Unit 4:
Peer Interactions
(March through April)

LOOK BOTH WAYS
(PERSPECTIVES. THERE ARE A LOT OF 'EM)

When focusing on peer interactions for the child with ASD it is relevant that the DOE Nest Program is an *inclusion* model. Inclusion sets the stage for peer interactions, learning alongside classmates, and gathering information from both neurotypical and Nest students. Therefore the inclusion model aids in targeting some core challenges of autism in the naturalistic environment of the classroom. With this unit we focus on peer interactions both in the shared learning of the classroom and in the therapeutic context of SDI.

An awareness of peer interactions starts with highlighting connections and social moments LIVE, in order to put what students are already doing on their radars as 'social!'. In early grades, particularly Kindergarten, we capitalize on engagement with adults to support interactions with peers and to build competence. Many of our students with ASD appear more comfortable with adults who are often forgiving of social mistakes. Adults are generally more patient listeners and often attempt to make the associations and connections for the emerging social thinker. (As adults we should be aware of the repairs that we make). Therefore it is important for the educator to help students explore learned concepts with both adults and same-age peers. We strike a balance between 'supported' social interactions with adults, and more naturalistic and interactive social engagement with peers. Educators support the generalization of concepts to natural contexts and provide opportunities for peer to peer problem solving, social moments, and collaboration.

By working in dyads and small groups for social relational activities, highlighting teamwork, and modeling social problem solving we lay the foundation for more related and nuanced peer interactions as students mature. *Remember that dyad work is important at all ages* as dynamic social thinking is exacting and may be less demanding with just one other person. Also, one to one interactions can be chosen throughout a lifetime, and therefore should be given as much weight in our intervention as our SDI groups and full classroom group.

We highlight "thinking about others[1]" to build an awareness of perspective-taking, which can be challenging for our students to remember during a dynamic exchange. In early elementary we are bringing to the surface such early aspects of perspective taking as: *thinking about others*, *the eyes and thinking* "Sam is looking at the chocolate, so I know he is thinking about the chocolate.", *remembering* things about others, and *making connections*. In upper elementary and middle school, children may have higher expectations of their peers socially; expecting partners to both *listen* and *think* about what they are saying. At a subconscious level, people often expect a nuanced exchange to occur that includes comments, questions, disagreements, or a continuation of their thinking. To do this, one must consider the perspective of the speaker then integrate a partner's thinking with one's own in order to continue the shared thought.

Whether or not a social thinker is savvy and rapid in perspective taking, an *awareness* of the expectation to consider other's thoughts is valuable information for our Nest students. From there they can learn about clues to other's thinking, build up more awareness of perspective taking in context, and ultimately self-advocate for themselves in challenging social situations. Awareness is to first step in self-advocacy.

To clarify the perspective-taking piece, in K-2 we are simply putting the concepts of 'thinking' and 'thinking about others' on our student's radar

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[1] Winner, MG Think Social, 2005

through modeling and highlighting. This will help to build an awareness of social world. By supporting our student's ability to attend, reference others, coordinate actions with others, and share experiences in the early elementary grades we introduce active perspective taking and thinking about others' thinking. In grades 3rd-5th and in middle school, we continue modeling and highlighting, and for those who are socially ready we begin to directly investigate social cognitive concepts. We do this by noting *point of view* and different *perspectives*, exploring age-relevant social concepts and hidden social 'rules', and by having students self-reflect and discuss what they need to be social thinkers. Here we highlight hidden rules[2] and we breakdown social scenarios in multiple contexts.

Intervention throughout the year has provided a groundwork for adults to decrease their level of facilitation during activities as the students become more aware of their 'place in the group' and their role in a small group.

As in the three previous units, we incorporate experience sharing into every goal area. To support this social engagement within both therapeutic times and throughout the school day, educators can look for ways to set up roles, partnerships or teams. Students can be given jobs in pairs so that the completion of a task is dependant upon teamwork. Group-work encourages collaboration, while assigning roles provides clear expectations about *how* peers can work together. *Equally important is to allow students time to work individually while simply sharing space.* Group work demands conscious cognitive energy for individuals with ASD and can be taxing for students. (This is essential information for *the educators'* perspective taking). Sometimes just sharing space is challenging enough. Remember that 'social' is any time that you share space with another person and does not mean constant verbal engagement and problem solving.

The ability to 'size-up' or appraise a situation is necessary in both social interactions and when solving problems with others. In both cases, we build appraisal by modeling our thinking when we enter a situation,

noting and investigating the multiple ways to respond, and acknowledging 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. We demonstrate that people can have different thoughts on the same topic and that *this is okay*. Due to the focused, yet somewhat inflexible nature of autism, our students can think that their solution or opinion is the only answer. This can challenge positive interactions. A singular solution 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*, which is necessary for shared learning, group problem solving and social interactions.

As guides in the social world, we are on a mission to find what motivates and interests our students. SDI's social relational work serves to build competence in our students through experience sharing and an awareness of each student's unique strengths in social communication. Ideally, as students develop as social thinkers, they become increasingly motivated through positive interactions with both peers and adults. An *investigation* of strengths and areas of interest will be essential supports in later elementary and middle school. We teach through strengths and preferred interests while building an understanding of what is 'expected' in the social world of different grades. In other words we must, no matter the grade, help to keep an age-relevant social view on our students' radar and a sharp eye on what motivates them as they change over time. For those that remain socially aloof or are resistant communicators, an *awareness* and understanding of social world, of perspective taking, of pragmatics and non-verbal cues can help develop a competence in *thinking through social interactions* when a situations demands it.

> **Vocabulary & Concept *Examples***
> Making Connections
> Flexible Thinking
> Big Problem/ Little Problem/ Glitch (multiple solutions)
> *Social Clues, Teamwork*
> **Additional for *3rd*-5th**
> *Brain match*, Connected Thoughts
> Friend/ People files™
> *Thinking about what others are thinking*
> Social Detective Work™
> Sharing your Thinking/Keeping a Thought a Thought
> Collaboration, *"It Depends" (Context Highlighting)*

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[2] Myles, Tautman, Schelvan <u>The Hidden Curriculum: Practical Solutions for Understanding Unstated Rules in Social Situations</u> 2004