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## Thinking About Social Thinking

### Guest Author

Lisa Chatter, MA-CCC

This quarter's newsletter features our first guest author, Lisa Chatter, MA-CCC. Lisa has worked with the Orange County Department of Education's autism mentor group for six years. She consults regularly with therapists to work with pragmatics and social thinking.

In a recent e-mail conversation, Lisa made the following statements on evaluating and treating these students effectively. With her permission, here are some of her comments:

I've come to believe that social thinking is the most important communication deficit that I address. Most students with articulation and language learning disabilities will grow up and be employable regardless of whether we work with them. Kids with social thinking deficits are at very high risk for depression, serious acting out, suicide, and all sorts of mental health issues. Successful navigation for these students is less about "social rules" than it is about "social thinking."

Without adequate social thinking, kids have a great deal of difficulty applying the rules in dynamic social interactions. That's because either they are unaware that others have thoughts about them; they are aware but cannot figure it out; or they can figure those out, but are unable to modify their own behavior to foster changes in the thoughts of others.

### So how does one go about evaluating social thinking?

**Story Telling:** Using wordless picture books, like "Frog Goes to Dinner" by Mercer Mayer, have the student tell the story. It's a good idea to audio record the story because I always hear things in the recording that I didn't hear the first time I listened. The key is in the analysis. Thanks to some fabulous mentors, I look at a variety of aspects:

**Organization** - Kids with social thinking issues always organize by time because that's the way the books are written, but I am looking to see if they can identify cause/effect or problem/solution.

**Character motivations** - Does the student identify with what the characters are feeling/thinking or just report the actions?

**Grammar** -Does the student use consistent verb tense references, accurate gender pronoun references, sentence structure and cohesion?

**Amount of information**-Does the student describe the story in enough detail to create a clear mental image for you? Or perhaps the kid just goes on and on, oblivious to your signals of boredom.

**Double Interview:** I first interview the student about him/herself, asking questions about their school experiences, family, and leisure time activities. I make sure to use information that I learn to ask more questions and make supportive and add-on comments. Then I summarize what I learned from the interview and ask the student to interview me. I am looking for the ability to use information to formulate further questions, and make supportive and add-on comments. I make leading comments that beg for questions such as, "I can't wait for this weekend!" or "Last night was just awful," hoping the student will show interest in my experiences.

**Reading Facial Expressions:** Show the student photos that clearly depict emotions on people's faces. Ask what is going on in the picture. If the student doesn't even refer to the person's feelings, ask how the person feels and, more importantly, how does the student know? The ability to understand a person's feelings by their facial expressions is key to social thinking and a real area of deficit for these kids. It looks like attention deficit, and in a way, it is. However, it isn't necessarily because the brain has temporarily checked out, but because the student has no clue that their interaction partner is giving them information they need to use in order to modify their behavior to foster positive thoughts in others.

**Checklists for teachers and parents:** CELF 4 Pragmatics Profile; the Walker-McConnell Scale of Social Competence and School Adjustment (Walker & McConnell 1995); Skill-Streaming (Goldstein & McGinnis, 1997) are some that I regularly use.

### **What do you do with resistant students?**

I've had pretty good luck with the reluctant students using Chicken Soup for the Kids/Preteen Soul stories. I have made up questions that focus attention on character motivations-what led up to the problem, what the character(s) did that worked or didn't work. After reading the story and answering the questions, I use Michelle Garcia-Winner's "Social Behavior Maps" to chart the cause/effect relationships. I have found this a valuable tool in establishing a trusting relationship with a few reticent kids. The stories were about others. "Has that ever happened to you?" has worked with getting adolescents to open up about their particular situations.

In most cases I've won the kid's trust and was then able to build their social thinking. It is one way to keep a kid working without it being about him. I've found that these students claim they prefer to be alone, to think their unique thoughts, and pursue their unusual interests. Again, I focus on the social thinking that is the foundation for relationships because the student has to have relationships whether or not he wants to. Kids say they don't want to make friends because that's just so scary and they've been so unsuccessful. The prospect is overwhelming; they have no idea how to figure it out. But they have to interact with others because, unless they live on a deserted island, they need at least marginally successful relationships with some people throughout their life.

### **Where does one start learning about social thinking?**

Michelle Garcia Winner's seminal work in social thinking, [www.socialthinking.com](http://www.socialthinking.com), is a guiding force in my work with these students. I encourage others to attend her workshops and investigate her products to increase their awareness and success with these students. Carol Gray's work integrates seamlessly with Michelle's. Dr. Tony Attwood has also contributed tremendously to my understanding of social thinking deficits. Locally, Dr. Lauren Franke has done a tremendous amount of work in developing evaluating protocols. I am grateful to all these professionals for my education.

Thank you Lisa, for sharing your years of experience!

## Great Speech Tool-The Flip Video Camera



This addictive little video camera is inexpensive (starting at \$99) and hooks to your computer with a USB connection. Allows you to video sessions effectively with no fuss, no muss. Terrific personal and professional tool to make therapy fun! The sound quality is not be sensitive enough for speech production analysis and is best used at a distance of 4- 10 feet. For an overview of this tool, see [The Flip](#).

## Featured Website-Flashcardexchange.com



Great site for older students who enjoy learning online. Students have a virtual "box" of flashcards that you or a parent creates. They flip them virtually, and the program keeps track of accuracy and time elapsed. Has some nice features like viewing only missed items. There is pre-inputted material contributed by users, like Dolch words, but most appears directed to students from middle school to college level. The basics are free with an expanded subscription \$20 for life. Easy to input and save your own flashcard material. No bells and whistles - just basics.

## Jokes for Kids

**What kind of bee can't be understood?**

A mumble bee!

**Why did the computer get glasses?**

To improve its websight.

**Knock, Knock.**

Who's there?

**Reeda.**

Reeda who.

**Reed a lot of books this summer!**

**What building has the most stories?**

The library, of course!

**Why do dogs sit in the shade?**

Because they don't want to be HOT DOGS!

**What did the bee say to the other bee in summer?**

S'warm isn't it!

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