imagination and working as part of a group.
3. Being able to play effectively with peers in preschool provides children with a skill base necessary to sit and learn in a classroom.
4. Students with developmental delays in social thinking do not intuitively learn social information the way neurotypical children do. Instead, they have to be cognitively taught how to think socially and understand the use of related social skills.
5. The system of teaching "social thinking and related social skills" was pioneered by Michelle Garcia Winner beginning in the mid 1990s.
6. The approach requires students to learn to think about thinking in their play, classrooms, social relationships, work settings, community, etc.
7. It is best taught to students with near normal to way above normal verbal intelligence who have language skills. This is a language-based learning approach.
8. Core philosophies of social thinking:
  - a. We "think with our eyes" to figure out other people's thoughts, intentions, emotions, plans, etc.
  - b. Our thoughts and emotions are strongly connected. How we think affects how we feel, how we behave affects how others think and feel. If "your friends are people who make you feel good about you over time," then you must learn how to make friends and how to make other people feel good using your actions and your language.
  - c. 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. (This is how we drive our cars!)
  - d. As part of our humanity, each of us is on a daily quest to avoid each other's "weird thoughts." We constantly consider people around us and adjust our behavior to help people have "normal thoughts about us."
  - e. Most of the core social thinking lessons operate BELOW the level of cultures, meaning that all people engage in these thoughts and social behavioral adjustments.
  - f. How we adapt our behavior changes as we age and are in different situations and cultures. The nuance and sophistication of our behaviors (which we refine greatly by 3rd grade and then across our entire lives) is constantly evolving.
  - g. Social thinking is something all of us do every day, all day, even when we are alone in our homes. To understand a TV drama or sitcom one has to think about the character's emotions, thoughts, reactions, etc. Even reading novels requires social thinking.



- h. Social thinking, therefore, plays into our academic world, requiring us to think about the motives and intentions of people we read about in literature and history.
  - i. Social thinking affects us in adulthood. To hold a job, most of us have to adapt our own social behavior based on the perceived thoughts of the people we work and live with.
9. Students with social thinking challenges often have mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) and other diagnoses.
- a. Treatment for social cognitive deficits must also focus on managing anxiety and depression and understanding how social thinking is linked to these.
  - b. Cognitive behavioral teaching strategies, such as social behavior mapping, inform as to how people think about each other.
10. By learning how other people think, our students can understand other people's points of view and why specific social and communication skills are required in different situations.
11. When people learn how to think differently and flexibly they can think anywhere. This is different from just teaching a social skill. Individuals taught only the "skill" often will only perform that skill in the environment in which they learned it.

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