

“**Being in a group** is more complicated than most of us realize. For neurotypical students, these abilities evolve from birth. However, our students with social cognitive learning challenges do not experience a natural development of the skills needed to co-exist easily in a group.”  
*Michelle Garcia Winner*

The beginning of the school year is a time for adjustment. Whether new to the ASD program or returning to the next grade, each student will be a part of a new environment, new routines, new schedules, and interactions with new peers and educators. Though children with ASD may function more easily alone, alone is not the reality of the school day. At the most basic social level, being in school requires an ability to share space. We help our kids become comfortable with their place in each new group of which they will be a part, by helping them to understand what others expect of them as a member of a group. Equally as essential, we discover from our students’ point of view what they need to comfortably engage with others. Understanding our place in each group is a foundation for managing change and transitions as the year progresses.

To learn with your peers you first and foremost need to *recognize* the group in order to find your place in it. This unit addresses each child’s role in partnerships, in their small social group of four, and in the larger CTT class. It is the first unit of instruction as these abilities are essential to sharing an imagination (shared learning), developing social thinking and having access to academics within today’s public school classroom. Additionally, each child’s place in their family and community should be considered to promote the concepts

of role, group, and that rules may change from one group to the next.

This is also a time when the team of teachers and providers begin to develop relationships with the student. In these first weeks, the students learn to look to the adults around them as guides. They also are introduced to the adults as listeners to their unique way of thinking. This developing relationship can serve as a reference and grounding to the child’s new roles in the larger relationships of the classroom.

At the start of each school year, rules and routines are established and are vital to the success of any classroom. These serve as a structure for group functioning and also as touchstones for our students to understand classroom expectations. While important, rules do not *promote interaction and engagement with others*. The focus of this social development unit is to learn together with ones peers in a classroom structure, to encourage engagement in groups, to support students in establishing ownership within their school environment and to feel successful in becoming a part of each group in which they belong.

From a relational point of view, experience sharing (not verbal retelling of an experience but actually **sharing** an experience) is the primary motivator for successfully being a part of a group. Therefore we label moments of shared enjoyment, incorporate anticipation into lessons, set up partnerships as well as teams and collaborations, we concentrate on what it means to listen with your whole body and we *celebrate!* Teachers and providers highlight shared experiences by celebrating moments of success and sharing positive emotions throughout the school day. This will promote an awareness of both the people around them and the social expectation that we are

participants in the groups in which we find ourselves.

As educators we consider each student's unique place in his or her group/s and then facilitate engagement to promote shared learning. If we integrate our students in this way then in the words of IDEA, we are giving each child greater access to the curriculum. As we weave favorable social experiences into the student's day, we establish a necessary prerequisite for gathering information from people and from the world. *This* is the area where the child with ASD lacks savvy. Recognizing your place in a group is both learnable and vital to our students' success in school, as well as throughout their lives.

**Vocabulary & Concepts K-2nd**

Expected/ Unexpected Behaviors

*Listening with Your Whole Body*

Part of the Group/ Out of the Group

*Big Problem/ Little Problem/Glitch*

*Teamwork*

*"We-ness"*

*We're connected*

I'm thinking about you

**Additional for 3rd-5<sup>th</sup>+**

*Keep my Body & Brain in the Group*

*Body/ Brain Rolled Out of the Group*

*Social Clues*

*My Team of Unthinkables (4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup>+)*

*Downloading (5<sup>th</sup>+)*

*Brain Match*