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## Promoting Social Competence for Students with Autism

Hi this is Mindy Stevens. This tutorial is intended to expand your knowledge of some of the foundational concepts that are a part of teaching not just social skills, but social competence, to students who don't intuitively understand how to interact successfully with others.

Throughout this tutorial you'll find quiz questions designed to help you apply the content you've just learned. When a quiz question appears, simply choose the correct answer by clicking on it.

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It's no wonder teachers often feel overwhelmed at the thought of teaching social skills to their students with autism. Most kids just "get it" when it comes to knowing how to interact with other children and adults in different contexts and settings. How should you go about it? It's not like "social interaction skills" are an academic subject like math or reading that we studied ourselves when we were in school. And for many of us, the only direct instruction in social interaction we received while we were growing up was the prompting our mothers gave us.

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**What Are Social Skills?**

*The specific and identifiable behaviors needed to perform social activities in a competent manner*

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So let's start at the beginning, by defining the concepts involved. Many teachers believe their students need to learn social skills, and often this is true. Social skills are defined as the specific and identifiable behaviors needed to perform social activities in a competent manner. Like most teachable skills, they are usually demonstrated as discrete behaviors that can be observed and measured.

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**For Instance....**

*...initiating, maintaining or breaking eye contact  
thank you*

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Here are some examples of discrete behaviors that are often taught as social skills

initiating, maintaining and breaking eye contact

offering or responding to a greeting

Using “please” and “thank you”

Holding the door open for another person

No doubt there are many others you also targeted with your students in a effort to expand their social abilities

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Insert quiz 1 question here



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### Social Competence

*making judgments and decisions about  
modulating one's own behavior based on  
expectations for age, environment,  
context and culture  
regarding a social partner, environment or general context*



However, teaching a discreet social behavior is just the tip of the iceberg. Many of our students often learn these behaviors, without also learning how to modify them or make judgments about when and where to use them. In other words, they don't acquire social competence, which is the ability to appropriately modulate one's behavior and influence that of another person, according to social expectations for age, environment, context and culture. It also includes making judgments and decisions about one's own behavior based on knowledge or experience gathered regarding a social partner, environment or general context. Many of these abilities are internal cognitive processes rather than discrete behaviors. This means an observer may not be able to directly see them when they occur..

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**Learning better  
social skills  
is only a part of acquiring  
social competence**

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Most children learn social competence intuitively. However, children with social deficits often need additional instruction and support to acquire this ability. You can see that teaching social skills in and of themselves often isn't enough. More importantly, our students also need to acquire social competence and we as teachers need to know how to promote it.

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**Social Competence  
and Human Developmental**

- Social interest emerges in infancy
- Social competence becomes more sophisticated with maturity
- Social expectations vary with chronological age

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The emergence of social competence is a part of human development, just like motor, communication and cognitive abilities. Typical infants and toddlers begin to show increasingly more sophisticated and complex abilities to successfully initiate, maintain and end social interactions with adults and other children. Just as expectations for behavior vary from one social situation to the next, they also vary depending on the age of the individuals involved. For instance, imagine the social context of dining in a crowded restaurant. An observer will most likely have different expectations and levels of tolerance for the behavior of a very young child, as opposed to older children, teenagers and adults.

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Insert quiz 2 question here



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### Components of Social Competence

- Developmental - emerge and become more complex with age
- Unique to the individual



In addition to this, there are several ability areas that comprise a person's social competence. Each of these are also developmental, because they emerge and become increasingly more complex with age. Each area is unique and will look different depending on the age of the individual.

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### Empathy

*...the ability to identify and respond to the emotions of others*

Infants and toddlers	Smile or cry in reaction to similar adult behavior
Preschoolers	Label other people's feelings based on their facial expressions
Older children	Alter their own behavior in consideration or reaction to the feelings of others
Adolescents and teens	Take the perspective of others and use it to plan or anticipate social exchanges

**Empathy** is thought of as the ability to identify and respond to the emotions of others

**Infants and toddlers** ...smile or cry in reaction to similar adult behavior

**Preschoolers**...label other people's feelings based on their facial expressions

**Older children**...alter their own behavior in consideration or reaction to the feelings of others

**Adolescents and teens**...take the perspective of others and use it to

plan or anticipate social exchanges

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Role Taking	
<i>...the ability to take account of, predict and adapt one's behavior according to the roles of others</i>	
Infants and toddlers	Recognize parents as caretakers
Preschoolers	Differentiate roles within a family and imitate them in play
Older children	Understand and make judgments based on the distinctions between roles outside of family
Adolescents and teens	Assume multiple roles

**Role Taking** is defined as the ability to take account of, predict and adapt to the roles of others.

**Infants and toddlers** recognize parents as caretakers

**Preschoolers** differentiate roles within a family and imitate them in play

**Older children** understand and make judgments based on the distinctions between roles outside of family

**Adolescents and teens** assume multiple roles

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Interaction Management	
<i>...the ability to successfully conduct the different aspects of conversations</i>	
Infants and toddlers	Seek and maintain eye contact as a means of establishing joint attention
Preschoolers	Expand strategies to gain attention from others,
Older children	Listen to and wait for opportunities to contribute to conversations
Adolescents and teens	Take the input and perspective of others into consideration during conversation

**Interaction Management** is understood as the ability to successfully conduct the different aspects of conversations, such as turn taking, listening, asking questions or changing topics .

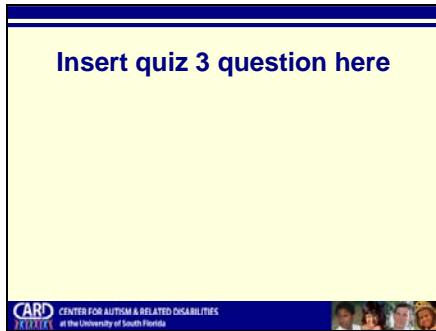
**Infants and toddlers** seek and maintain eye contact as a means of establishing joint attention

**Preschoolers** expand strategies to gain attention from others, ask and respond to simple questions

**Older children** listen to and wait for opportunities to contribute to conversations

**Adolescents and teens** take the input and perspective of others into consideration during conversation

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**Foundational Social Skills**

*Social skills that are expected to be in place, but are noticed only when they are absent or insufficiently demonstrated.*

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In addition to these areas, there are many foundational skills that are most often noticeable only when they are absent or insufficiently demonstrated. These skills that don't usually gain a person much recognition when they do occur, but are obviously missing when they don't. Often they are skills from other ability areas, such as personal hygiene or self-management, but they have an impact on an individual's social competence because their absence or inadequacy inhibits the likelihood of other people initiating and maintaining extensive social interaction with the individual.

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**For Instance...**

**respecting personal space in close quarters**

**Waiting quietly and patiently in line**

**Walking in pace with a companion**

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Here are some examples of foundational social skills:

Eye contact

Personal hygiene

Respecting personal space in close quarters

Waiting quietly and patiently in line

Walking in pace with a companion

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Insert quiz 4 question here



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### Problems with Social Skills Demonstration

- Performance deficit or fluency problem
- Skill acquisition problem
- Interfering or competing behavior



Furthermore, a person's ability to quickly and efficiently demonstrate a necessary social skill also has an impact on their social competence.

In some cases, the student may actually have the required social skill, but may not be able to perform it fluently or make decisions about when and with whom to use it. For instance, the student may well be able to ask the question "what did you watch on television last night?" but may not be able to determine when to ask his classmates or to generate the correct question when other students are discussing television shows.

In other cases, it may be simply that the student hasn't acquired the necessary skill and may need some focused instruction to learn it. For example, the student may not have learned it's OK in small group activity to share materials with classmates and to ask specifically for what is needed. In this context, these skills are necessary for successful social interaction, but if the student hasn't acquired them, they may need direct instruction.

Occasionally, student will have behaviors that interfere or compete with the demonstration of more appropriate social behaviors. Often these problem behaviors are very efficient at obtaining the desired outcome for the student, but prevent access to sustained interactions and opportunities for others. For instance, one student had the annoying behavior of licking other people on their arms in order to gain their attention. While most people did in fact respond rather quickly to this behavior, their reactions to it often prevented further opportunities to learn more successful social behaviors.

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Insert quiz 5 question here

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**Hidden Social Agendas**

*...any behavior that most members of a group or culture believe should or should not be performed in a given situation, but that may not be clearly apparent or instructed specifically.*

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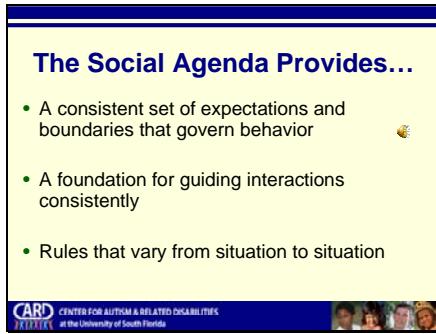
Social errors may often occur because the student is unable to successfully determine the hidden social agenda. This term refers to “*...any behavior that most members of a group or culture believe should or should not be performed in a given situation, but that may not be clearly apparent or instructed specifically.*”

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**The Social Agenda Provides...**

- A consistent set of expectations and boundaries that govern behavior
- A foundation for guiding interactions consistently
- Rules that vary from situation to situation

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As most students interact with each other, they intuitively learn to determine these subtle social protocol. Students with autism often require support to understand them

Consider what a social agenda provides:

a consistent set of expectations and boundaries that govern behaviors. While the agenda will change from one circumstance to another, In most situations, there are norms and limits that define acceptable behavior.

Because the social agenda provides a structure for the social circumstance, they also afford consistency, or a way for those involved in the interaction to anticipate and interpret the behavior of the others. For situations that are problematic of our students, clarifying the social agenda may heighten the structure and predictability for the student

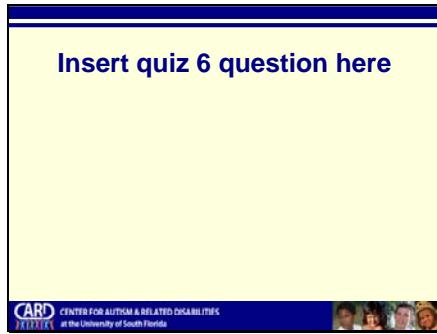
Behavior is deemed appropriate in a social situation depending on the circumstance and the ages, roles and

relationship of the individuals involved.

Rules that govern a social situation most often are implicit, but are still in place and most noticeable when an infraction occurs. Another way to support your students in a social situations is to state implicit limits and expectations as rules.

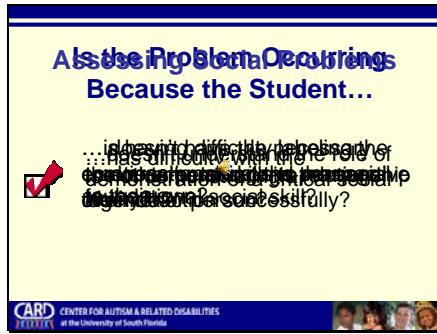
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Insert quiz 6 question here



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Is the Problem Ocurring  
Because the Student...



- ...is having difficulty labeling the emotions or taking the perspective of another person?
- ...has difficulty with the role of the other person involved in the social interaction?
- ...is having trouble understanding social cues?

For students with autism, difficulty in any of these areas may well result in social interactions that are less than successful. When a student has a difficult social moment, an easy way to assess the problem is answer the following questions:

Is the problem occurring because the student....

...is having difficulty labeling the emotions or taking the perspective of another person?

... doesn't understand the role of the other person involved in the

interaction or its' relationship to their own?

...doesn't have the necessary conversational skills to manage the interaction successfully?

Is not demonstrating a foundational social skill?

Has difficulty demonstrating a critical social ability?

Doesn't understand the social agenda?

And lastly, ***When are these skills required in classroom activities?***

By determining in advance as best you can, when these abilities may be needed, you can identify possible times for instruction in a particular skill or then need for additional support.

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Most students with autism require social instruction and support.

- Reading comprehension
- Written expression
- Working as part of a group in a classroom

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Most children acquire these social interaction abilities on an intuitive level as they move through their school years. However, students with autism often require direct instruction and additional support to learn these important social abilities.

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The ability to relate to other people's perspectives has an impact on...

- Reading comprehension
- Written expression
- Working as part of a group in a classroom

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Social competence can also have a significant impact on a student's academic performance. Consider how the ability to interpret and adapt to other perceptions and behaviors of others has an impact on

Children who have difficulty understanding the perspective of another person often demonstrate poorer reading comprehension abilities.

Written comprehension - in order to express oneself effectively in writing, one must have a sense of the reader

One of the most important abilities children learn in school is how to work together cooperatively. To do this successfully, they have to have the ability to share perspectives knowledge and experiences.

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**Social Competence in the Classroom**

Each interaction participant  
Students and teacher share space effectively interprets the exchange accurately

 Students will judge gender based on the exchange accurately.

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Any classroom is a physical environment that serves as the context for countless social interactions across a typical school day. In order for all classroom members to interact successfully the following abilities are necessary.

Students and teacher share space effectively.

Each interaction participant (student/teacher or student/student) interprets the exchange accurately.

Students work together in peer based groups.

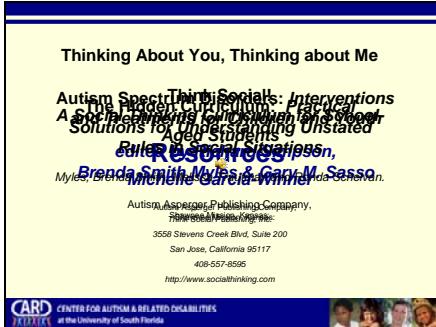
Students interpret and respond accurately to the curriculum.

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Insert quiz 7 question here

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Here are some additional resources for information about social competence and how to promote it with your students.

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