

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS NETWORK NEWS



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Issue 27

Think Again! A Review of Social Cognitive Theories

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Most parents, educators and practitioners can identify what an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is and would be able to give a qualitative description of its characteristics. However, despite their working knowledge of Autism and day-to-day interactions with children with ASD, they may still be puzzled by the disorder. Even though substantial progress is made in the field of Autism research every year, we still don't have a clear understanding of its underlying mechanisms. In order to try to explain and understand Autism, researchers have established several theories. The following three social-cognitive theories of Autism are among the front runners: Executive Dysfunction, Central Coherence Deficit (or Weak Central Coherence) and Theory of Mind.

Consider this scenario: The beginning of the school year has been hectic and the classroom could really use a clean-up! You ask your students to clean and organize their desks and like busy little bees, they get to work. They automatically know they should first empty their desks, go through all the materials and discard anything they no longer need. In addition, most students would know to clean out the desk with a cloth before putting anything back. While most students intuitively know how to begin this process and what is involved, students with an ASD will have difficulty knowing where to start, what steps are involved, etc. Sometimes even simple aspects of a task like knowing to take out a pencil, eraser and copybook in order to begin a task, can be daunting for a student with ASD. This difficulty can be explained by the theory of *executive dysfunction* (Hill, 2004). Executive function refers to the group of functions involved in the planning and execution of complex behaviours. This includes behaviours such as multi-tasking, shifting attention, beginning and monitoring tasks, mental representation of the steps involved in a task, ultimate task goals, cognitive flexibility, impulse control, and organization.

Let's look at another scenario: After a school field trip to the apple orchard, Grade 2 students were asked to draw a picture that reflected their experience. The teacher reviewed some of the things that they saw, such as the lines of apple trees, the different kinds of apples, the small petting zoo they had at the orchard, the tractor which they rode out to the orchard on, etc. Most of the students got busy creating colourful pictures representing their day at the apple orchard, while the student with ASD spent the whole time drawing a picture of the tractor that he had fixated on during the trip. Although his drawing of the tractor might have been particularly detailed, he was missing the 'big picture', which was that the teacher wanted a representation of the *experience* of apple picking. The child's ASD related difficulty can be explained by the theory of *central coherence deficit* (Rajendran & Mitchell, 2007). Central coherence refers to the ability to process all given information within a context to construct a general meaning. Individuals with Autism have a very detail oriented processing style; while there may be some advantages to this style, contextual meaning is compromised.

In a third scenario a group of teenage girls are getting ready to go to the first high school dance of the year. One of them turns to a girl with ASD and asks her, "does my outfit look nice?". To her dismay, the girl replies, "No, those colours are ugly". This is not an uncommon social experience for individuals with an ASD, and can be explained by *theory of mind*. Dr. Simon Baron-Cohen, who developed the theory, explains, "By theory of mind we mean being able to infer the full range of mental states (i.e., beliefs, desires, intentions, imagination, emotions, etc.) that cause action. In brief, having a theory of mind is to be able to reflect on the contents of one's own and other's minds. Difficulty in understanding other minds is a core feature of autism spectrum conditions" (Baron-Cohen, 2001). In the example above, the teenager with ASD is not able to infer the mental state of the other teenager and is unaware that her response will inevitably have a negative emotional impact on her. In addition, due to the difficulty with inferring the content of other's minds, individuals with ASD often believe that what they are thinking is what everyone else is thinking; this makes perspective taking particularly challenging for them.

While social cognitive theories can't offer anything conclusive in terms of etiology at this point, they continue to be studied, and offer insights which give us a deeper understanding of Autism.

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References:

- Baron-Cohen, S. (2001). *Theory of Mind in Normal Development and Autism*. *Prisme*, 34, 174-183.,
Hill, E. (2004). *Executive Dysfunction in Autism*. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 8 (1), 26-32.,
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Behaviour Tip

3 Behaviour Tips to start off the year:

1. Use visual supports

Visual supports help in the understanding and retention of instructions and schedules for a student with an ASD. They not only appeal to the learning style of these students but they also help in making the information more meaningful and their day more predictable. As a consequence their anxiety and challenging behaviours are reduced.

2. Use positive reinforcement

In situations where a student with an ASD seems unmotivated or discouraged to complete a task, using positive reinforcers or a reward system is a helpful way to provide external motivation to the student, as well as prevent any negative behaviours arising from a student's efforts to avoid engaging in the task/activity.

3. Be consistent

One of the most important rules in behaviour management is to be consistent in language and method with the students we work with. This is even more critical when there are several staff members dealing with the same student. Using consistent materials and strategies as well as communicating with the student in the same manner on a daily basis will greatly increase the chances of improving challenging behaviour over time by offering greater structure for the student.

Occupational Therapy Corner: Facilitating Homework Completion

With every new school year, the home routine needs to be reorganized to include homework periods. Although homework time is not always easy, it is possible to make it a more enjoyable period for both parent and student by periodically reviewing a few guidelines and adjusting strategies to fit the needs of the learner. Please note that the following homework strategies can also be adapted to be used during individual teaching and independent work periods at school.

- * Identify a quiet and visually organized area of your home for homework, with limited distractions (away from TV, radio, siblings playing, etc.). If needed, create a study carrel with a large box to support visual focus, or try using ear muffs/headphones if it is not possible to find a quiet environment.
- * Provide an appropriate size chair and table/desk for the student. Feet should be flat on the floor when sitting straight with back resting on dorsum of chair. Height of the table/desk should be about two inches above the student's bent elbow when arm is aligned along the trunk in a straight seated position.
- * Orient the table/desk or lamp so that the lighting source is on the student's non-dominant side (i.e. on the left for right-handed individuals).
- * Make sure all necessary supplies are within reach. Books and materials can be organized in a small carrel or shelves nearby.
- * Identify the optimal time for homework completion and be consistent with it. Take into account that students are generally more available for learning after a break from cognitive work requiring concentration and following an alerting movement activity.
- * Ask the student to choose a motivator/reward activity (reading, coloring/drawing, listening to music, computer time, etc.) to be done after homework. As needed, use a "Before... After..." visual card to emphasize that reward comes after homework.
- * Develop a visual/written schedule including all activities to be completed during the homework period. Insert short 2 minutes breaks as needed in-between activities, and/or breakdown more challenging activities into chunks to be done in-between easier ones.
- * Use a visual or regular timer so that the student knows that the homework period has an end.
- * Use manipulative supplies (e.g.: pasta noodles, straws, blocks, etc.) for math/number work.
- * Try using oral-motor strategies (such as chewing gum/a straw, sucking on a sour candy or ice chip, drinking from a sports water bottle, eating crunchy foods: apple, carrots, crackers, etc.) to support alertness and concentration during working periods.
- * Include movement activities (e.g.: bouncing on postural ball, jumping on re-bouncer, rocking chair, catching/throwing ball, jumping jacks, etc.) with learning/reciting activities.
- * Alternate work position by allowing the child to work standing with worksheet on wall; sitting on bean bag/rocking chair to read; lying on tummy on floor to write/draw/color, etc.
- * Embed short muscular-resistive activities (such as chair push-ups, foot stomp in sitting/standing, hand squeeze and pull, body stretch, etc.) throughout the period as needed.
- * Include short breaks with eyes closed, listening to music and/or breathing deeply to relax.

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Our team is comprised of professionals with a variety of specializations. Designated as a Centre of Excellence within the province, our mandate is to assist LBPSB schools in the implementation of best practices for the inclusion of students with an ASD and to serve as a resource to the other English school boards in Quebec. Our team provides assistance to students and families and works to support educational personnel in augmenting their capacity to meet a wide range of needs in the classroom. We do this through direct intervention, coaching, consulting, professional development, and the sharing of materials.

We're on the web!

<http://www2.lbpsb.qc.ca/eng/asdn/index.asp>

Hot Off the Press

The Social Times is a yearly subscription made up of nine issues that can be helpful for teaching social skills to students in grades 3 – 9. Developed by Kari Dunn Buron and Brenda Smith Myles, it is written directly to the students in their voice. Each issue explains a specific social skill and provides exercises, worksheets and other activities to reinforce the lesson. Topics such as asking for help, telling jokes, tattling versus telling and sarcasm are addressed in the various issues. Issues are delivered each month of the school year. A subscription costs \$15.00.

To view or borrow a sample of nine issues from a previous school year, please contact an Autism Consultant from LBPSB.

Try this

To promote joint attention!

Joint attention involves two or more people paying attention to the same thing, sharing an emotional state or trying to accomplish the same thing while being aware they are working together. Joint attention skills involve being able to gain information by looking into another person's eyes, following their gaze and looking at what their attention is drawn to. Joint attention is critical for social development, language acquisition and cognitive development. When attempting to encourage joint attention with a child, try bringing something that they will find really fascinating and which has a cause/effect type of action to inspire interest and excitement. Intentionally become the source of new sensory experiences for the child and become a co-participant in each activity. Consider what the child has a special interest in and discover ways to engage in the interest together. By showing your enthusiasm for each activity, you can help the child bring more curiosity and energy to the experience. One activity which you can try to promote joint attention is building a block tower together. In this activity, each person takes a turn showing the other, with their eyes, which block to choose and where to put it. Another idea is playing *eye spy* without clues but instead requiring one person to guess what the other is looking at by following their gaze. As the child develops the ability to engage in joint attention it is also important that they become skilled at sustained attention, shifting attention, sharing emotions, perspective taking, and emotional regulation.

www. <https://sites.google.com/site/autismgames/home/games-pages>

Learning Apps

LetterSchool is a fun, interactive app for students to practice writing uppercase and lowercase letters and numbers. It promotes fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination. This app includes different levels of difficulty and eventually leads to free form writing. This app. costs \$2.49. It is very engaging and popular amongst Kindergarten and cycle 1 students.

Coming Soon!

The Centre of Excellence for Autism is pleased to launch this year's ASD Lecture Series on **Tuesday, November 13, 2012 from 7–9pm** in the LBPSB boardroom. Cindy Coady, M.A. is a Relationship Development Intervention (RDI) Consultant with over 20 years of experience working with children and families. Using the RDI model, she will help parents and professionals understand how the core challenges of autism manifest themselves in the classroom and what strategies can be used to promote school success. The spring lecture will be held on **Tuesday, March 19th from 7-9pm** (speaker to be announced).

[WWW](http://www.autismoutreach.ca)

www.autismoutreach.ca— Although this website is based in B.C. and describes services available for residents of B.C., it also includes resources and publications which provide information regarding best practices and strategies for children with Autism.