

## Awareness, Responsibility, and Advocacy

May and June

*Another aspect of (transitions for teenagers) is that skills that have been already attained can be variable. Why is this? Well, every person has a finite amount of cognitive resources at any point in time to use for things like problem-solving, navigating barriers and making sense of the input from the senses. In most people, a lot of these tasks are done almost completely subconsciously. In contrast, those of us on the autism spectrum have to utilize a lot more conscious thought and working memory to deal with such things. Because of that, navigating a new situation can easily tax our resources beyond what we can handle. It's like the brain is a bucket that fills with too much water: something winds up going over the side, and what "goes over the side" may vary. |*

*- Lynne Soraya*

Advocate Jesse Saperstein, discusses transitions, saying, "The analogy I use is when you are trying to do a puzzle, a really big one, you start to get the edges, you fill in the gaps, you learn what colors go where and then you are three-fourths of the way done and someone, a little kid or dog, comes and they mess it up and knock it off the table. You scream with frustration. That is what transitions are like for those of us on the autism spectrum."

Because many of our students do find transitions challenging, SDI supports developing strategies for taking on change. Over the next two months, big transitions are afoot such as completing a grade, saying goodbye to teachers and peers, changing routines and beginning summer activities. Throughout the year we have supported problem solving and *daily* transitions. We built appraisal and cognitive flexibility for communication and academic learning. We brought context to the forefront when exploring social concepts in order to 'flex' thinking across contexts.

<sup>1</sup>Soraya, Lynne *How To Support Teenages with Autism Through Transitions*, [www.specialeducationguide.com/blog/](http://www.specialeducationguide.com/blog/)

Unit 5 is a reflection on individual strengths and challenges, the importance of context when problem solving, and on learned strategies that support communicating through transitions. We encourage an awareness of challenges, successes and competencies, while continuing our work on self-advocacy.

Through SDI, in preparation for a transition to the next grade, we help students identify 'best-fit' personal strategies. This awareness supports more fluid transitioning, because it allows students to start *from a place of competence*. Reflecting on both challenges and effective tools allows us to further highlight the connection between learned concepts and new environments.

Each student's goals are personalized to best support their present social communication abilities. Our students may be considering specific hidden social 'rules' and how they change depending on the context or perhaps they are learning to 'read the room'. No matter the focus, this awareness is what

ultimately makes self-advocating possible. Therefore, students are active participants in identifying what they need to engage, communicate and transition. Therapists consider individual perspective taking abilities to support realistic strategy identification and goal setting. Identifying what type of perspective takers our students are is just another way that we individualize support in the Nest. *If you know one person with autism, you know one person with autism.* The flexible framework of SDI allows therapists and educators to target each student's individual social development. Michelle Winner's Social Communication Profile<sup>1</sup> is an example of a tool to help identify each student's unique social profile.

A reflection on the year's progress, allows us to identify learned strategies that promote effective communication. Reviewing social articles, role-plays, comic strips, investigated concepts, group projects and any personal strategies that have been developed *with the student* will build awareness that there are multiple tools for engaging with others. We can highlight strategies that are successful or if necessary, work with students to develop personal goals for the next year. So, together we are *identifying* relevant strategies, *reviewing* successes, and *planning* for the transition to next year. Emphasizing what strategies have been learned and successfully utilized, supports competence and carryover to the next grade.

We continue to strengthen and practice cognitive flexibility: the ability to understand when things are 'good enough', to be comfortable in the grey areas and with less concrete thinking. It includes developing new strategies when

previous ones no longer work. By focusing on the ability to adjust to change, we further encourage self-regulation and self-monitoring. Within SDI sessions, through feedback and reflection, we continue to highlight the social relevance of actions in order to demonstrate integrated uses of flexibility.

In the four previous units, we have investigated self-advocacy through the work of Zosia Zaks. For Unit 5 each student's self-advocacy style is explored. While still individualizing, for our 6<sup>th</sup> graders we may highlight one or two successful strategies and look into relevant scenarios about advocating for better communication. For our 8<sup>th</sup> graders who are preparing for high school, we foster clarity about what it means to advocate, when and how self-advocacy can be used, identify personal styles and strategies, and hopefully lock-in a strong sense of each student's role as self-advocate. Remember, self-advocating is an essential part of communication for our students in the school environment but also throughout life.

As with all things in social communication, everyone develops his or her own way to self-advocate. Zosia discusses self-advocacy styles, saying, "*Some self-advocates are bold. They speak out whenever they need help or something is wrong. Other self-advocates are quieter. They may come from cultures where it isn't polite to speak out. Or they may feel shy. Whether you are protesting at the White House in Washington, D.C., or trying to get through math class, knowing your self-advocacy style will help you pick and design techniques, tools, and strategies that make sense for you.*" In SDI students will work to describe and discuss how their personality influences their self-advocacy style.

This unit therefore has goals for both the students and the educators. The *student*

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<sup>1</sup> Winner Crooke & M<sup>1</sup> adrigal Social Communication Learning Styles as a Guide to Treatment and Prognosis: The Social Thinking-Social Communication Profile™2011

will be given the opportunity to identify successes, take ownership of effective strategies and consider their advocacy style in order to take on upcoming transitions. Each *educator* will consider the social developmental level of the student, differentiate social supports to individual needs, and encourage self-advocacy. In this way, we are supporting the carry over of successful strategies, language and concepts to each student's next school environment.

We recommend that you look over the units that have been most beneficial to each student. Revisit what was successful and highlight these areas as successes and as tools that they now

have to be more engaged, to share an imagination, to be better social thinkers and to advocate for their own communication preferences. Also revisit the GPSs as a team. For next year's team, understanding where the child was functioning come September will be invaluable to supporting social development. This self-reflection will guide the new team on where to begin the next school year.

Lastly, this time of reflection should have an element of celebration. Positive observations and enjoyment are a powerful way to lock-in flexible strategies and build competence. Have fun!

### SDI Vocabulary & Concept Review<sup>o</sup>™ ↵

Expected/ Unexpected™  
(awareness & choice)

#### **My Role, My Place in a Group**

Flexibility (highlighting)  
"Good Enough"

It Depends.... (Context Highlighting)

#### **Pushing the Context Button<sup>2</sup>**

Rules Change Across Environment/  
People (context!)

Social Clues (Gathering Information)

Downloading vs. Uploading

#### **Teamwork and Collaboration**

Whole Body Listening™

(social expectations) vs.

Knowing What I Need to Listen

Your body sends a message↵

(facial expression & body language)

*Her eyes (face, body, tone) are telling me...*

Body & Brain in the Group™

**Smart Guesses™** about Intention

Reading the Room

Join the Action (not change the action)↵

Whopping Topic Change™

Pass the Baton↵

#### **Connected Thinking**

"Brainmatch" "Thinking the same thing"

#### **Perspective Taking**

Sharing Your Thinking vs.

Keeping a Thought a Thought↵

Overlapping Thought↵

#### **Group Thinking/ Group Thought**

**Thinking Alone vs. Thinking**

**Together**

Hidden Social Highlight↵

The Hidden Curriculum<sup>3</sup>

Figuring out someone's plan/

Sharing your plan

Friend/Acquaintance/People files™

Strengths Challenges Self-Advocacy

Size of Problem vs. How it feels

Different or Multiple solutions

Explaining emotion from my perspective

#### **The Language of Emotion**

(connecting to the reason)

#### **CORE CONCEPTS IN BOLD**

™ Michelle G Winner

↵ social underground

<sup>2</sup> Peter Vermeulen, (2012) Autism as Context Blindness p360 Shawnee Mission, KS AAPC

<sup>3</sup> Brenda Smith Myles, Melissa L. Trautman, Ronda L. Schelvan (2004) The Hidden Curriculum Shawnee Mission, KS AAPC