



Speech and Language Therapy Blog

Social Thinking



What is 'social thinking'?

You've probably heard the term 'social skills'. This usually refers to turn taking, eye contact, body language and tone of voice - all the things we can see somebody doing 'on the outside'. But before we can expect a child to learn 'social skills', they need to have developed a deeper understanding of *why* we do these things; this is 'social thinking'. Social thinking is something that we cannot see or hear, but the thought processes that go on 'behind the scenes'.

It's a bit like looking at a tree. Eye contact, facial expression and turn taking are like the green leaves we can see, but these things wouldn't exist unless there was an extensive network of roots hidden below the ground supporting the tree. These roots are like our social thinking.



Social thinking and deafness:

Social thinking is typically learned by hearing children with little effort starting at a young age. These skills are shaped by children watching others and having other people react to their behaviour. How we learn social skills is based on very subtle cues, such as facial expression, body posture and quiet auditory cues. Because of their smaller "listening bubbles" children with hearing loss do not pick up language and the subtle aspects of interactions going on around them as fully as their hearing peers.

When do we use social thinking?

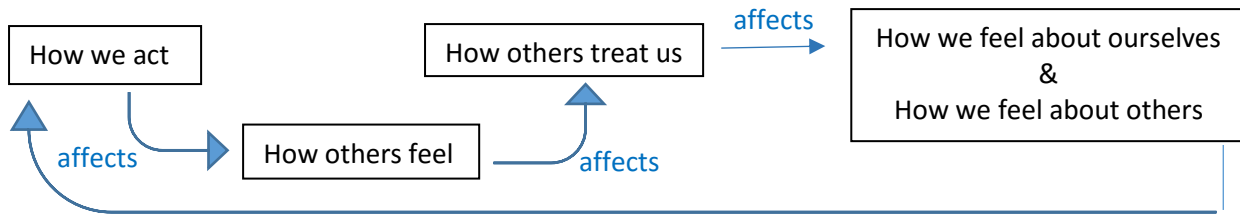
We practice social thinking all day long! Essentially, we use social thinking whenever we think about the perspective of another person. Below are some examples.

- **At work** – when we become aware that by loudly sipping our coffee we may be bothering our colleagues.
- **At the supermarket** - when we move our trolley away from the middle of the aisle so other shoppers can pass by.
- **Watching TV** – when we follow the story by understanding how the characters interpret each other's behaviour and how that then influences their own behaviour.
- **While driving** - when we slow down upon sensing that another car will cut in front of us.
- **When we're on social media** – to understand the intention of a message and its sender; for example, whether it is to be friendly, sarcastic, compassionate, etc.
- **In conversation** – when we attempt to read the thoughts, beliefs, intentions, emotions, knowledge and actions of our conversation partner(s) and adapt our behaviour to affect the thoughts they have about us.

Why is social thinking important?

We often take it for granted, but having the ability to be a 'social thinker' is a core skill which allows us to better connect with others. Social thinking allows us to effectively share space with others,

work as part of a team, and develop relationships of all kinds: with family, friends, classmates, work colleagues, and more.



Our social thinking and social skills directly impact how others feel about us and therefore affects how we are treated. Therefore, we must treat others well to benefit from the same treatment.

Social thinking and school

Students use social thinking constantly at school; to work effectively as part of a group, stay on task, figure out the expected times to talk in class, and share space well with others in the classroom, dinner hall, and on the playground... and that's not all.

Reading: Social thinking is required when reading stories to understand the deeper meaning behind the actions of the characters and their relationships. If a student has poor social thinking abilities, he or she may struggle to take the perspective of characters, figure out how they are affected by others, and understand why characters act and feel as they do.



Writing: We also use social thinking in our writing of stories and essays. We need social thinking to make sure our arguments make sense to our audience by taking the perspective of the reader and considering what that person may already know or not know about the topic. We must also take the reader's perspective to consider how to organise the information so it will be logical for the reader to follow. If a student struggles with social thinking, he or she will have difficulty understanding the perspective of the audience and may therefore have trouble writing a persuasive essay that is well organised and easily understood by others.

What you can do to help:

- **Put your thoughts on loudspeaker:** Tell your child what you're thinking and how you're feeling and explain why. This will help your son/daughter understand how your thoughts affect the decisions you make.
- **Encourage self awareness:** Point out when their behaviour might be affecting others and explain why: For example, when travelling on a bus you might suggest that they put their bag on the floor because another passenger might like to sit in the seat beside them.
- **Reinforce good social behaviours:** Be specific about what he/she does well! Praise the level of effort as well as their output.
- **Be a good role model:** Use good social skills yourself, and make it obvious when you're doing this i.e. saying "I'm just going to hold the door open for this older lady because...."
- **Give them the vocabulary:** When watching TV comment on how characters may be feeling. Teach your child some of the more complex emotions such as 'jealous', 'frustrated' and 'confident' rather than sticking to the basics of 'sad/angry/happy'. provide the words for what he/she may be feeling. Try to teach them vocabulary in context (as and when the words come up) – this will support their understanding and learning.

- **Pay attention:** Watch how your child interacts with others. Help them to notice when they have been inappropriate, this will help them develop the ability to regulate their own behaviour.
- **When your child has a social mis-step:**
 - Immediately model what s/he should have said/done
 - Use words to describe what s/he should have said/done (You mean....)
 - Explain how it made you, or others feel (ignored, frustrated, jealous)
 - Describe how your child's actions can be interpreted by others in a way s/he didn't mean (i.e. by not answering, someone may think you don't care about them or what they say)

The speech and language therapy department hope that these ideas will help you to develop your teenager's social thinking at home. If you have any questions or would like to know more, please contact your son/daughter's speech therapist via email or telephone.

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