

Connecting Feelings & Emotions to the Situation at Hand

(January and February)

"Joe is a really good example of someone whose body language is almost completely comprehensible to me, and vice versa. We were instantly like open books to each other, in a way so extreme as to be uncomfortable. Too many layers: What we are feeling, what we feel about that, what we want to be feeling, what we want to look like we're feeling, all in a big jumble. As Joe said, it's like being naked, and not always in a pleasant way. I began to understand why there are so many polite conventions among non-autistic people built around sparing each other's feelings: They can often see all that about each other, and it must be a protection and a politeness to avoid being too invasive". -Amanda on Ballastexistenz

When a loved one dies I'm usually very saddened, but don't seem to express my emotions outwardly. When talking about it I usually speak very bluntly, probably causing others to see me as cold or uncaring. Other times I can cry unexpectedly. I have always hated funerals and viewings because there will be a lot of people crying, hugging, shaking hands, and I can never seem to get that close to somebody in a social situation. Though I genuinely want to comfort them I can't seem to get over my social awkwardness.

-17-yr-old male on Wrong Planet

All individuals, including those on the autism spectrum, experience complex emotions and feelings. The *reading* and *expression* of emotions is essential to both communication and social competence. Rapidly expressing emotions and interpreting another's feelings are often challenging processes for individuals with ASD. To further complicate two-way communication, a neurotypical person's understanding of this *difference in processing emotional information* is often limited.

In an attempt to bridge those differences, our goals are as follows:

- to investigate the language and nuances of emotion
- to connect the reading of other's feelings to the context
- to build strategies that support regulating emotion
- to build our own (educator/therapist's) understanding of a complex & rapid processing of emotional information

We begin by modeling the language of emotion, and providing a concrete connection to the cause or reason. For example, "I am feeling impressed with this group's work because you each took on a role and continued to problem solve together even when it was difficult" or, when highlighting a historical event in context: "When it says that Lincoln 'stepped slowly to the front of the platform, with his hands clasped before him, his natural sadness of expression deepened, his head bowed forward, and his eyes cast to the ground'¹, the writer is suggesting that the president was feeling melancholy by the loss of life at Gettysburg and was showing respect for those who had died." By weaving this language into our school day we are highlighting the experience of feelings, modeling how we think about emotion (self-talk), and demonstrating that feelings can be interpreted and have reasons behind them.

The language of emotion extends to *pragmatic language*. We know that facial expressions, body language and prosody (volume, rhythm, rate, intensity) help us to interpret the emotions of others. As neurotypcial thinkers we process this part of language spontaneously, rapidly, unconsciously and in communion with

¹ E.W. Andrews in Johnson, Martin P. *Writing the Gettysburg Address*. University Press of Kansas, October 2013

the verbal message. Individuals with ASD however, may not read these pragmatic components and therefore have difficulty decoding the emotional content of a message. For some students, it may be necessary to let them in on what may actually be a mystery; people's faces, gesture, and bodies send a message and can give you clues about *how a person feels*. This is an excellent way to work on a concrete concept that supports perspective taking. Building our own awareness of the pragmatic aspects of language (where much of the nuances lie), reminds us to highlight this part of our communication.

Understanding basic emotions is the foundation for processing the increasing complexity of emotions. Therefore, we must be aware of students who get stuck in a limited happy-sad-mad construct. We want to connect even these simple emotions to facial expressions, body language, and context and then expand the emotional repertoire. We highlight and explore a more nuanced feeling vocabulary (e.g. exhilarated-incensed-despondent) as students increase their social thinking.

Be mindful of isolating emotions or singular aspects of pragmatic language void of context. Body language and facial expressions change rapidly in interactions and are part of a more complete communicative message. When we isolate aspects of communication, we run the risk of teaching rote identification skills, which are not dynamic or flexible in a variety of situations. Emotions are a part of a larger interaction that includes environment, language, roles, preferences, experience etc. Connecting emotions to the situation at hand (the overall communication context) supports the *thinking* that goes into interpreting emotion. It allows for practice in 'pushing the context button' when reading, expressing, and regulating emotions is necessary.

Peter Vermeulen discusses how emotional expressions in real life contexts

can be very mysterious for individuals with autism in the following example: *Michelle, a high-functioning woman with autism relates that she sees the changes in the faces of others or that she hears the change in voice intonation, but that she does not know what the change means. She always interprets a loud voice as anger, even when the context would lead to another meaning - especially, when two people are too far from each other to communicate with a normal voice volume. As do other people with autism, Michelle uses a fixed connection between expression and emotions: loud voice = anger. She is not able to adjust the meaning that she gives to expression based on the context*². We want to support flexible interpretations of emotions by connecting the message to the specific context.

In regard to exploring and processing feelings and emotions, we cannot overstress the power of our student's increasing self-awareness. Individuals with ASD often have challenges in self-awareness and so may not intuit a connection between actions and emotions. Moreover, students may not easily identify and label emotions within themselves or understand the path that led them to feel a certain way. A focus on self-awareness leads to a fuller range of opinions, an understanding of how our actions impact others, a development of self-regulation and an expansion of the gray areas and complexities of emotions.

SDI supports such as visuals, modeling, highlighting, and reflection serve to reinforce the connection between actions and the emotional experience (cause and effect). These strategies can serve to 'flex' the potential meanings of emotions and build some competence in processing dynamic information. A focus on one's own emotions and how they relate to others (emotional self-awareness) is the

² Vermeulen, P. (2012). *Autism As Context Blindness*. Shawnee Mission, KS AAPC 138-9

first step in discussing relevant ways to regulate one's emotions.

We turn to Zosia Zaks to begin our investigation of the regulation of emotions. Much of this work is done in reflection, meaning that we investigate different over-reactions or under-reactions that we have *had* in the past. In this way we can identify potential situations where regulation is challenging and build strategies to use in the future. Zosia says of **regulation issues**, "the brain makes decisions every single second and based on events, it adjusts our behavior to match a situation. This is how our brains manage or regulate emotions like anger or physical states like hunger. However, sometimes the brain doesn't match reactions to the situation so well." To support emotional regulation, students will explore their own regulation issues, learn simple strategies

as well as the 5-point regulation scale, and gain an understanding of how good regulation of your emotions, is a part of self-advocacy.

As far as reading social cues to identify emotions in others, this may always require more processing time for students on the spectrum. By *recognizing* that there is important information in the pragmatic nuances, one can ask for clarification of another's message when these clues aren't readable. Most importantly then, we are facilitating an awareness that people's feelings are often readable through their facial expressions, body language, and the specific context. Understanding this can empower students to recognize this social fact, attempt to interpret and express a more complete emotional message, and when unclear, to advocate for themselves.

Vocabulary & Concepts

Flexibility

Big - Small Problem/ Glitch™ (*matching response to the level of the problem*)

Size of Problem vs. How it feels

Your body sends a message ↩ (facial expression & body language)

Your face and body are telling me (be specific)

Thinking about what others are thinking™: Perspective Taking
Rules Change with Age™, across Environment, with Different People

It Depends

Explaining emotion *from my perspective*

The Language of Emotion (connecting to the reason)

Pushing the Context Button³

The Hidden Curriculum⁴

Regulation & Self Advocacy

CORE CONCEPTS IN BOLD

™ Michelle G Winner

↩© social underground

³ Peter Vermeulen, (2012) Autism as Context Blindness p360 Shawnee Mission, KS AAPC

⁴ Brenda Smith Myles, Melissa L. Trautman, Ronda L. Schelvan (2004) The Hidden Curriculum Shawnee Mission, KS AAPC