

# I Get It! The Do's and Don'ts of Teaching Social Thinking

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Our social world is a complex, highly nuanced network of relationships that span the gamut of brief two-person encounters to long term and large scale social structures that organize and guide human kind. As caregivers and service providers in the autism community, we must first acknowledge – and accept – that teaching Social Thinking™ and related social skills can *never* refer to one linear set of lessons that can be applied to all students in all situations. Instead, by its very nature, Social Thinking™ is fluid and exceedingly context driven. It is active and receptive, encompassing both the yin and yang of being in relationship with others. To successfully teach Social Thinking™ requires that we take into consideration many dimensions of the individual and the situation: the chronological and developmental age of the student; the individual's intrinsic social thinking abilities; the student's expressive and receptive language skills; learning preferences, strengths and weaknesses (multiple intelligences); as well as the “unspoken” and obvious social and cultural expectations in a given situation. This information is paired with what we know about the social and language development of neurotypical peers and it all is meshed together into a plan that guides us in teaching our students not just how to participate on the playground or work as a member of a classroom, but how to figure out the social expectations of any life situation.

Social Thinking represents many things happening at once, both inside and outside the student. For instance, if we are teaching students better ways to relate with their peers, we have to go beyond simple rote social skills and teach that the Social Thinking process starts in the brain, with the student becoming aware of others nearby, assessing what their motives might be, thinking about the social requirements within the situation, what behaviors

might be expected and not expected, and how to co-exist with others in a way that keeps them feeling good about the encounter. Previous columns written for this magazine have broken down some of these concepts in detail to illustrate the complexity of what we, as adult teachers, are asking when we state we want a child to “learn better social skills.” In my experience, I repeatedly notice we often underestimate how complex and difficult it is to teach Social Thinking and related social skills to students not intuitively born to this information. Some of us truly struggle with understanding the different ways of thinking and processing common to individuals with ASD, and imagining what life would be like without the social awareness we use in our everyday lives!

Coming to a full appreciation of what it means to “think social” is a process, for our students but also for those of us who are teachers in their lives. I started by simply watching how my mind worked when I was sharing space with others. I realized my social *skills* were the behavioral output of my social mind working first to process the situational demands as well as the possible thoughts, feelings, motives, etc. of those around me. Only then could I make a socially appropriate response. As we started working with more and more individuals with social learning challenges in our clinic, especially those with higher levels of verbal intelligence and language skills, it became clear to me, as a clinician, that I needed to teach my students more exact ways to “sync up” to the potential thoughts and feelings of others *before* they could make successful decisions about which social behaviors (social skills) to use.

As an intervention, Social Thinking and its related teaching concepts are gaining widespread attention and recognition not just across the U.S., but around the world. While Social Thinking is becoming widely embraced, it is not always being well implemented. Educators are sometimes jumping too far ahead too soon, or holding expectations about how students “should” synthesize the strategies, rather than noticing and responding to what “is” within the student or group.

One often-overlooked cornerstone of Social Thinking instruction is that this approach is specifically geared to students with near normal to substantially above normal verbal intelligence and solid language skills. This approach has very limited benefit, if any, for students with serious cognitive and language learning impairments. The heart of Social Thinking instruction is language, and using language as a vehicle to teach students how to think about the thinking process. A second cornerstone often side-stepped is the individual's perspective taking abilities. Some students are not even aware that others' minds think differently, and assuming they understand about motives or social expectations is much too advanced.

In our clinic we have worked with hundreds if not a thousand individuals teaching Social Thinking ideas and strategies. Over that time, some do's and don'ts have emerged, often arising through our own social blunders, that we'd like to share with you.

### **Let's start with the Do's.**

1. Do pair students with similar social thinking abilities. (See the free article, "The Spectrum of Perspective Taking" posted on my website, [www.socialthinking.com](http://www.socialthinking.com).)
2. Do keep groups relatively small when teaching specific lessons. No more than four students seems to be most effective.
3. Do learn the basics of Social Thinking beforehand. This will help you better assess your students' strengths and weaknesses while you work with them and problem solve situations that are a regular part of teaching these concepts. Free articles on the following topics are posted on my website:
  - ILAUGH model of Social Cognition
  - 4 Steps of Communication
  - 4 Steps of Perspective Taking
1. Do get into the habit of noticing how your brain engages in social thinking everywhere you go and with everything you do. The more you recognize how your own mind works the better equipped you will be to make sense of the strategies you are teaching, as well as develop your own.

2. Do learn the Social Thinking vocabulary concepts! It is crucial that you learn to teach social expectations without assumptions. Assumptions are tricky fellows and often exist in the far recesses of our minds. And, they can severely impair your ability to be successful with your students! This means spending a lot of time talking about thoughts, and how thoughts relate to feelings, while you work with your students across the day. This is an unusual discussion for most of us and takes repeated practice and some getting used to! The vocabulary concepts are introduced in my book *Thinking About You Thinking About Me*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, explored in greater detail in *Think Social! A Social Thinking Curriculum for School Age Students*, and expressed in comic book form for students in *You Are a Social Detective*.
3. Do start at the very beginning, with your initial emphasis on the student and his or her feelings about being with others and what it means to be part of a group. Help students explore what they expect from others so *they* first connect to *their own* social expectations before we work with them on understanding what we expect from them. Teachers should not start this curriculum with lessons that teach students about changing their behavior for everyone else. This is a surefire way to destroy a student's motivation! While it's true that we all modify our behaviors to keep people interested and comfortable sharing social space with us, that's a lesson that comes way later. Instead, have them learn about their own minds and what they find comfortable based on how people treat them.
4. Do implement programs that foster insight and self-awareness into our students' strengths and weaknesses. These might include video replay, analysis, use of Social Stories®, or the many Social Thinking worksheets found in my books. Your goal is to give them lots of opportunities to discuss and relate to Social Thinking concepts and related social behaviors.
5. Do have students eventually monitor their own social behavior and assess the impact it has on the thoughts and feelings of others. Provide plenty of practice time, as this can be a difficult step for our students. Many can recognize how others' behaviors affect them, but cannot turn the tables and notice how their own behaviors impact that in others.

6. Do teach your group that socializing together does not mean everyone will become friends. Help them learn to cope with interaction whether or not they enjoy being with others. Interaction is a fact of life. Sometimes it's great and other times we merely plod through it. We all have to do the social fake at times, as no one enjoys every minute with others, even others they really like or love.
7. Do help your students learn to feel the "why" behind interaction, and that as people we come together for reasons other than to simply "gather new data." Create situations where your students can engage in discussions about their own emotions and how others impact them, and visa versa. Encourage a support group to form within your social thinking group that illuminates the basis of wanting to be with others: for personal validation, support, emotional connection and encouragement.
8. Do understand – and help your students understand – that one need not become an "expert" about Social Thinking to engage in the process. Everyone makes social mistakes—they are inevitable! Bravely acknowledge your own social blunders and use humor to handle the accidental social errors that arise by nature of having your students in a group.
9. Do realize you can teach social thinking even when you only have one student in the room. Two people together means two people are having thoughts and regulating their behavior based on the other's presence.
10. Do expect that as our students become more self-aware of their own and others' social minds they are at higher risk for social anxiety and depression. Incorporate lessons in anxiety management into your curriculum. As needed, seek co-treatments or get advice from counselors in the school and/or community.

**Now, some of the Don'ts to consider when running Social Thinking groups.**

1. Don't pair students based on their diagnostic label; instead match them based on their level of social functioning.
2. Don't try to introduce the concepts of Social Thinking in large groups, especially within an integrated classroom with typical children and spectrum children. A child with social learning challenges will need a far

more extensive discussion than will his neurotypical peers and he will need far more time to explore the thinking side of the social process and then practice specific behaviors.

3. Don't selectively pick out a few Social Thinking lessons that look cute and appealing and start teaching them, thinking your students will understand and change their behaviors. Yes, we want our students to ultimately change their behaviors, but we want them to learn they do this based on what others are thinking about them. We need to start with having them explore their own and others' thoughts, before we move into behavior change. Our book, *Superflex: A Social Thinking Superhero Curriculum* is colorful, lively, engaging and appeals to many educators. It is an excellent curriculum that can be very powerful, but only when it is implemented *after* initial Social Thinking lessons, including the Social Thinking vocabulary, are taught.
4. Don't teach social skills as a set of rules to be memorized and scripted. Social Thinking and related social skills require synergistic and dynamic thinking that involves problem solving and increasingly more developed personal awareness. Nothing about social thinking should be memorized. Instead it should be processed, integrated, and acted upon as the situation warrants.
5. Don't equate academic expertise or having a prolific vocabulary with an equal ability to understand Social Thinking ideas and concepts. Some of our most bright and gifted students struggle severely with social understanding.
6. Don't use a token reward system over the long term as the primary reinforcement for good social skills. Social thinking ultimately has to be sustained by recognizing the natural consequences (positive and negative) of showing interest and relating to others – or not.
7. Don't assume our students will be able to apply the information learned in the smaller treatment group to the real-world setting quickly and efficiently; this type of learning is a slow process that requires lessons from people in all different contexts. As the teacher, you will need to evolve their Social Thinking and related social skills from small group to more socially complex situations. Engage teachers, office staff, the school janitors or administrators in widening the base of social interactions. Go out into the community and practice!

8. When taking data, don't focus solely on whether a child performed a social skill set with accuracy as the sole measure of success. Do try and take narrative data about how a student is learning to think about his own and others' social thinking differently.
9. Don't confuse friendship or shared interest social groups with Social Thinking teaching groups. While it is good for students to make friends around areas of interest and in fact, this should be encouraged during different times in the day, Social Thinking groups are to teach tolerance, patience, and expertise in dealing with all kinds of minds. We are teaching thinking and social behavioral skills that will benefit them across their current and future lives. These are not groups manufactured to simply keep our students calm and happy.
10. Don't run away from the "sticky" discussion of how someone's behavior is making you think or feel. That said, to have students value what you and others are saying to them, spend more time explaining what they are doing well than pointing out their mistakes and weaknesses. We all want to know we are doing more right than wrong. That's how we become comfortable with our teachers and mentors, and trust when they deliver a message that is less than positive!
11. Don't view this teaching as fixed in time, like Algebra that starts and ends in one year. Teaching Social Thinking and related skills is shooting a bullet at a moving target, and our students will never out-grow the need for some type of social thinking support. All students constantly evolve in social learning; we refer to this as maturity. As our students with social learning challenges improve, the peer group has already moved onto a different level of thinking and socially based nuance. Many schools are starting to provide social thinking instruction to all students as part of a campus service, outside of an IEP requirement. Some of our students don't qualify for IEPs but would still benefit from Social Thinking lessons. Impress upon administrators the importance of this type of service to help prepare our students for life beyond the classroom.
12. Don't assume typical peer models are a necessity in teaching Social Thinking and related social skills. If our students easily learned through modeling, there would be no need for a Social Thinking program! However, peer mentoring can be a tremendous benefit. As students'

Social Thinking skills mature, peer mentor training programs motivate our students to keep thinking about all these social concepts when encouraged by a peer across the school day. Peer mentors trained in Social Thinking and related social skills is a great idea!

13. Don't give up too soon! Some lessons in Social Thinking may take months and months of practice before they even begin to make sense. Look for small, incremental gains in social understanding as the beacons that light your path toward student success.

## **BIO**

Michelle Garcia Winner, CCC-SLP, is internationally recognized as an innovative therapist, energetic and enthusiastic workshop presenter, and prolific author specializing in the treatment of persons with social learning challenges. Learn more at [www.socialthinking.com](http://www.socialthinking.com).

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