> *"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 emotions and feelings through experiences. However, both the expression of emotions and the interpretation of other's feelings appear different for individuals with ASD and neurotypical individuals.

In an attempt to bridge those differences, our goal is to put the *language of emotion,* which is varied and nuanced, on our students' radar. We will also encourage engagement and investigation that highlights emotions: what they look like, how we identify them, the importance of considering them in context and

eventually, *make* inferences about them. Emotions inform social interactions through self-awareness, an evaluation of your actions and consideration of how they affect others, and a regulation and adjustment of one's actions based on another's perspective. Therefore a focus on one's own emotions and how they relate to others (emotional self awareness) is highlighted in our foundation work in Kindergarden-2nd and investigated when working on social cognition in 3rd grade (earliest) and the later grades.

Individuals with ASD often have challenges in self-awareness and so may not intuit *a connection between* actions and emotions. Moreover, it may be challenging to identify and label emotions within themselves or understand the path that led them to feel a certain way. We start by modeling the language of emotion, and providing a concrete connection to the context or reason. For example, "I am feeling proud *because* you all worked very hard on drafting and revising your personal narratives. *Because* of all your work, I feel excited to show your parents your published stories". 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 we attach feelings to experiences (episodic memory).

The *language of emotion* and how actions can affect feelings include: words that identify feelings, ordering the intensity of an emotion, and examining feelings of characters in stories and later people in social scenarios. Literature or role-play can provide a framework of understanding. Again it is important to name the emotion and *tie it to the context*. If an emotion is heightened, we can review the experience at a later time to give the student an opportunity to relate the emotion to the situation and not as something isolated from the

experience. Through story, comic stripping, self talk and role-play we can model how actions affect feelings. This is a cause and effect equation to be delivered as concrete non-judgmental information. (e.g. "When Josie won the race, Joshua looked very disappointed. I know he practiced very hard for that race.) Remember, an understanding of how emotions affect others is part of perspective-taking. We are building a deeper understanding of emotions to support the perspective taking process. The *goal* is not behavior change. In SDI the goal is experience sharing and relevant social thinking which ultimately can lead to a change in behavior.

In regard to understanding feelings, we cannot overstress the power of our student's increasing self-awareness. 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. Visuals, modeling and highlighting serve to reinforce the connection between the actions and the emotional experience.

The language of emotion extends to pragmatic language. Individuals with ASD may have difficulty both attending to and reading the facial expression of others. This is likely to affect the ability to decode other's emotions. To interpret an emotion visually, one must construct salient aspects of facial features and body language. For some children, it may be necessary to let them in on what may actually be a big secret; *people's faces, gesture, and bodies can give you clues about how a person feels*. For our older students who are focusing on social cognitive work, this is part of being a social detective and building an awareness of the steps of perspective taking.

We do highlight facial expressions and tie them to emotions. Our students need to develop an understanding of basic emotions and their connection to context (environment, situation, others etc) in order to provide a foundation for those of increasing complexity. Some children may appear to comprehend a wider range of emotions because they use the feelings vocabulary they have heard or read.

Nevertheless, using the correct (and sometimes impressive) label does not always mean that there is a true understanding of a more complicated emotion.

On the other hand, after instruction on basic emotions, we have noticed that some children stick closely to the happy-sad-mad world of emotion. Therefore, it is helpful to connect even these simple emotions to facial expressions and body language and then expand-on the emotional repertoire. We explore a more nuanced feeling vocabulary as students increase their social understanding. This in turn can support the child's growing understanding that there are degrees of feelings. There are many opportunities throughout the day for highlighting and for "teachable feeling moments".

Be mindful of isolating emotions and facial expressions. While basic identification is important to start, facial expressions change rapidly in interactions and are part of a more complete communicative message. We consider emotions and expressions as part of a larger interaction that includes context, environment, language, status etc. Therefore it is essential to connect emotional expression to the overall communication exchange.

Reading social cues to identify emotions can remain challenging for individuals on the spectrum throughout their lives. Most importantly then, we are facilitating **an awareness** that people's feelings are often readable through their facial expressions and body language. Understanding this can empower the older student to recognize this social fact, and self advocate for themselves. By recognizing that others may be sharing feelings through body language but they may not be able to read these clues, they can then share this challenge and ask for a more direct expression of feelings from others.

It is helpful for all team members to use similar vocabulary with each child in relation to feelings and emotions. When it is essential that our students understand a feeling or emotion in the moment, this is a time to use directive language and to be clear, concise and connect to the context.

2

Emotions are often complicated and transitory, therefore it is absolutely essential that we build rather than confuse a complicated concept.

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<u>Vocabulary & Concepts K-2nd</u>
Flexibility
Big Problem/ Little Problem/ Glitch (matching response to the level of the problem)
Size of Problem vs. How it feels
Feeling Clues (facial expression & body language)
Your face and body are telling me *(be specific)*

<u>Additional for 3rd-5th</u>
Thinking about what others are thinking
Rules Change with Age
Dealing with the Boring Moment
Social Clues: Being a Social Detective

<u>Middle & High School</u>
Investigating HOW "that changed the way I feel"
Explaining emotion from my perspective
The Steps of Perspective Taking[1]
Discussion: The Hidden Curriculum[2]

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[1] Winner, M (2005) <u>Think Social: A Social Thinking Curriculum for School-Age Students</u>
[2] Brenda Smith Myles, Melissa L. Trautman, Ronda L. Schelvan (2004) <u>The Hidden Curriculum</u> Shawnee Mission, KS AAPC

Turn Key Questions for
Unit 3 *Identifying and Understanding Feelings and Emotions*

1. Discussion on the quotes. This is a change in our perspective of intervention. We acknowledge that our students have challenges but it is important to remember that this is a difference in feelings and emotions as opposed to our students NOT feeling.

2. Language of emotion: for all grades, **highlighting** emotion is key. How can we do this in read-aloud? During academics? What does this look like in 1st grade, sound like in 5th grade? Get ideas from different grades so we can see how this looks different.

3. Review Self Awareness

4. Stress that identifying feelings and emotions is not mostly about using a comic strip to show a child how their behavior/actions hurt someone else's feelings. A student must first recognize feelings, understand what a thought is, and have some ability to take another's perspective. We often jump to showing students how their actions offend another, and expect change from this lesson. Think about the tools that are needed to go through the cognitive process of the cause and effect of your actions. (listed in Unit)

5. Why is it important to work on emotion *in context*? How do we do this? Explain how we do this in an SDI session.

6. What is the connection between emotions and pragmatics (facial expression and body language)? There are some similarities in the pragmatic challenges of those who are blind and those who are on the spectrum. Think out loud about this with your team.