

Social Thinking: *From Play to Academics and Across a Lifespan*

Thoughts on how teaching social thinking and related social skills contributes to academic performance and real life.

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Doug has difficulty playing during recess. He walks around the playground talking to himself, not being invited to play by students. He clearly is “different” from others in that he has not intuitively developed skills for playing. Relating to kids his own age continues to be a primary focus for his educational team. Doug has difficulty paying attention to what other people are thinking by watching them. Other kids can figure out if they are welcome to join a group, what the group would do next, how the group is organized and how each of the kids’ feel about the other kids they are playing with. Doug does not understand how important these skills are towards working and living in society: **thinking about others and their thoughts**. He does not understand how kids play together, even though he desires to be part of the group. In addition, he also does not appear to *know how to keep his body in a group and he fails to use eye contact*, except when cued. Verbally, Doug loves to talk about things of great interest to him. For a fourth grader, he has amazing knowledge about space and NASA. He happily talks to adults and children alike about this topic, even if they do not have the time or interest in what he is saying. Doug thinks that communication is talking about what **he** likes to think about.

Doug’s parents are aware that he is quite different in his social development from their other children. However, he appears to be so smart and determined to learn information that is of interest to him that they do not perceive him as a child with learning problems. The school district gave him tests that indicate a solid intelligence, meaning his language and academic skills are at grade level. Even though his test scores are solid, everyone recognizes that Doug is not like most other kids in class; his peers think Doug is “odd.” It is difficult for his educational team to figure out if he needs special education services and if so, what exactly should the services be? Our schools focus on academic accomplishments as measured by test scores. If a student does well in that domain does that mean they have no learning challenges that will impact them across life?

The skills other kids develop during social interactions and play: the ability to think about others, observe what they were doing, predict what they will do next, getting an idea how social play is organized, determining the feelings of others, keeping their bodies at appropriate distances to interact, but not so close as to offend, and forming language to add to the play are the exact same skills needed to work as a member of a group in a classroom. Doug's peers have been intuitively learning these skills since they were infants.

These play skills also appear to be incredibly important towards helping students to learn how to interpret social information that is embedded in their academic studies. Reading comprehension of literature, social studies and history all require an understanding of other people's motives, intentions and emotions. Math estimation and word problems require a student to move beyond the facts and provide some level of interpretation and analysis. Written expression is often impacted when a student has difficulty getting his thoughts organized around a topic that is not intrinsically interesting to him.

One thing that Doug's teachers do acknowledge is that 4th grade for Doug is a lot harder than 3rd grade. He is noticeably more anxious during class, he is not learning how to organize his many materials well and his classmates seem increasingly aware that he is not someone they can easily work with. During an IEP meeting for Doug, his parents express growing concern about his lack of abilities. They think he feels left out of social interactions with his peers. His parents request Doug learn "social skills" and receives further attention in core academics even if his test scores show he is "within normal limits".

The school's speech language pathologist, school psychologist, occupational therapist and classroom teacher agree with his parents' descriptions of Doug's lack of social connectedness and increasing academic challenges. However they want to take a different approach to helping him. They recommend exploring the "**social thinking building blocks**" Doug is missing. Understanding that social intelligence is the bedrock concept for social performance and related social analysis for participating in social academic such as the language arts curriculum and real life, the team pushes for a deeper teaching approach. It is conceptualized that the cause of Doug's

weaknesses in play, working and learning as part of a group is deeper than just not knowing what “social skill” to use. Within his academic learning demands, an increasing problem is noticed in his ability to comprehend what he is reading when it relates to social information or less interesting topics or writing on topics requiring more than factual information.

The team recognizes that Doug does not fully understand how he is suppose to think about others, whether he is playing, talking or reading about characters in a book. They want to write a goal explore how to think about other people. Related goals are written related to learning to take perspective to explore what kids are likely thinking during play, what teachers are likely thinking when they ask kids to work in groups and/or what characters are likely thinking when he reads about them in books.

As the team continues their discussion they realize how many skills spring from *thinking about others* during play and within a classroom setting. It is determined that Doug needs to become better at *learning to watch or observe others*. A goal is written to help Doug figure out *what people (students and teachers) were planning to do next*. Benchmarks are written to help Doug learn to *“read” other people’s eyes so that he can start to see that where people are looking often related to what they are thinking about*. A benchmark is also written to help him *read people’s body gestures and body actions so that he can start to figure out what messages the people are saying with their bodies*. The team discusses that this is the same type of information students use to interpret what they are reading about characters in a book or going out to play at recess when they want to join a group.

They also decide to encourage Doug to use language to explore what other people are thinking/talking about so he can learn that social interaction/communication is more than just talking about his own interests. A benchmark is written to help Doug learn strategies to remember things about others, since it *is much easier to ask people questions if you can remember things that they like to do or that they are planning to do*.

The team cautions everyone to be aware that when a child is dealing with significant weaknesses in social thinking their social learning curve is slow but steady. They help the parents to be comfortable with the fact that the year long goals are not focused on an ultimate end product - of achieving success in the ‘big ticket social items’ such as

spontaneous group play and conversation. Rather for Doug, a student with a very significant **social thinking learning disability**, the short term goals, for this year and probably next year, will be in helping Doug to build some basic building blocks of social thinking and knowledge. These goals will help him to slowly, but surely, develop skills towards *understanding and interacting with peers, learning more about how to participate within a group in the classroom and on campus and being able to interpret and understand more abstract information in his required reading in literature, social studies and even science.*

To embrace this teaching his parents and teachers come to recognize that social skills are not independent from social thought. To teach a “smart” student like Doug is to teach him how to think socially and then understand how to apply related social skills. Using a common “social thinking” vocabulary, these concepts can be discussed across educational and home settings allowing the thinking to be recognized and applied everywhere, just as social information is to be thought about and responded to through our social skills across each and every day.

Other goals focus on his needs in the area of occupational therapy, behavioral attention issues in the classroom and his need to learn to ask for help in class. It is recommended that the resource teacher become more involved in his case.

It is acknowledged that while the speech language pathologist, classroom teacher and the occupational therapist are important members of this educational team, each person who works and lives with a child with difficulty in social thinking and social interactions is responsible for following through with these basic social lessons. Thus the special educators need time not only to work with the child but to also work with teachers and parents, helping them to learn to teach these unique, but very important, concepts and skills to children on the high end of the autism spectrum or with similar diagnostic labels. The ultimate goal is to help Doug, and other children like him, to become a better social thinker by becoming more aware of his social surroundings and expected responses across the home and school day so that this information can be applied in his community, vocational, family and leisure activities across his life.

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Michelle Garcia Winner, MA, CCC is a speech language pathologist who specializes in the treatment of individuals with social cognitive deficits: those with diagnoses such as Autism, Asperger Syndrome and Nonverbal Learning Disorder. In private practice in San Jose, California, she and her clinic staff work with individuals from 3 years old into adulthood who struggle with social thinking and related social skills.

The heart of her work is illuminating the often illusive and intangible world of social thinking, and developing practical strategies that can be easily used by parents, educators and service providers, across different environments, to teach social thinking and social skills. A pioneer and visionary in her field, her work is being applied not only to persons with autism and related disabilities but also more broadly to students in mainstream classrooms and to adults in vocational/professional settings in the U.S. and abroad.

Michelle is a prolific writer in the area of social thinking/social skills and travels internationally presenting numerous different workshops. She has been invited to train psychiatrists, psychologists, counselors, parents, educators and state policy makers on the importance of social thinking. Her goal is to raise awareness among administrators, educators and parents of the critical role social thinking and social skills play in every student's life, not just in achieving academic success, but for success in adulthood and life in general.

Michelle was given a ³Congressional Special Recognition Award² in 2008 for her pioneering work.

Michelle has two young adult children, Heidi and Robyn, who continue to teach her about social relations. For more information visit her website: www.socialthinking.com