

Unit 4

Making Connections & Communicating with Peers

(March & April)

Because the Nest is an inclusion model it offers an authentic world for exploring social engagement. Here, students are presented with the demands (and potential rewards) of shared learning with peers, connecting with various acquaintances and possibly making friends. Together, SDI and the inclusion-classroom support a growing social awareness of varying perspectives and connected thinking. With this unit we focus on peer interactions in both the shared learning of the classroom and in the therapeutic context of SDI. Our intervention aims to utilize individual strengths in order to build strategies for two-way communication throughout the school day and beyond.

In SDI focus time, students actively engage to explore social concepts and practice problem solving in dyads and small groups. This interactive framework allows the speech therapist to build a more nuanced and individualized social awareness. To aid in carry-over to the classroom, remember that a balance of dyad work and group work *in all settings* is important. Dynamic social thinking is exacting and may be less or more demanding with just one other person. Individual work in the classroom also requires thinking of others while we simply share space. The social world never stops but its demands do fluctuate.

An awareness of social communication is built through highlighting connections and social concepts live, in a variety of contexts. We 'flex' SDI concepts throughout the day, in order to keep the social layer on our students' radar. We believe that this rich and flexible exposure to thinking socially is what supports true generalization of communication skills.

To promote positive peer interactions, remember that our students are sometimes more comfortable with adults, who are often forgiving of social mistakes. Adults are generally more patient listeners and attempt to make the associations and connections for the neuro-diverse social thinker.

(As adults we should be aware of the repairs that we make). At the same time, our students often do show interest in their peers and demonstrate the same proverbial eye rolling about adults that their NT peers do. Our students may be interested in others, but unable to communicate their interest. They may be too direct with their comments and observations in conversation. Perhaps they talk too much about their interests or alternately, rarely share their thinking. Adolescence and autism bring all sorts of complexity to interactions! No matter the individual profile however, adults can facilitate the building of social awareness, which supports navigating the social world. In SDI, we strike a balance between adult 'supported' social interactions, and more naturalistic and interactive social engagement with peers. In the latter, we step back, using strategies that encourage interaction without directing or leading.

In the Nest, we may have some socially aloof or resistant communicators. While these students may not be easily engaged, we continue to build an awareness and understanding of social world, of perspective taking, and of social cues to help develop a competence in thinking through social interactions when situations demand it.

As in the three previous units, we incorporate engagement and experience sharing into all goal areas because it is essential to intrinsic motivation. Students must not be simply 'told' how to be social but instead they must be given the opportunity to actively explore and experience these concepts. To support social engagement and to organize collaboration educators find ways to set up roles, partnerships or teams. Students can be given jobs in pairs so that the completion of a task is dependent upon teamwork. Assigning roles provides clear expectations about how peers can work together. Again, equally important is to allow students time to work individually while simply sharing space. Sometimes just sharing space is challenging enough.

Because thinking about others rapidly and fluently is challenging for our students, educators highlight perspective-taking in all contexts. Taking another's perspective is essential to shared thinking and our student's can never get too much exposure to it. Consider that peers in middle school may subconsciously have quite high expectations of each other; expecting partners to both listen and think about what they are saying, and then potentially add comments, questions and novel thoughts. To communicate this way, one must first process the perspective of the speaker, and *then* integrate a partner's thinking with one's own in order to add on to the shared thought, and to keep this going throughout a conversation. Oh, one must also process this information and respond within *seconds*. Let's not forget that adolescents are also communicating with each other in *teenager talk*, using text acronyms, and making lots of changes in prosody to express themselves, which can be new, confusing, or just simply missed.

I've often watched with amazement the translators in the United Nations, listening in one language *while* speaking the translation in another language. Translating for many requires much more processing time than it does for the professional, not to mention the focus and brain power that it demands. Imagine that your students are attempting such a feat but with social language (processing, decoding, responding). Consider that they are being asked to not only translate social cues and others' thinking into meaningful information but to also process and respond in the moment. This variation in processing is why we *take the time* to highlight perspective taking (our own, a character's, a historical figure's, another student's) and use language that recognizes social cues.

Whether or not a student is savvy and rapid in perspective taking, an awareness that there is an *expectation* from others that we consider their thinking, is invaluable information. This understanding can motivate one to find clues (body language, facial expressions) to what others may be thinking, to consider the present context that supports decoding perspectives, and ultimately to ask for what you need in challenging social situations. Knowing there are social expectations is powerful: it can buy you time and lead you to the right questions to further communication. Awareness is the first

step in self-advocacy. With this knowledge and by asking for what you need, interactions may look different, however the responsibilities of communication can then be placed on both partners and a unique connection can be made.

In SDI another key to motivation, and ultimately to self-advocacy, is helping students to understand their own strengths and challenges *in social communication*. Throughout the year we have built an awareness of individual strengths and challenges, and in this unit we further that awareness as it directly relates to being social. When student's can identify what is challenging for them, we can then develop compensatory strategies for communication.

Discussing each student's abilities in social development during case conferencing allows teams to support newfound communication strategies in the varying contexts of their classrooms. In SDI focus time, students will be investigating hidden social rules (Hidden Curriculum¹) and will breakdown relevant social scenarios through social-autopsies, reflections, video replay and comic stripping. More nuanced social concepts may be explored, such as "reading-the-room" and "passing the baton". These relate directly to thinking socially in order to collaborate and engage in the classroom, so can be highlighted as relevant to your students during each subject area.

The ability to 'size-up' or appraise a situation is helpful to successful social communication and is also one of the core challenges of autism. Appraisal allows us to consider the **context** and let it guide our interactions. We can support this in our students by modeling our thinking when we enter a situation, which includes an awareness of the context. Additionally, we note and investigate multiple ways to respond, and highlight multiple perspectives. We focus on helping students first become more aware of their own preferences and opinions, and second to consider the different preferences of others. Showing interest in different thoughts on the

¹ Myles, Tautman, Schelvan The Hidden Curriculum: Practical Solutions for Understanding Unstated Rules in Social Situations 2004

same topic celebrates various ideas and underlines that they can all exist together. Due to the focused, yet somewhat inflexible nature of autism, our students can think that their solution or opinion is the only answer, which challenges positive interactions. A singular solution or idea based on singular thinking leads to rigidity. Therefore we explore the concepts of collaboration and compromise. By expanding on potential ways to solve a problem we support flexible thinking.

Lastly, we cannot talk about peer interactions in adolescence without considering friendship. SDI allows us the opportunity to support social communication as it relates to making friends. Adolescents are finding their way through a more complicated world of friendship than they have yet to (or may ever) experience. While rules and nuances of friendship are endless, we can help to organize and identify issues specific to our students.

An example of a challenging hierarchy is the varying degrees of a friend. Black and white thinking states that there are friends or enemies. It's not that simple however, and there are multiple possibilities in between: there are best friends, evolving friends, frenemies, acquaintances, and just kids that I say hello to most days. Thinking within these grey areas and understanding this nuance improves communication. Therefore, through an investigation in SDI focus time into friendship we identify any confusion, explore and organize thinking.

Issues can range from how and when to say sorry, to using tact when being honest. It may be about 'netiquette', or bullying as it relates to the levels of friendship. All of this is about improving communication. Concepts are determined by individual group needs. As with all of our work in SDI, it is about shedding light on expectations and giving our student's the choice to engage and self-advocate. Therefore, individuals with autism should inform any investigation into friendship. Below are resources from autistic individuals that explore what is complicated about friendship and ways to navigate social world.

Holliday Willey, Liane Asperger Syndrome in Adolescence: Living With the Ups, the Downs and Things in Between Jessica Kingsley Publishers, Philadelphia PA 2003

Jackson, Luke Freaks, Geeks, & Sperger Syndrome: A User Guide to Adolescence Jessica Kingsley Publishers, Philadelphia PA 2002

Kraus, J.D. The Aspie Teen's Survival Guide: Candid Advice for Teens, Tweenes, and Parents, from a Young Man with Asperger's Syndrome Future Horizons 2010

Moss, Haley Middle School: The Stuff Nobody Tells You About (A Teenage Girl with High-Functioning Autism Shares Her Experiences) AAPC, KS 2010

O'Toole, Jennifer Cook, The Asperkid's Secret Book of Social Rules, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, Philadelphia PA 2013

(additional resources by Neurotypical writers)
Crooke, P. & Winner, M.G. Socially Curious and Curiously Social San Jose CA 2009

Vocabulary & Concept Examples

Social Clues

Brain match, Connected Thoughts, "Thinking the same thing"
Overlapping Thought↔

Friend/Acquaintance/People files™
Social Detective Work™

Thinking about what others are thinking™:
Perspective Taking

Sharing your Thinking vs. Keeping a Thought a Thought↔

We-Thinking (Group Thinking) vs Me-Thinking
Collaboration, Teamwork

Reading the Room↔
Passing the Baton↔
It Depends (Context Highlight),
Pushing the Context Button²

CORE CONCEPTS IN BOLD

™ Michelle G Winner

↔© social underground

² Peter Vermeulen, (2012) Autism as Context Blindness p360
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