

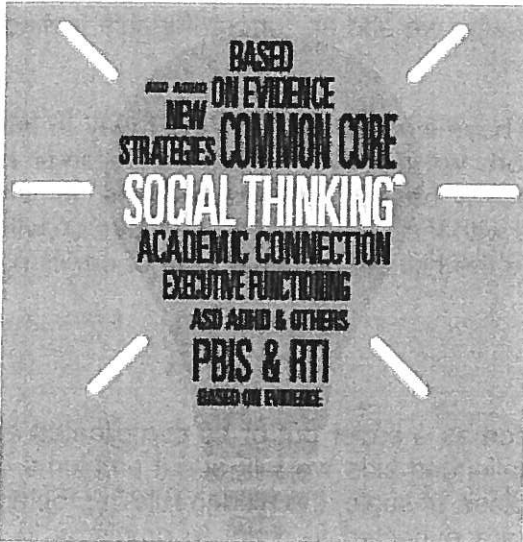
Social Thinking Articles

Learning to Take Control of Emotional Reactions as Part of Problem Solving

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Beckham Linton and Michelle Garcia Winner



We all encounter problems routinely. Some of them are caused by our own mistakes, such as sleeping through the alarm or missing a meeting. Some are caused by others, (a stolen wallet) and some are just bad luck (getting stuck in a traffic jam)!

Just about everything we do throughout the day involves solving some kind of problem; it's just an unavoidable fact of life. What we can do, however, is learn to manage our problems. This involves, in part, managing the emotions that arise when a problem occurs. It also involves being aware of the effect our reactions to our problems have on ourselves and others.

Our ability to regulate our emotions in problem situations greatly influences how effectively we are able to solve the problems we face. In fact, emotional regulation is frequently the determining factor in whether or not the problem is solved and how easy or difficult it is to do so. For example, when a problem occurs, most of us are able to quickly figure out the size of the problem and then regulate our

emotional reaction to stay calm and able to deal with it. But that's not always the case. **New or even bigger problems are created** when the size of our reaction is mismatched to the size of the actual problem. Who wants that?

Defining Socially-Based Problems

Einstein once said, "If I had an hour to solve a problem I'd spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and 5 minutes thinking about solutions." He had a point! When a problem occurs, many of us just swoop in and start trying to solve it without fully understanding what happened. We may overreact or shut down emotionally, making us unavailable to solve the problem at all. This wastes time and energy and often results in the creation of new or bigger problems.

Defining a social problem may include:

- Understanding the stated or hidden social rules—what's expected in any given situation. As long as everyone follows the hidden rules and is doing what's expected, there is no problem and everyone feels okay.
- Understanding the reactions of others, especially when our behavior is unexpected
- Understanding the perspectives and emotions of others.

Conflict can arise when someone has a very different point of view or interpretation of the "rules" in the situation. For instance, we recently worked with a student who became really upset by a teacher's perspective as he had a very different point of view. While the teacher considered the student's behavior "unexpected", the student felt it

was fully “expected” based on his point of view. This is why, when working with our students with social learning challenges, it’s so important to spend time first defining the actual problem from multiple people’s perspectives. That way all people recognize what the actual socially-based problem is! (Ross Greene, creator of the Collaborative & Proactive Solutions model, addresses this topic in detail. Learn more at www.livesinthebalance.org.)

A Problem-Solving Equation

It is helpful for our kids to learn formulas, equations, and frameworks to organize their own thinking. We find the following formula pretty helpful:

A socially-based problem =
an unexpected event or perspective + an uncomfortable feeling

It should be noted that not every unexpected event is a problem. Some unexpected events cause us to feel happy or excited: flowers being delivered, hitting all green lights on a busy street, etc. These situations do not become problems because of the positive emotions associated with them. This is why we add an “uncomfortable feeling” into the formula/equation.

This problem solving equation was created with a group of middle school boys who wanted an easier way to talk about problems and how to solve them. Through our collaborative effort, we discovered that our feelings of discomfort, anger, and/or stress are what motivate us to solve the socially-based problems we face, simply because of our basic desire to feel better. When we feel more comfortable with the situation, we can move on with our plans. In fact, the ultimate goal in social problem solving is to achieve the highest possible level of emotional comfort for everyone involved. Think about it.

The Size of a Problem

Problems are not created equal. For children they can be as commonplace as a paper cut or as complicated as having to cope with a family tragedy. When working with our socially-challenged kids we talk about problems in three sizes: small problems, medium problems, and big problems. Regardless of scale, the hidden rule in problem solving with preschool and elementary school age children is that we are expected to react to problems in a manner that matches (or is smaller than) the size of the problem. This is where social problem solving can get tricky. A problem that is perceived by one person as being small could cause a person with social learning challenges to have big feelings about it and then have a big reaction, which would be unexpected. Not only does this mismatch create more anxiety in the individual, it can also limit the effectiveness of solving the current problem while at the same time creating a new problem.

Figuring out the size of the problem is the first step in being able to match our emotional reaction accordingly. The team at Social Thinking has created a poster that helps develop our student’s awareness of the process of matching or minimizing the size of our reaction to the size of the problem.

The thermometer has the numbers 1-10 ascending from the bottom to the top. The numbers 1-4 represent small problems. Small Problems are defined as those that can be pretty easily solved on our own, despite us possibly feeling a little sad, annoyed, or worried. For instance: having to sharpen a pencil point that broke, doing homework even when we don’t want to, or forgetting they were supposed to bring something to a friend.

Medium problems fall into the 5-7 range. They require someone’s help, often an adult, to solve. That said, it is expected that kids help solve medium problems. Some examples include figuring out a math problem, getting a ride to the store for a project, or forgetting their lunch at home. Medium problems often make us feel some degree of mad, sad, confused, frustrated, or worried.

The numbers 8-10 represent big problems. A big problem makes us

feel really scared, hurt, worried, or upset. Big problems are solved by an adult. For instance: being bullied, getting very sick or injured, or dealing with unfortunate events outside of our direct control. Even adults usually need help solving big problems!

Helping our students learn to recognize the size of their problem and examining the related size of their emotional reaction is an important part of teaching social problem solving. Our poster can help encourage this process.

Start by having students write their problems on the poster in the green, orange, or red sections and circling the corresponding number on the left side. This represents what they think is the size of their problem. Next, they write their reaction (or the desired reaction) on the right side, next to its corresponding number. The student then draws a line from the problem number to the reaction number. If the size of the reaction is the same size as the problem, or smaller, we teach that people usually don't think a new problem has been created. If the reaction size was bigger than the problem size (the line goes "up"), that's unexpected and a new problem has been created. The student then describes what the new problem may be at the bottom of the poster.

The poster is titled "Size of My Problem" and "Size of My Reaction" with an arrow pointing from the problem side to the reaction side. It features a central vertical scale with numbers 1 through 10 and corresponding smiley face icons (😊, 😐, 😞, 😡). The left column is labeled "My Problem" and the right column is labeled "What I did". Below the scale, there are instructions for how to use the poster.

Size of My Problem → **Size of My Reaction**

My Problem | **What I did**

1 😊 | 1 😊

2 😊 | 2 😊

3 😊 | 3 😊

4 😊 | 4 😊

5 😊 | 5 😊

6 😊 | 6 😊

7 😊 | 7 😊

8 😊 | 8 😊

9 😊 | 9 😊

10 😊 | 10 😊

Instructions:

1. Write your problem in the green, orange, or red section.
2. Circle the number that represents the size of your problem.
3. Write your reaction in the green, orange, or red section.
4. Circle the number that represents the size of your reaction.
5. Draw a line from the problem number to the reaction number.

For example, when struggling to get their homework done students often perceive homework as being a small, or perhaps medium-sized, problem. In this situation students will seek help from their peers, parents or teacher while showing some mild level of frustration; the student's emotional reaction fits the problem. Help is given, the student calms a bit more, and the problem gets solved. Other students, however, react to their difficulty with homework by throwing their pencil on the floor, arguing with the teacher/parent, or refusing to do it altogether. Not only does the problem remain unsolved, the larger reaction both limits the child's ability to consider a proactive solution and creates a new problem: increased anxiety and discomfort in those around the student. Furthermore, the adult who could have been there to offer homework assistance is now faced with trying to manage the fall-out from the student's large emotional reaction.

Stop and Think about Feelings versus Emotions

Students with difficulties with executive functioning are highly prone to have problems regulating their emotional reactions. Let's teach kids to take the time to *Stop and Think* as part of learning self-control.

We also want them to learn that we all have feelings and our feelings are okay. "Feelings" are what we feel regardless of whether we have language to describe them. On the other hand, "emotions" are words we use to label how we feel so we can create a better cognitive awareness and begin to learn the process of emotional self-control.

We cannot change our feelings but we can help our students understand how to control the size of their emotions. As they learn to stop and think, they can begin to learn that not all problems are big problems and by better understanding their emotions, they can also possibly change their emotional reaction size in relation to the problem.

Teaching our students that different sized emotional reactions are expected for different size problems helps our students find logic in a sea of emotion. On the other hand, many of our students have impulse control issues and get flooded by big feelings to something even they might agree is a fairly small problem. They have not yet learned to control their emotions. Once again we try to infuse logic: when a big emotional reaction is produced in response to a medium or small problem, other people get upset. This results in new problems for all people involved, including the student.

Points and discussion items at the bottom of the poster help the teacher/parent work with students to determine if their emotional reaction kept other problems at bay, or whether a new problem was created.

This information will take time and effort for your student to learn. Encourage small steps of improvement. Helping your students use language to describe the size of their problem and the expected size of their emotional reaction helps them develop their own level of self-awareness. Allowing them time to stop and think through this process teaches we all take time for self-control; this is all part of the social learning process.

My friend Sal could have used these lessons years ago, but ultimately he got it. Sal consistently overreacted to a variety of situations. One day in middle school, he spilled ketchup on his new shirt at lunch and cried and yelled at a kid who gave him a napkin to clean it off. The kid walked away and Sal spent the rest of the day in despair, wondering why no one would talk to him about it. We spent months teaching Sal how to match the size of his reaction to the size of the problem. Despite being able to verbally explain the process, Sal continued to react in big ways to small problems until one day when Sal broke his arm in gym class. This event, in most of our lives, warrants a big reaction. As expected, Sal cried and yelled, but instead of people moving away like they did in the ketchup incident, people moved toward him to help. This prompted Sal to actually calm down and “work the problem” with them to get him to the doctor as quickly as possible.

When Sal returned to school the next week, we pulled out the poster and he wrote “spilling ketchup” next to the number 2 (small problem) on the left side of the poster and “cried and yelled” next to the number 8 (big reaction) on the right side of the poster. Next, he drew a line from the 2 to the 8 and was able to explain how his reaction did not match the size of the problem and actually caused a new problem. He described his problem like this, “If I stay calm, people care, if I freak out, people stare.” Priceless!

Sal was able to see how crying and yelling was expected and matched the size of the problem when he broke his arm but it worked against him when he spilled the ketchup on his shirt.

This was a turning point in Sal's ability to recognize the actual size of a variety of problems and his newfound awareness prompted an improvement in adjusting his reaction accordingly. Sal's story is also a good reminder to all of us: when teaching students about problem solving, it is also helpful to encourage students to explore that people are more similar than different in how they think and feel about the social expectations and related emotional responses that surround them.

Matching the size of our reactions to the size of our problems takes time, learning, and repetition to master. But with practice we can help our students better understand the importance of doing this to help them feel calmer, enjoy the support of teachers and peers, and avoid creating new problems! Stop and think about it!

BIOS

Beckham Linton is a member of the [Social Thinking Training and Speakers' Collaborative](#), a team of professionals hand-picked by Michelle Garcia Winner who work directly with clients and also provide day-long and shorter customized training on Social Thinking and social learning. Read Beckham's [complete bio](#) here.

Michelle Garcia Winner is the creator of the Social Thinking methodology and founder/CEO of Social Thinking. A prolific writer and international speaker, she specializes in the treatment of individuals with social learning challenges at the Social Thinking Center, her clinic in San Jose, California. Michelle helps educators, mental health professionals, and parents appreciate how social thinking and social skills are integral to a person's success – be it in school, in relationships, in the community, or in their career.

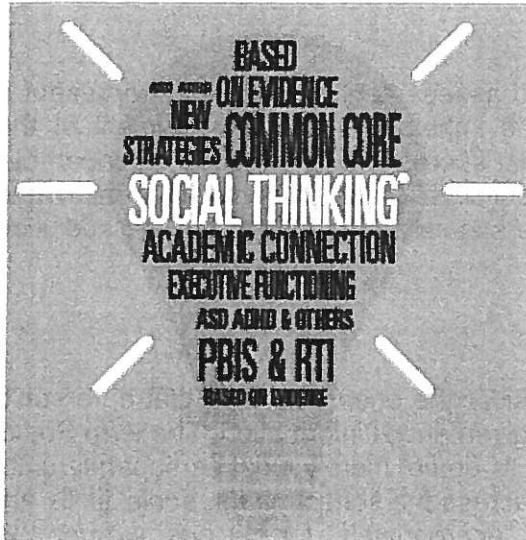
Social Thinking Articles

Assessing the Social Mind in Action: The Importance of Informal Dynamic Assessments

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Michelle Garcia Winner and Pamela Crooke



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While most of us engage in social interaction/regulation intuitively, many students with social learning challenges who have good to excellent language and cognition (e.g., High Functioning Autism, Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified, Asperger Syndrome and/or Attention Deficit Disorder) are weak in their ability to think about how we think socially. They also often lag behind their peers in the development of their social relationship skills. Professionals may regard this higher functioning group as being "quirky" with some level of "social skill problems," but struggle when determining whether or not these students should qualify for specialized services in our schools, given that they may demonstrate strong academic knowledge. Nonetheless, the peer group is generally critical of how these students relate and may actively reject those who don't fit in. Furthermore, the deeper social learning challenges faced by this group may have an impact on how they interpret and respond to academic lessons that require social knowledge, such as reading

comprehension of literature, written expression of essays, organizational skills and participating in peer-based (less structured) work groups. (Westby, 1985; Winner, 2000)

Social intelligence has an impact not only on our ability to live productively, but also on our ability to experience relative satisfaction throughout our lives (Hersh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2003; Goleman, 2006). In fact, the set of tools used for social understanding and social regulation/communication in our early years is the same set required in adulthood to participate effectively as a member of society (i.e., hold a job and live with others in the community). Several years of clinical experience by both authors has led us to the conclusion that IQ scores and achievement fail to predict whether or not an individual considered high functioning will achieve a similar level of success in adulthood (e.g., maintain employment and develop satisfactory interpersonal social relations within their desired community).

Most of us would agree that the purpose of receiving an education is to prepare students to participate successfully in the adult world. Therefore it is reasonable to assume that those with significant social learning challenges need extra supports for learning about the social world, as well as for improving their capacity to develop social relationship skills. However, given that a neurotypical child's social knowledge and social skills are learned intuitively from their earliest days of life (Sabbagh, 2006), generally, teachers need only provide subtle cues to help these students learn to adjust their social behavior across different situations and grade level expectations. Therefore direct, concrete and explicit social teachings are not taught as part of the daily core curriculum. These more intensive teachings are usually taught by special educators, speech-language pathologists and psychologists/counselors.

In order to "qualify" for an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), a professional must demonstrate, via an assessment, that a student's deficits are severe enough across the school day to warrant more intensive

services. Most professionals are taught to rely on standardized measures to determine whether or not a student is eligible for services. Thus, the most logical place to turn to assess a student's social thinking and related social skills would be through formal measures. However, significant limitations persist with the use of standardized tools for higher functioning students with ASD and related disabilities. The dynamic nature of social interaction is not easily captured in a linear standardized test battery.

Simmons-Mackie & Damico, in their seminal article, *Contributions of Qualitative Research to the Knowledge Base of Normal Communication* (2003) acknowledge that communication is a synergistic and dynamic process that quickly becomes indecipherable when we try and break it down into parts in order to test specific aspects. Furthermore, speed is of the essence during the process of interpreting what another person is thinking/saying and coding our own related social response. It is expected that we respond to one another in an interaction within milliseconds to 2 seconds (Vuchinich, 1980). Unfortunately, standardized testing is a process that deconstructs and examines communication in parts, but fails to assess how a student integrates this information. This may result in test scores that demonstrate islands of social knowledge without the ability to combine this knowledge into a functional whole. In fact, Minshew and Goldstein (1998) state that Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) are best described as a deficit in the integration of complex information.

Many clinicians have reported experiencing frustration when trying to find assessment tools to fairly represent a student's social functioning in "real time." This frustration has been the impetus for the development of the strategies described later in this article. A student with very impressive test scores who looks good on paper, but has obvious social relationship issues, becomes perplexing to the diagnostician. These students have motivated the authors to better understand not only why this group should receive specialized teaching, but the specifics behind what should be taught.

What does it mean to assess social thinking and related social skills?

Before assessing social thinking and related social skills, one must consider the enormous task that a person's social mind must undertake in order to integrate and then respond when given social information. The term Social Thinking was coined by the first author to illuminate the fact that social skills do not merely exist as separate units of information learned through behaviorism. Instead as we age, including across the school years, social skills are the behavioral output of our more fine-tuned social thoughts. To interact "appropriately" for our age, we need to consider what others are thinking and feeling as well as the expectations imposed by the situations in which we share our space or interact. While this may seem well beyond the ability of the preschool or young elementary school child, it is not. This can be seen when observing a kindergarten class where most five-year-old children can work in a group of 20 students, adapting effectively to the teacher's expectations across time.

Winner (2000) developed the acronym, the ILAUGH model of Social Thinking to help explain to parents and professionals the many elements that contribute to Social Thinking:

I = Initiation of language to ask for help: enter/exit social interactions, or initiate other interactions that are not routine.

L = Listening with eyes and brain: we listen with both our ears and our eyes in order to interpret what people are doing with their bodies, facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, language, etc.

A = Abstract and inferential thinking: making smart or educated guesses about what people are saying and doing in context in order to decipher meaning.

U = Understanding perspective: considering one's own and others' thoughts, emotions, motives, intentions, prior knowledge, belief systems and personality in context to help more accurately interpret and respond to information.

G = Getting the big picture (gestalt processing): focusing on main ideas and recognizing supporting details; as opposed to getting lost in details and struggling to see how they connect to broader ideas.

H = Humor and Human relatedness: valuing and fostering human relatedness while also exploring the value of humor at the right time, in the right place, and with the right person.

It is also critical that we realize that social behavior is ever-changing based on our own stage of development. We expect students to demonstrate increasing nuance and sophistication in the ways they engage with each other, in their social thinking and related social skills with each passing year. When children are young they have relatively little social knowledge, thus may act in a more "immature" manner. But as they grow, we expect increasing maturity which is reflected by the expression of more finely tuned social-behavioral responses, also referred to as

social skills. Furthermore, social behavior is also dictated by our ability to "read" the changing "hidden rules" or "hidden curriculum" required in specific situations (Myles, Trautman, & Schelvan, 2004). Adapting to the complexities by considering and responding to all of these variables can best be understood as "complex social processing." To our knowledge, there is no standardized test or informal checklist that explores one's ability to socially adapt at a microscopic level, but it is at this level that we form perceptions of how people are "behaving" around us.

Remarkably, across cultures, we have subtle, nuanced behavioral expectations but we don't have a readily accessible way to describe when a child or even an adult is not "behaving" in a way that is expected. Yet interpreting those around us accurately and conforming our social behavior to situational demands, even for our youngest students, is considered a mandatory part of participating in the societies of our home, school and community. Therefore, creative approaches to assess this complex processing are in order.

Aspects of an Informal Dynamic Social Thinking Assessment Process:

The first step in assessing a student's social challenges is to understand the many ways in which we think socially and expect related social behavioral adaptations in others (Winner, 2007). As we acquire this knowledge, we can become better observers of our student's social behavior within social situations. Our goal is to not only observe in structured and unstructured naturalistic situations (Weatherby, 2006), but to also learn what about the student's social knowledge that may support or fail to support social behavioral or social academic expectations.

If a professional works in a school environment, observing a student in the naturalistic setting is an invaluable part of the assessment. Professionals may ask, "Where are the guidelines or written social standards on which we can base these observations?" The answer is that the professional has to observe, to some extent, the student in the setting to determine if the behavior of the student they are assessing is "expected" or "unexpected." For example, if a student is "blurting" out in class, it is important to note that to some extent all students "blurt" on occasion in a classroom. Thus it is not that the student has blurted, it is whether his level of blurring significantly exceeds the expected "norm" of the other students in the classroom.

If a professional does not work within the school, it is important to remember that social behavior happens 24 hours a day and so the assessment should begin in the waiting room or at the initial meeting. Knowledge of general social developmental expectations of students across childhood and into adulthood is helpful. This knowledge is most easily gained by actively observing "normal" behavior in a given situation, whether it is in a grocery store, a school, home, etc. A recent example of this occurred when a 13-year-old boy came for a first visit to the authors' waiting room. The boy stood very close, spoke in a very loud voice, and described his Playstation game in a very, very excited manner. This behavior may have been "expected" for a 6-year-old but was clearly "out of the norm" for a 13-year-old. Thus, the assessment had already begun.

Winner (2007) created a number of informal assessment tasks to better understand how individuals process and respond to social information that is complex in nature. The following is an example of one task within an Informal Dynamic Social Thinking Assessment. The tasks in this assessment are designed to explore a student's thinking in "real time" and are a critical aspect of assessing the ability to relate effectively with others. This core task explores how students use their eyes to process and respond to other's thinking. The task will be described in three parts: a. the task itself, b. how this task relates to developing social interactive competencies, and c. how this knowledge is incorporated across a school or home day using the paradigm of the ILAUGH model of social thinking.

Thinking With Your Eyes:

a. Task description: The examiner works with the student in a relatively small room and asks him to guess what he thinks the examiner might be looking towards. The examiner can cue the student by telling him that the task relates to looking at her eyes. If the examiner is wearing glasses, she should take them off. The examiner then looks at one object in the room that is 8 feet or less from where the examiner is sitting. The student is to focus on what the examiner is looking at, follow her eyes and then state aloud what he or she thinks the examiner sees. For example, if the examiner is looking at a clock, the student should guess she is looking at the clock. The examiner should not correct the student if they are wrong.

After the examiner determines the student's ability to follow the examiner's eye gaze, she can then say, "Now I want you to guess what I am thinking about and this also has to do with my eyes." Now she should look back

towards some of the objects from the previous task. For example, if the student thinks she is looking at the clock he should now state she is thinking about the time. If the student can do this, it indicates that he is able to shift his observation of another person's eyes from thinking about what they seeing to inferring the concept the examiner may be considering or thinking.

b. Assessment of social knowledge: In the research on early development, the ability to follow eye gaze is called "Joint Attention" and it is expected that neurotypical students are proficient by 12 months. When a student is limited in his ability to "read someone's eyes" or what we describe as "thinking with your eyes about what someone else is thinking," it impacts social understanding of the situation. For example, a student is required to determine what the teacher may be thinking in the classroom each and every day (e.g., observing the teacher to figure out whose turn it is to speak or what is expected from the students). This is also the case when two or more individuals are actively engaged in a discussion or conversation. If you take time to observe this skill in yourself, you will begin to notice how much we depend on watching and reading others' eyes to figure out their intentions, etc.

c. How this knowledge is incorporated into the school and home day: Awareness of another person's eyes (and related thoughts) is a central skill for understanding how a person works as part of a larger group in a classroom as well as how to relate to others through play and conversation. It is also considered a part of our own personal safety as we monitor what others see as it relates to thoughts they may be having about us. Typically, when a student has "poor to good eye contact" we determine they need to learn to use appropriate eye contact. What we may not realize is that they are lacking more than the understanding of eye contact itself; many students with social learning challenges are inefficient social thinkers who do not easily making the eye-gaze/social thinking connection. With regards to the ILAUGH model of Social Thinking the concept of "thinking with your eyes" is central not only to "Listening with eyes and brain" but also "Understanding Perspective." The ability to efficiently think about what someone else is thinking also leads to better abstract/inferential thinking as we infer what people mean by what they say, based on what we think they might be thinking about.

Many instances of using this task in hundreds of individuals of all ages has shown us that how a person performs on this task cannot be predicted based on their diagnostic label, IQ scores, or language skills. The task is unique in that it assesses the ability to actively engage in Social Thinking in the moment of social interaction and appears to be a crucial aspect of the assessment of social competencies. Winner (2007) has described a number of tasks that attempt to capture a more "real time" assessment of social thinking and related social skills and discusses how the information gleaned from these tasks helps to more accurately predict a student's actual social processing and responding.

A comprehensive assessment should include a blend of standardized assessments, checklists of social functioning, such as Bellini's Autism Social Skills Profile (2006), and Informal Dynamic Measures of Social Thinking. However, if the professional has time constraints, the least informative method for predicting how a student relates and responds to social information in real-time interactions and in their core curriculum is through standardized tests. In the process of understanding the social mind in action, it is critical to consider that formal tests are not the best and most accurate indicators of a student's ability to function in day-to-day social and academic skills. Instead, this article has given one task to inspire diagnosticians to dig a little deeper into the assessment of the social mind; there are many other creative ways in which dynamic social thinking and related social skills can be explored. Professionals should realize they are on the cutting edge of a new field for which the research has not been completed, but the need for creativity combined with continued learning about the complex social mind and its many functions is crucial. Individuals with social learning challenges are here now and they can't wait for our field and our research to evolve.

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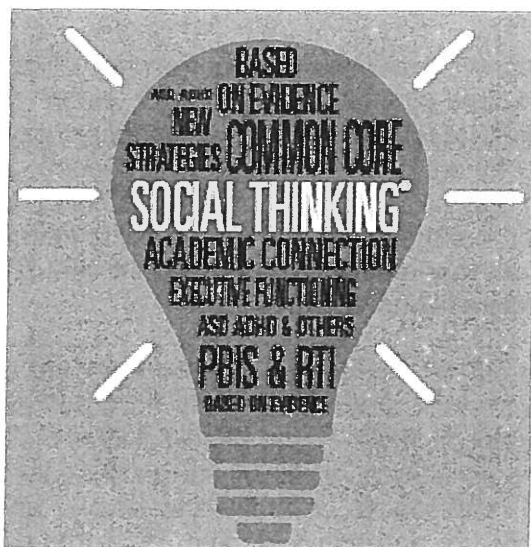
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Social Thinking Articles

Taking a Deeper Look at Whole Body Listening: It's a Tool Not a Rule

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Elizabeth Sautter, MA, CCC-SLP



Phrases like “pay attention” and “listen carefully” ring out in classrooms across the country. Moms, dads, and other caregivers can be heard saying some version of these same words to children everywhere. Paying attention and listening to others are not only considered essential for social communication, but also for learning to be part of a group and for academic success. In fact, these skills are clearly outlined in the Common Core Learning Standards that teachers use to grade their students.

Although we can easily agree that the ability to listen is important, listening involves more than “hearing” with our ears. So how is this multi-layered skill best taught? To make listening more concrete and teachable, speech pathologist Susanne Poulette Truesdale (1990) came up with a powerful, and now very popular, concept known as “whole body listening.” This innovative tool breaks down the abstract concept of listening by explaining how each body part other than the ears is involved: the brain thinking about what is being said; the eyes looking at or toward the speaker; the mouth quiet; the body facing

toward the speaker; and the hands and feet quiet and kept to oneself. In a more recent article (2013) Truesdale stresses that the most critical part of whole body listening takes place in the brain. She states that “when we are asking someone to think about what we are saying, we are in essence asking for the listener’s brain to be connected and tuned-in.”

Over time, other professionals have expanded the initial whole body listening concept to include the heart as a way to encourage empathy and perspective taking. This later addition is helpful when working on social interactions and relationships in which the purpose of listening is not just to “hear” and interpret what is being said, but also to demonstrate shared involvement to make a positive impression. This expanded concept of whole body listening is woven into parts of Michelle Garcia Winner’s larger Social Thinking® methodology to teach the fundamentals of how and why we listen to figure out the “expected” behavior when around others. Similar to other Social Thinking Vocabulary that breaks down the social code, whole body listening has become a foundational concept to help make this and other abstract concepts more concrete and easier to understand, teach, and practice.

Truesdale emphasizes that whole body listening is “a tool, not a rule,” meaning that adults need to think flexibly about how best to use it. There is no “one way” to teach the whole body listening concept. The goal is to create effective approaches for those with a variety of learning styles. And most importantly, to do this in ways that respect each person’s particular needs and abilities.

Kids Do Well If They Can

When children struggle to meet classroom standards related to listening and following directions, they may be misunderstood or possibly labeled as “behavioral problems.” According to their age/stage of development we

expect children to learn how to focus, listen, and follow directions intuitively, using the “built-in” social regulation sense we assume all children possess. However, some children don’t intuitively acquire the social skills and self-regulation that we typically associate with listening. To support these children, parents and teachers need to take a step back and view the situation through a different lens.

Dr. Ross Greene, a psychologist and expert in working with kids who have challenging behaviors, suggests that we ask ourselves, “Does the child *have* the skills needed to perform the task?” He states it perfectly: “Kids do well if they **can**.” Greene believes that it is our job to figure out in which areas our children need support, understanding and/or accommodations so that they **can** do well. To explain listening in a way that makes sense, a host of social cognitive and sensory processing skills may first need to be concretely taught. And in some cases, children with social learning, sensory processing, attention, or other regulation challenges may not be able to perform tasks generally associated with listening, such as keeping one’s body still, making eye contact, or staying quiet.

What’s So Hard About Listening?

When we prompt children to “get out your math book,” do you get an image in your mind of what that looks like? How about “sit down”? These requests are concrete and simple to define and picture. But words like “listen” or “pay attention” are more abstract and challenging to define. What does this request really mean? How does it look in various situations and contexts? And why even care about listening? They are open for interpretation based on the person asking and the context or situation. For instance: listening during story time is different than listening on the playground or during a conversation. When a request leaves room for interpretation, the person being asked needs to be aware of and consider both the person making the request and the social rules within that context. This requires strong social attention, social awareness, and social perspective taking.

In addition, when met with a request to “listen” some adults expect children to not only listen with their ears, but to stop whatever they are doing and *demonstrate* that they are listening with their entire body. This adult-defined expectation may include standing completely still, similar to a soldier at attention. This is not only difficult for most children, but impossible for some. Listening with your whole body involves integrating all of the body senses (sensory processing), and combining that with executive functioning (self-control of brain and body), and perspective taking (thinking of others and what they are saying). This is not an easy task and it’s extremely important to be aware of the processing complexity involved. Many children do not fully understand what is expected of them or may not be able to meet the expected demands when it comes to listening.

Tips from Whole Body Listening Larry

Many parents, teachers, and other professionals supporting children appreciate the way that these guiding professionals have helped break down the abstract concept of listening into more manageable, concrete actions.

Kristen Wilson, a former therapist at my center, Communication Works (CW) in the San Francisco Bay Area, created a story and lessons on whole body listening using a character named Whole Body Listening Larry and examples of how he struggled with paying attention. After Larry learned what was expected of him and each part of his body, he found listening much easier. He wanted to help others by sharing what he had learned.

The clients at our center could relate to Larry’s struggles. They appreciated how the story helped them learn and remember how to show that they were listening. Larry’s story also reminded kids to advocate for themselves when they were unable to focus or attend with their whole body. Kristen Wilson and I saw that Larry was an effective teaching tool and together co-authored the books *Whole Body Listening Larry at Home* and *Whole Body Listening Larry at School* (2011), which were published by Social Thinking Publishing. The books have given children a deeper understanding of what to do in various situations in which they have to self-regulate and listen, and teachers and parents have appreciated a way to talk about this concept and teach it.

A Tool, Not a Rule!

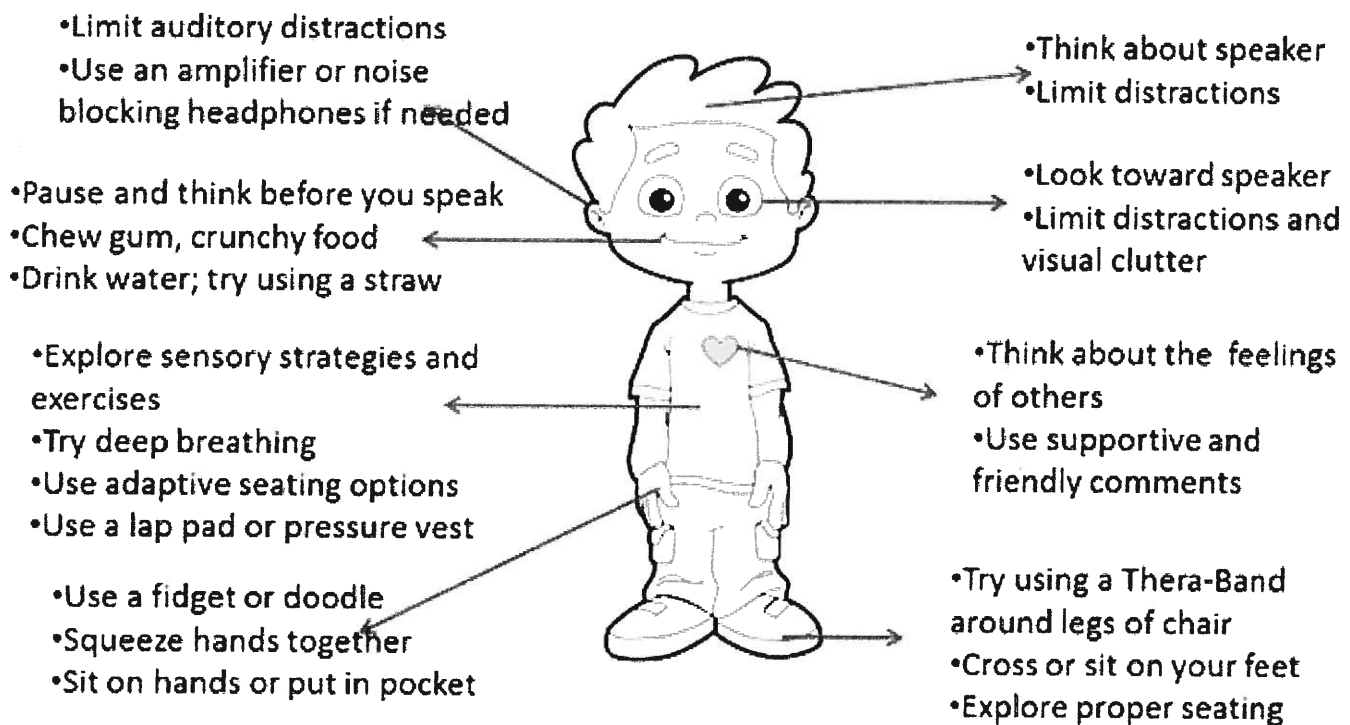
As with other tools and curricula, the abilities and developmental level of each individual must be considered before implementing whole body listening. Some of the skills used in whole body listening, such as maintaining eye contact, staying still, or remaining quiet are extremely difficult and may cause stress or simply not be possible for certain people. When this is the case it’s important that adults demonstrate awareness and understanding.

Parents, teachers, therapists, and employers should make modifications and help individuals advocate for themselves in a variety of social, educational, and work-related situations.

Given the popularity of the Larry books, posters, and lessons, it is important for adults to be sure that the material is appropriate for anyone to whom it is presented. Teachers, parents, or other adults should not “enforce” this concept or any other on someone if it will cause anxiety, distress, or shame. When a child or adult is interested and capable of learning how to listen with his/her whole body it can be helpful to explore strategies and accommodations with the support team.

To aid in teaching whole body listening, some general strategies and accommodations follow, developed by myself and Leah Kuypers OT/R, another former therapist from CW and author of the popular curriculum, *The Zones of Regulation*®. Each person is different and should be assessed for individual needs and support. Also included is information to build awareness for differences that may occur, especially for those with sensory processing challenges. In these incidences modification and differential teaching should be implemented. The following visual provides a quick reference:

Tools & Accommodations to Support Whole Body Listening



Graphic © Kuyers & Sautter 2012

Ears: Limit auditory distractions. Explore the use of an amplifier (e.g., frequency modulation (FM) system) or noise blocking headphones if the child is easily distracted by background noise.

Be mindful: People who are hard of hearing or deaf can listen through ASL interpretation, lip reading, gestures, and written words or images.

Eyes: Look toward the speaker, maybe not directly but checking in for facial expressions to “read” emotions and others’ intentions. Limit distractions and visual clutter.

Be mindful: Direct eye contact can be overwhelming, intimidating, or difficult (even painful) for some. Persons can hear what is being said even if they are not looking directly at the speaker.

Mouth: Practice impulse control by pausing and thinking before speaking (brain filter). Chewing gum or crunchy food can provide sensory input that helps regulate one's system. Drinking water, especially through a straw, can be helpful.

Be mindful: Some people need to make verbal sounds to help them process what is being said and stay calm.

Hands: Use a fidget or doodle. Squeeze hands together. Sit on hands or put them in pockets.

Be mindful: Some people move or flap their hands as a way to regulate themselves and can still listen/hear while moving their hands.

Feet: Tie a Thera-Band or deflated bicycle tubes around legs of a chair as a place to rest the feet and/or use as a fidget for restless feet. Explore proper seating for posture and comfort. Cross or sit on feet to help keep them still.

Be mindful: Some people need to move their body to stay regulated, attend, and feel comfortable. If they are moving, they can still listen and may be able to learn better.

Body: Explore sensory strategies and exercises (e.g., chair push-ups, deep breathing, etc). Consult an occupational therapist to explore adaptive seating options and use of a weighted lap pad.

Be mindful: Some people need to move their body to stay regulated, attend, and feel comfortable. If they are moving, they can still listen and may be able to learn better.

Heart: When children are developmentally and cognitively ready, help them think about *why* we listen to others. This includes creating rapport, a shared experience, and considering the feelings of the speaker and others and how their listening behavior might affect the thoughts of others. Practice building perspective taking and thinking about others versus themselves and their own interests during social interactions and conversation when wanting to remain part of a group and/or make a good impression. Practice using supportive and friendly comments and using the Social Fake (a Social Thinking strategy of acting interested even if you're not) when needed. Also, help children understand that when we are around others it is socially expected that we care (pay attention to them) enough so that others feel comfortable with our presence in the group.

Be mindful: Caring about others and how our own behavior affects others in a social situation can be shown in many different ways. Don't assume someone doesn't care just because that person has difficulty with whole body listening. Also, it's crucial to acknowledge and teach that some people make us feel uncomfortable. We don't have to personally care about everyone we talk to and adults should not force caring where it doesn't exist or if the person does not seem friendly or safe.

Brain: Teach kids about the brain and how it works. Teach short and sustained attention strategies. Practice controlling impulses. Introduce The Social Fake (Social Thinking concept) and limit distractions. Lastly, one of my most favorite tools is mindfulness, which has been proven to be a powerful tool for the brain and all other body parts. Teaching how to be aware of the present moment, on purpose, can really help with knowing when to pause and reflect before acting, and knowing how and when to use whole body listening.

Be mindful: It's important to do a check-in before assuming that someone is not thinking about what is being said—they might show it in a way you don't expect.

Be An Advocate

If the expectations of whole body listening prove difficult or impossible, it's important to advocate for your child or for yourself. For example, if you or your child/student find it hard or painful to maintain eye contact, discuss this with the relevant people involved in the situation. Stating what's real and true at the onset helps to create reasonable expectations and prevents a situation in which expectations go unmet. By modeling and teaching advocacy skills, adults help others develop the ability to speak up for themselves.

Adults can also create an environment that's conducive to good listening by keeping expectations reasonable for the developmental and cognitive level of students. Keep these ideas in mind:

- Sitting still for long periods of time is hard for *everyone*, and not possible for some.
- The goal is not to create student "drones" who are taught to demonstrate whole body listening in only one specific way.

- Whole body listening should not be used to discipline children. Don't forget that it is a teaching tool—not a rule.
- Create an environment that is conducive for listening with your whole body. Limit distractions, think about calming techniques, and be sure to support transitions and awareness for when listening with the whole body is expected.
- Help create situational awareness by talking about the hidden rules and the level of whole body listening that is expected at a given time.

Whole body listening is a useful tool that breaks down the tasks involved in listening. It has not only aided in making a complex concept clearer, but it increases awareness of expected behavior and can facilitate the teaching of self-advocacy skills. If taught, practiced and supported in a mindful manner, it can become a habit and more automatic response. However, to use this concept correctly, we must be sensitive to the unique abilities of each person. Parents, teachers, therapists, and even employers should consider the challenges that whole body listening may cause and, when needed, should adapt listening strategies to suit a person's particular needs. When appropriate modifications are made and abilities are taken into account, whole body listening can be a powerful tool that benefits a broad and diverse range of people.

BIO

Elizabeth Sautter is the co-director/owner of Communication Works (www.cwtherapy.com). She is a licensed and certified speech-language pathologist who has been working with clients and their families since 1996. She is experienced in the areas of autism, developmental disabilities, social cognitive deficits, and challenging behaviors and since 2001, has focused most of her career on social cognitive and self-regulation intervention and training. Her latest book release is [Make Social Learning Stick!](#) (2014).

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About the Books

[Whole Body Listening Larry at School](#) and [Whole Body Listening Larry at Home](#) are charming stories set in rhyme and geared to young readers in Pre-K to grade three. The authors explore how two siblings, Leah and Luka, struggle to focus their brains and bodies during the school day or at home, and the simple yet powerful teachings shared by their friend, Larry, who helps them learn more about what it means to use their whole bodies to listen and attend to others.

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We recently received a letter from an educator who was asking about her middle school aged student who exhibits impulsive behaviors. Impulsive behaviors are common among our students with social thinking/social learning challenges. The problem is that impulsive behavior is observed as unexpected behavior and can result in challenges in both functioning as part of a group, and gaining social acceptance by one's peers, both within and outside the classroom. Plus, middle school is a time when our students become more aware of their social differences. They are nevertheless trying to assert their own independence alongside increasing expectations by adults and by teachers that they become more responsible and handle greater levels of independent thought, schoolwork and behavior. At this stage in social development, impulsive behaviors can often result in teasing and bullying by peers and cause exasperation in teachers who have to manage the student's repeated disruptions.

Impulsivity is obviously tied to self-regulation (sensory and emotional).

Several Social Thinking concepts relate to treatments that encourage

the impulsive student to expand self-awareness of his or her own physical and emotional states. Developing strategies that build awareness of the thoughts and feelings of one's self and of others is the first step. We then relate how each of us responds to **expected** versus **unexpected** behaviors in different social contexts. Finally, we teach our students how to use their own awareness and knowledge of social expectations to develop self-regulatory strategies so they can monitor and modify their behaviors to meet the needs not only of themselves but also of others. To learn these skills, the student needs to identify basic emotions in the self and in others and expand his or her awareness that each of us has emotional reactions to each other *and* we have reactions to others' reactions (e.g., embarrassment, etc.)!

On top of this our students are expected to monitor their sensory needs and use related strategies to help them stay as calm as possible in different situations. The multi-channel monitoring and self-regulatory systems require processing and responding from many different inputs (physical, perspective taking, emotional), which is why the social experience taps so strongly into our executive functioning.

It can be argued that almost every "impulsive" student has executive functioning learning challenges. Hence, they may be able to describe what they need to do when calm but struggle in the moment to self-regulate adequately as they try to juggle so many regulatory systems.

Consider that most children at age five are quite skilled in managing impulsivity and this is one of the reasons why they are considered ready to learn in a large classroom (e.g., kindergarten)! The child who remains impulsive into his middle school years certainly is wrestling with a weak self-regulatory system. Explaining this to teachers and other adults frustrated by this student's behavior is a start (e.g., the child is not just acting like a trouble maker in the classroom on purpose!). This also leads us to the work of Ross Greene (author of *The Explosive Child* and *Lost in School*) who states so eloquently, "A child would [behave] if he could."

However, all of our understanding of a student's impulsive behavior does little to help students function together in a group (a mandate of the school experience) so we also need to teach the teacher and student how to better manage his or her "challenging behaviors." Our goal is to try to identify their root causes and work from there, rather than simply focus on extinguishing the behavior. An excellent book to guide the development of the team process related to managing challenging behavior is [The Behavior Code](#) (Minahan & Rappaport, 2012).

The Letter

The educator's letter on this topic and my response follows. I brainstorm some more specific options for helping her student.

Dear Michelle,

I'm wondering what your thoughts are on managing impulsivity. I have a middle school student who has an IEP coming due. The student often has the best intentions (knows what kinds of thoughts he will give people), but still does unexpected behaviors (e.g., interrupting his teachers, repeating stereotypes he hears, and farting in class). I have explained to his learning support teacher that while we have gone over these behaviors and what kind of thoughts they give people through social group lessons these behaviors may still be exhibited due to difficulty filtering/controlling impulses. The student has received speech services since preschool.

Many of my students do well in my small group social skills group but fall apart in learning support classroom and regular education classes. I'm looking at revising this student's social thinking goal (previously it was working on social thinking through looking at pictured social scenes and real-life experiences in social group). My challenge now is determining how to continue to help this student generalize more across the school day and try to determine what amount of a behavior is reasonable based on his levels of impulsivity. This student has some tick behaviors due to Tourette's (i.e., eye blinking, head twitching). Middle school is tough due to students not wanting to appear different from their peers...the last thing they want is the SLP coming into their class working with them. Sixth grade isn't too bad, but 7th and 8th the kids generally want nothing to do with me outside the speech room. As always, any suggestions are greatly appreciated!

My Response

Hi there! Here are some ideas based on your email:

Explore the book [The Zones of Regulation](#) which seeks to establish a system for teaching students sensory as well as basic social-emotional understanding of others to assist with the more global concept of helping our students develop better global self-regulation systems. Within her book, with my permission, she incorporates teaching about [Social Behavior Mapping](#)

Set up *Social Behavior Mapping* (SBM) type feedback in the mainstream setting and have the student or an assistant take data on the student's behavior. Has he read the book [Social Fortune or Social Fate](#)? This provides direct instruction to students about SBM concepts.

Explore if there is a response to his unexpected behavior from adults/peers in his environments that may inadvertently reinforce and maintain that behavior. For instance, are peers encouraging the unexpected behavior, leading adults to swoop in with negative attention when he does the unexpected in a far more predictable manner than when he does an expected behavior? This would encourage the unexpected behavior since he is at least getting attention from others.

Are there certain tasks, situations or curricula you see more unexpected behavior? Even for students we consider to be "smart", they can still struggle with the abstract or gestalt based concepts that need to be interpreted and responded to in the curriculum. Many of our students demonstrate especially problematic behavior when required to write paragraphs or more abstract schoolwork such as math word problems (See articles I have written on the [JLAUGH Model of Social Thinking](#) to learn more about this.) Keep in mind that it is important for educators and parents to assess the student's level of self-awareness in the moment he is producing challenging behaviors. If he is unaware of his unexpected behaviors it will continue to be difficult for him to self-monitor them. If he has then also work with him on developing motivation to self-monitor his behavior across situations. When you have him track data, only track what is realistic behavior for him to demonstrate. A student's awareness that the behavior may be unexpected, as you know, does not make a student produce expected behavior reliably. (Just as you and

I am aware of healthy food choices but often choose unhealthy foods to eat, even when we know it is a bad choice). His unexpected behaviors are what he is used to doing so they are his default behaviors. He has to be able to practice developing competency with the concepts and then be motivated to apply the newly acquired skills in other places at school. I have been working with students a lot on using goals and action plans to help them figure out the steps in taking their increased awareness and behavior out the door. At the end of this blog are some worksheets on developing and monitoring progress on action plans related to short-term goals.

You may also want to use Sticker Strategies type tools to help put visual cues front and center.

Consider developing peer mentor training to encourage peers to coach him in real time by making expected choices.

You may want to encourage the teacher to use the Social Thinking Vocabulary in classes to help all kids be more aware of how their behavior impacts others and themselves; it sounds like you are familiar with these lessons from our book Think Social! A Social Thinking Curriculum for School Age Students

As mentioned, one aspect of self-regulation is self-monitoring our physical and emotional states to better understand how to stay calm. Tools include biofeedback systems that can be worn across a school day that provide concrete feedback of a student's physical states (anxiety, stress). Teach him to observe the data and use calming strategies that directly relate to his social thinking goals in the class environment. Biofeedback systems that are immediately accessible across a school day (including newly developed apps) can help students to become more aware of their physical reality and better use strategies that maintain stability even when faced with harder tasks or more complex social situations.

It may be helpful to use more specific strategies to target specific behaviors, e.g., his blurting, etc. Break down each unexpected behavior and have him develop a hierarchy of which ones he is motivated to work on changing, why, and what he can do as a replacement behavior. And don't forget to have him contribute how he wants to reward himself for doing the work involved!

I hope at least one of these ideas helps!
Michelle:)

Impulsivity: Goals and Action Plans Worksheet

Goals are things we THINK about.

Action Plans are things we DO to help ourselves accomplish our goal.

Usually you have to do multiple, sequenced action plans to meet a goal.

If you talk about your goal and don't participate in the plans to reaching your goal, this is called "*talking the talk*." If you do work through your action plans to help meet your goal, this is called, "*walking the walk*."

To help you walk the walk...

We have long-term goals (e.g., get a college degree) and short-term goals (e.g., apply to colleges). Short-term goals can also explore how to get rid of a specific behavior and what steps you go through to diminish the presence of that behavior.

For example, if you have a short-term goal to stop blurting, we need action plans to be aware of how you change your behavior to avoid blurting.

Goal: avoid blurting

Action plans:

1. Think with my eyes to see how the speaker is talking to. If the speaker is not looking at me, then avoid speaking and do some further thinking.

2. Is this a time where the speaker welcomes another person to make a comment (a teacher is allowing students in the class to ask questions), if so I can raise my hand while keeping the question or comment in my mind but speaking it allowed.
3. Be aware that not everyone who wants to speak gets a chance to speak. If the speaker does not give you attention, even if you have sought it in an expected manner, then continue to keep the thought in your mind.
4. If you feel you need to express your idea but you are not being welcomed to speak aloud, write your thought or question down in a blurring journal. Arrange a time to show your teacher or parent the thoughts in your journal, away from the larger classroom discussion time.

We will begin by exploring short-term goals: Describe one short-term goal you and others would like you to work on:

Short-term Goal:

Now list 3-4 sequenced action plans you need to achieve to help you get closer to meeting this short-term goal. You may want to ask for help when writing these to discuss how you can list out a series of specific and defined actions to go along with your goal.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Data Sheet/Goals and Action Plans For _____

Short-term Goal _____

THE BELOW ACTION PLANS INDICATE BEHAVIORS YOU HAVE TO DO TO HELP YOU ACCOMPLISH YOUR short-term GOAL.

- A teacher, counselor or parent should approve the action plan.
- Action plans should be things you are capable of doing but that you need to work to remember when to do each of these during specific times.
- When you review how you are doing on your action plans, choose a date (perhaps you will review them daily, weekly?)
- Put an "+" on next to the action plan, on the date you are recording it, to demonstrate you accomplished working on that action plan.
- Place a "-“ in the date box corresponding with an action plan you did not achieve.
- Place a "=/-“ in the date box if you met it half way or half the time.

Action plans described:	DATE	DATE	DATE	DATE
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				
5.				
6.				
7.				

Explore how you graded yourself on your action plans. Now consider what challenges you faced in doing the action plans. Explain these challenges as "roadblocks" or negative things you said to yourself that kept you from working on doing the action plan (self-defeating comments). **Roadblocks/self-defeater comments/excuses:**

Explore the strategies you used that encouraged you to do the action plan. How did you remember to do it? How did you self-monitor doing the action plan? What positive message did you say to yourself to encourage you to do these new behaviors? Explain these as: **Strategies that helped you succeed (inner coach):**

Explore what you are learning about your own learning by attempting to meet these action plans, which then help you meet your goal. Or what you learned about yourself when you did not really attempt to change any of your behaviors: **What did you learn about yourself?**

Revise your action plans as needed and keep trying!

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Social Behavior Mapping - Connecting Behavior, Emotions and Consequences Across the Day



Many individuals do not intuitively understand how their behavior affects other people. Social Behavior Mapping, one of the most popular tools within the Social Thinking Methodology, is a visual flowchart that is used to “map” the consequences of any behavior in any situation – good or bad, and brings to light the perspectives of everyone affected by the behavior. For use with all ages. [see more](#)

