



# Think Social!

A Presentation about Social Cognition and  
Michelle G. Winner's  
Social Thinking Curriculum  
ASA Phoenix Chapter January 26, 2010  
Sue Lerner, PhD., Presenter

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# Introduction

- Licensed clinical psychologist
- Independent practice of psychology in Austin, TX. 1994-2001
- School Psychology
- Post-doctoral training in family/couples therapy
- Former Asst. Professor UT at Austin
- Former middle school teacher
- MOM of 18 year old with Asperger's Syndrome



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Each of our families has a unique story. Some of you know my daughter's story. In our case, it took more than 7 years of to get a correct diagnosis and to connect to strategies that helped. My daughter was misdiagnosed and treated for several childhood mental disorders before we knew that she had an autistic disorder. When she was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome at age 15, it was almost impossible to find a school program with the specialized instruction that she needed to progress. **Anne is intellectually gifted, but she has poorly regulated sensory and emotional systems, rigid thinking styles and significant social cognition problems.** What you see in this slide is a digital painting that Anne made for her dad this month. It is a painting of our dog.

My daughter's special needs have changed my life as I'm sure your loved one on the spectrum has changed your life. When Anne became more independent and I was able to re-enter my profession after a several year hiatus . **I set out to sub-specialize in autism and social cognitive deficits for 2 reasons:**

- 1.I knew the terrain well since I had spearheaded my daughter's journey.
- 2.I wanted to provide things that worked so that others could benefit early.

When I found Michelle Winner's Social Thinking, it was a "light bulb" epiphany type of thing for me. This is cognitive behavioral teaching (or therapy) that is adapted and translated for people with social cognitive disabilities.

I knew as a psychologist that CBT can be very effective, but I also knew that it was too abstract for people with developmental delays like my daughter.

# Plan

- Why we need more than social skills instruction.
- Social skills definition
- Multiple intelligences and thinking socially
- Disorders of social functioning
- Help?
- Social Thinking basics
- Social Thinking vocabulary
- Future directions and limitations

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# Why We Need More Than Social Skills Instruction

- Social skills, friendship skills, social intelligence, social competence, social cognition?
- What do these mean and why is this so hard?



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What do we mean when we say someone has good social skills? What do we mean when someone says that our loved one needs social skills instruction?

Can you make a picture of “good social skills” in your head? How does this look? Think about this for a minute. You can’t put this into one image because they’re **transactional**. This means the actions (or even non-actions) are **LINKED to other things**.

In fact, they’re linked to other actions AND to hidden rules about what those actions mean in that context.. **Actions are linked to expectations about those actions**. These expectations change with the contexts.

For example, we teach our kids on the autistic spectrum to look at others when they speak. Where should they look? At the nose? Forehead? Chin? If your child is lucky, the teacher points out that they should look at the other person’s eyes. **But**, what about blinking? And when does a look become a stare? And do you look at teachers, bosses, friends, parents, peers in the same way? Obviously not! Also, can’t good social skills also be “not doing” something like not blurting our answers in class. But sometimes, it’s ok to blurt out. How’s a person supposed to know all this stuff?

I could continue but you see that these **nuances** can apply to all types of skilled social behaviors: handshakes, personal spaces, conversations. Etc.

Consider this definition “Having good social skills is when people share their space with others effectively”.

# Men In Black Exam Scene

- [Men in Black Exam Scene \(You Tube\)](#)

(Click on Hyperlink to view video clip.  
Must have internet connection to  
play.)

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This clip from Men in Black is an excellent example of how complex social “stuff” can be. In this scene, actor Will Smith is an NYPD officer applying for a job he knows very little about. Watch his and other behaviors as they confront challenges in the differing social environments. What makes him successful? Apart from humor, would you say he’s successful socially as he’s taking the test as well as when he’s shooting at the terrorist?

# Good Social Skills

- Abstract and complex.
- Involve sequential processes of observing others, thinking about them, and adapting your behaviors based on judgments.



Our terminology of “good social skills” has already led us astray. This is more complicated stuff than professionals originally thought.

For the most part, schools are still trying to catch up in this area of the curriculum.

For the remainder of my talk, I plan to discuss a framework (paradigm) that seems to be a better explanation of what’s necessary for success and independence in life with others.

For most people, learning social cognition is an intuitive process. It occurs naturally occurs from infancy through life. People with social cognitive deficits do not learn this vital information. They need specialized instruction, coaching and extra practice just like someone with dyslexia needs specialized instruction and practice in order to learn to read.

# Social Skills Defined

- “Being able to share space with others effectively”.
- 
- “To adapt effectively in different contexts
  - within the same environment
  - across environments”.

Michelle G. Winner, 2008  
Workshop in Alamo, CA.



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For example, in a classroom, it's not just about when to speak when not to speak. It's also about how to sit quietly at your desk and pay attention or at least look like you're paying attention.

How about on the phone, it's what to say, how fast and clearly but also, when to **pause** and for how long.

And don't forget the purpose of the call in the first place: the INFORMATIVE CONTENT like “where are we going to meet and when?”

Finally, don't forget to cue that the call is finishing by saying goodbye or some sort of verbal ending.

One more, how do you know what to wear to a job interview? Most of us have learned over time that certain circumstances require specialized attention. You want the interviewers to think positively about you so you wear a tie or a suit and you talk about stuff that helps the interviewer think positively about you.

But what about when you are going to your friends birthday party at Dave & Buster's? How do you know what to wear and what to talk about?

## Multiple Intelligences and Thinking Socially

- We now know that there are multiple abilities (intelligences) or competences.
- These abilities help lead to independent, productive and satisfying adult life.
- It's not just IQ.
- Knowing about self /others **and** being able to adapt behaviors is a necessary ability.

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Until recently, we had an overly simple view of intelligence and what's necessary for "success". For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we believed that **school smarts and testing smarts** were all that were necessary for success.

We know now that there are multiple abilities or intelligences that interact with experiences to lead someone towards independence and happiness.

Social abilities (aka: social intelligence) is among these. For the most part, most of us have a moderate ability to learn about ourselves and each other. As we mature, we learn to adapt our behaviors based on various factors in the environment.

# Social Thinking

- This can be called social intelligence, social cognition or social competence. It's also what Michelle G. Winner means by **Social Thinking**.
- Certain levels of competencies in these social/emotional areas are necessary for independent adult life.
- Some folks are **learning disabled in social cognition**.

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Social intelligence, social cognition, social competence and social thinking pertain to the ability to learn, understand, reason and adapt behavior towards social purposes or goals.

This ability involves responding to sensory input,  
personality characteristics,  
emotions,  
overt and hidden social rules  
expectations that vary in different environments  
at different times.

Just as most of us are born with certain abilities to learn about the physical world, most of us intuitively learn about the social/emotional world as well.

However, some folks have weaknesses or challenges in this type of learning. These folks of disorders of social functioning and need specialized lessons or instruction in their area of weakness or LD.

## Disorders of Social Functioning

- Brain-based, developmental and often occur with other “diagnosable” problems.
- Examples: Autism spectrum, nonverbal learning, attention deficit hyperactivity and other disorders such as bipolar disorder.
- Severe social functioning problems can be lifelong without intervention.

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While neither the DSM nor the IDEA law specify a group of disorders called “disorders of social functioning or social cognition”, both clinicians and researchers are becoming aware that certain diagnostic or disability groups are having similar types of problem with social functioning.

Furthermore, we’ve found that certain types of interventions lead to improvements across this group of disorders.

For example, social thinking instruction and practice is helpful for individuals with ADHD as well as individuals with Asperger’s Syndrome or PDD-NOS or NVLD, etc.

# Help?

- Research repeatedly shows that current social skills programs fall short.
- Emerging data suggests that it helps to teach and practice how to **observe, understand and think** about what goes on when others are around or involved.
- Shift from the **how** to do social skills to the **why and when** as well.

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For the most part, the bulk of what we know is that much of what we're currently doing doesn't work well enough. Social skills research has repeatedly shown that what kids practice in school programs doesn't generalize to other environments. The increments of change fall short of the comprehensive changes that are needed for independence and productivity. **So, what does work?**

# Social Thinking

- Michelle Garcia Winner, M.A., S.L.P.-C.C.C. in San Jose, Ca.
- [www.socialthinking.com](http://www.socialthinking.com)
- Theory-based curriculum of lessons and materials for teaching, coaching and practicing social cognition and social skills.

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Michelle Garcia Winner, a speech-language pathologist in the Bay area of Ca. has been thinking about this question for about 20 years.

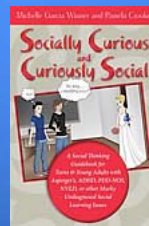
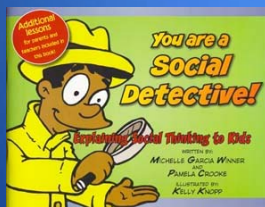
Through her work in schools, running a clinic, and working with other professionals, she has developed a program and a curriculum that seems to make a difference. This program is called **SOCIAL THINKING**.

She has developed a broad range of very useful materials for school-age children and teens.

Her approach also is good for adults with social cognitive disorders and can be adapted for normal (neuro-typical) pre-school age children.

# Social Thinking

- **Small group model** which means 2-4 similar kids
- Fun.
- Can be used at home, clinic or in schools



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Not only was I impressed by the user-friendly, brightly colored materials, I was curious to see how these groups really worked.

In 2008, I was trained in Michelle's clinic and I will be completing additional training this coming spring. As I've already said this program has solid theoretical foundations in an easy to learn format.

I was attracted by something else. Students and therapists alike share enthusiasm, spontaneity, and enjoyment about doing fun things and learning new abilities.

Let me introduce some of the fundamentals of this program:

## Social Thinking Core

- Social thinking = social cognition
- It involves the ability to predict, infer, conceptualize, determine, motive and intentions, organize, listen actively, and speak thoughts coherently.
- We “think with our eyes” to figure out other people’s thoughts, intentions, plans emotions, etc.

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Social thinking = social cognition. It’s “Who am I and who are you?” or learning to understand the “I’m thinking about you and you’re thinking about me” of the social world.

Social Thinking teaches students to think about the social world. We think with our eyes to figure out another person’s thoughts, intentions, emotions, plans ,etc.

ST teaches the nuanced social skills that work in the social world. This is the **what, why, when and where and the how of life in a world with others.**

FYI, this is not just about friendships. These are abilities that span all aspects of life. Being socially skilled is necessary for academic, vocational & professional success as well as for an emotionally satisfying and rewarding life.

## Social Thinking Core, p. 2

- Students with developmental delays in social thinking do not intuitively learn social information.
- We think about people all the time, even when we have no plans to interact with them. We adjust our own behavior based on what we think the people around us are thinking.



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[www.dr.suelerner.com](http://www.dr.suelerner.com)

Students with developmental delays in social thinking (social cognition) don't intuitively learn social information. If you think about it, learning social information can be a challenge for any of us.

I'm sure you can think back on something embarrassing that you've said or done. It was probably the social feedback that let you know of your error. You probably "connected the dots" about your error or you had help from someone who could bring it into focus for you.

WE intuitively know that social mistakes matter over time so we work hard to adapt. We work hard to not repeat the gaffe. Students with social cognitive deficits need to be taught that social mistakes matter. They need to be taught what are the mistakes and they need to be taught cues to watch for to avoid social mistakes.

Social thinking is abstract and difficult to discuss since it is something we usually learn intuitively. To help us all to think about it, Michelle has developed social thinking "scaffolds."

By learning how other people think, our students can understand other people's points of view and why specific social and communication skills are required in different situations.

When people learn how to think differently and flexibly they can think anywhere. This is different from just teaching a social skill. Individuals taught only the "skill" often will only perform that skill in the environment in which they learned it.

## Social Thinking Core, p. 3

- People who know how to feel differently and flexibly can think anywhere. This is better than just teaching a social skill.
- How we think affects how we feel, how we behave affects how others think and feel.
- If “your friends are people who make you feel good about you over time,” then you must learn how to make friends and how to make other people feel good using your actions and your language.

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Every social moment is also an emotional moment. Social + emotional are all part of the same “stew” You may have heard that some of the challenges of autism stem from deficits in theory of mind or perspective taking. (the ability to think about someone else and their experience or point of reference).

There is evidence to suggest that this applies to self understanding and knowledge as well. Understanding & regulating one’s emotions, understanding ones’ personality traits and complex social judgment about self and about self with others, it’s all part of social cognition.

Our thoughts and emotions are strongly connected. How we think affects how we feel, how we behave affects how others think and feel. If “your friends are people who make you feel good about you over time,” then you must learn how to make friends and how to make other people feel good using your actions and your language.

## Social Thinking Core, p.4

- We are always on a quest to avoid each other's "unexpected thoughts." We're always considering people around us. We adjust our behavior to help people have "normal thoughts" about us.
- Most of the core social thinking lessons operate BELOW the level of cultures. Think of different groups in high school.

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As part of our humanity, we're on a daily quest to avoid each other's "weird thoughts." We constantly consider people around us and adjust our behavior to help people have "normal thoughts" about us.

Most of the core social thinking lessons operate BELOW the level of cultures, meaning that all people engage in these thoughts and social behavioral adjustments. Why did the Harry Potter series become popular around the world? Why do we find foreign films entertaining? Why is there a Nobel Prize for Literature each year? Human and social stories transcend cultures. Nevertheless, the nuances differ from culture to culture and sub-group to sub-group. To be socially skilled you have to be able to "think in the moment" based on the sub-group at hand.

## Social Thinking Core, p.5

- How we adapt our behavior changes as we age and are in different situations & cultures.



- Social thinking is something we do every day, even when we are alone in our homes.
- Social thinking in our academic world requires us to think about the motives / intentions of people we read about in literature and history.

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It's been pointed out recently that sometimes we teach kids on the spectrum social skills such as eye gaze and handshakes that are a better fit for adult groups when we need to be teaching them about how to fit with their peers. Spend time around teens in a relaxed setting, you may see little eye to eye contact. Let's not even talk about handshakes. How do you know when to high 5, low 5, man shake, hug??? I did a google search of teen handshakes & got 307,000 results in seconds.

Social thinking in academics. Very important and can really cause problems in content as well as in classroom behaviors. HFAs, people with Aspergers or ADHD rarely love literature or social studies. Sometimes they like the weapons of history or the facts or history or a genre of literature, but the complex themes of literature or societies are rarely topics of interest. More often than not, there are comprehension problems. Sometimes they are subtle, but they are real.

Adulthood. To hold a job, most of us have to adapt our own social behavior based on the perceived thoughts of the people we work and live with.

## Four Steps of Communication

- **THINKING** about others
- Being aware of your physical presence and the physical presence of others.
- Using **EYES TO THINK ABOUT OTHERS** to watch what they are thinking about
- Using **LANGUAGE** to relate to others

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These steps help us organize and prioritize what we teach about human interaction. Remember: Human interaction can be as simple as standing in a group of people and NOT talking, or asking for help in class. These 4 steps help set a foundation.

## Four Steps of Perspective Taking

1. I think about you, you think about me.
2. I think about why you are near me, you think about why I am near you.
3. I think about what you are thinking about me.
4. I regulate my behavior to keep you thinking about me the way I want you to think about me.

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“Perspective taking” is an important life skill. It’s the opposite of self-centered thinking. It means that I know that I have thoughts and feelings AND I know that you have thoughts and feelings. I can’t automatically know what you are thinking and feeling but I can use watch and listen for your cues and messages. Then I can make a smart guess about your thoughts. Also, I want you to think good things about me.

Perspective taking is very abstract and complex. We learn it in increments throughout our lives. People with social deficits need instruction and practice in perspective taking. ST does this.

## Social Thinking Terms

- Doing what is “expected”
- Being part of a group involves eyes, ears, and brains in the group.
- Flexible thinking or Flexible brain
- Thinking with your eyes
- Whole body listening
- Social wondering



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In ST, we teach a new vocabulary that is catchy and easy to understand. They help teach the hidden social rules and help us about our behavior.

Some examples:

Doing what’s “expected” vs. doing what is “unexpected” We need to understand a range of hidden rules in every situation and we have to figure out what those rules are. Then, we need to follow them so others feel good about us. We do a lot of talking, teaching an practicing “expected” behaviors vs. “unexpected” behaviors

**Being part of a group involves eyes, ears, and brains in the group.** This helps establish a clear group expectation that certain behaviors are expected. We look at each other, talk and practice what being part of a group looks and feels like.

**Flexible thinking or Flexible brain.** Mental flexibility is necessary to interpret verbal, non-verbal and hidden information based on different points of view or different contexts. This is the opposite of having a rigid brain where one follows a rule all of the time or cannot interpret subtle different meaning in language or expression. We reinforce flexible thinking and flexible brains so that these behaviors will continue.

Thinking with your eyes is using your eyes to figure out what others are thinking. It’s the foundation to joint attention. Typical babies learn this in the first few months of life. It becomes the conduit for most of the social teaching and learning. People with social cognitive problems must be taught to look to others’ eyes for critical, social, nonverbal information.

Whole body listening is the same as keeping your body and brain in the group . Many of our students (all ages) have very active bodies or sensory issues that contribute to fidgeting. We help teach them to use “fidgets” in non-distracting ways. Students learn that our bodies need to look interested and connected to the group and the brain needs to keep thinking about the group. People can see when our body or brain don’t not appear to be a part of the group. This leads to “weird or unexpected thoughts” It also leads problems in school, with families and with friends.

Social wondering is the same as wondering about others (The speech bubble!) This concept helps the students begin to explore the idea that we are supposed to have social curiosity about others and that we can NEVER know everything there is to know about someone. Social wondering means that you have a thought about someone’s experience or beliefs and then you ask a question.

## More Terms

- Figuring out someone's plan.  
Be a social detective!
- Smart guessing and using eyes, ears and brain to make smart guess.
- Big problem/little problem

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Figuring out someone's plan is determining what people are planning to do next based on their physical actions.

Smart guesses are practiced vs. wacky guesses. Smart guesses take information you already know or have been taught and make an educated guess with the information.

Teaching scale about problems and emotions is very important. It's common for many things to be felt or understood as all or nothing. (as if every problem is a BIG problem). We practice different sizes or degree of problems.

## Future Directions and Limitations of ST

- More outcome research. Some exists now.
- Social Thinking “Peanut butter cup”
  - “Creamy peanut butter center” is the ST lessons.
  - “Chocolate shell” is ABA strategies to reduce problem behaviors and promote desired behaviors.
- Students must have a language system and abstract thought for Social Thinking program.

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We do have some evidence that ST makes a difference. Several years ago Dr. Pam Crooke published some outcome research of a pilot study in Journal of Developmental Disorders

**Brief Report: Measuring the Effectiveness of Teaching Social Thinking to Children with Asperger Syndrome (AS) and High Functioning Autism (HFA)**

**Pamela J. Crooke, Ryan E. Hendrix, Janine Y. Rachman**

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Morse recently a larger outcome study in Hong Kong was published.

**Hong Kong Journal of Mental Health (2009, 35, 10–17)**

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A promising evolution of ST is the merging of ABA principles and strategies with ST principles and strategies. Dr. Chris Abildgaard & Michelle Winner are collaborating in “peanut butter cup” model that takes the best of both to expand the applications of **ST**.

The ST curriculum is designed for student with a language system and capacity for abstract thought and problem solving. It is designed for students with near normal to well above average verbal and nonverbal intelligence, and who also have some understanding that each person has thoughts and that they differ from person to person.

It's is believed that ABA will be the most effective teaching strategy for students with severely impaired perspective taking. For the most part, it is believed that much of the ST model will not be effective for students with these challenges.