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Social Thinking® Philosophy-Michelle Garcia Winner

How do we learn to behave in socially acceptable ways in different environments? What allows us to read body language and understand the feelings, thoughts and intents of others in each of the places where we learn, work or play so that we know how to respond? Why do those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have difficulty learning these skills and how can we teach our students with ASD to interpret the behaviour of others and adapt their own so that they act in ways that are expected in different contexts.

Michelle Garcia Winner, the founder of the philosophy called Social Thinking®, has spent years researching these very questions and developing interventions to support people with ASD. Winner states that we can't simply teach social skills to students with ASD and expect them to know where and when to use these very specific skills. We need to teach them to be better observers of others so that they can interpret behaviours and know how to react in specific situations. Garcia Winner describes these skills as *being able to share space effectively or adapt to others across contexts*.

Social thinking is the process by which we interpret the thoughts, beliefs, intentions, emotions, knowledge and actions of another person along with the context of the situation to understand that person's experience. If we are engaging or sharing space with another person, we use this information to determine how to respond to affect the thoughts that person has about us and to achieve our social goals (e.g., being friendly to maintain a friendship, acting generous to impress a date, and seeming unfriendly to deflect attention when walking alone late at night, etc.). Social thinking is our meaning maker - it allows us to interpret the deeper meaning behind what others do in the world, and (if the situation calls for it) prompts us with how to respond. According to Garcia Winner, a person's social thinking ability has a considerable effect on his or her relationships and success in school and at work. It affects the person's social skills, perspective taking, critical thinking, social problem solving, play skills, self-awareness and self-regulation. It can also interfere with reading comprehension, written expression, ability to learn and work in a group and organizational skills (socialthinking.com).

Garcia Winner states that people generally behave in ways so that others will have good thoughts about them. We want to be perceived favourably so that people are comfortable around us and want to build relationships with us. As infants, we begin to develop socially and start to recognize facial and vocal expressions and read body language. We then assign meaning to these behaviours and adjust our actions so that those around us smile, show affection and respond positively when we behave as expected.

Our next stage of social development continues with our learning to communicate and share enjoyment with others. We communicate for the purpose of seeking assistance, seeking or giving information and for showing interest or talking about one's interest. Learning to communicate effectively is a complicated skill that requires the ability to think of others and interpret their reactions. When communicating, we need to gauge the interest of others in what we are talking about and determine how much time we should talk, when to listen, and how to ask for help.

These specific developmental stages are not readily attained by students with ASD. They don't intuitively learn to observe others and, in fact, Garcia Winner says that people with ASD are poor observers of social information and need to be directly taught to observe others and to *think socially*. Learning social skills in a specific context is clearly not enough; a student can benefit greatly from being taught to interpret social information and adjust their behaviour and actions to different situations. What is acceptable in one environment or situation might be completely unexpected in another. If we simply teach people a skill such as greeting others or using good manners, how can they anticipate all the unique contexts that they will find themselves in or when and where to use these skills.

We can spend hours practicing a certain skill but our students will still make social errors. This happens because they haven't fully thought about the situation and the people in that particular environment. Direct teaching of this social thinking approach helps our students determine which communication skill or behaviour is expected.

Many teachers and support persons have begun using the Social Thinking ® materials in their classes, in social skills groups or on a one to one basis. It is important to note that the materials should only be used by those who understand the Social Thinking philosophy and recognize that teaching these skills is not about judging students for their good or bad choices or about disciplining them for inappropriate behaviour. In fact, Garcia Winner uses the terms *expected* or *unexpected* to explain behaviour in a way which supports students to understand that it is important to pay attention to what people are comfortable with in different environments so that they can build and maintain positive relations.

To see more about social thinking philosophy view the following Utube videos

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iEbxNnNzVTs>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GeHV2u0cCz0>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3qYz1SRy15M>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vUd8e9Utuic>

Teacher Tip

Teaching the Size of the Problem

One of the difficulties our students with ASD face is that their reactions are often disproportionate to the size of the problems that occur in their everyday lives. Michelle Garcia Winner and Pamela Crooke discuss the idea that the reaction size (i.e., the behavioural response to problems) is often inflated by our students' perceptions of the size of the problem and the feelings that our students have about them. Similar to a volume meter or other concrete visual tools, Garcia Winner and Crooke suggest using a tool such as the *size of my problem poster* to support our students in identifying how big or small problems really are and to help them attach a more appropriate response to them. Problems that are considered small or what the authors refer to as "no big deal" are those that can be navigated independently such as dropping a pencil in class. However, when a reaction is larger than the size of the problem, a new set of problems can be created such as peers feeling uncomfortable with the situation and excluding the student who is having the larger than expected reactions. For more information on helping support social thinking please visit www.socialthinking.com

Apps & Links

As mentioned in other sections of this Newsletter, Socialthinking.com is a great reference for articles and resources related to Social Thinking. For FREE webinars on the topic, visit <https://www.socialthinking.com/eLearning/categories/FreeWebinars>.

Another great place to order books or materials to help support teaching of Social Thinking is through Autism Awareness Centre (based in Calgary) bit.ly/AutismAwarenessCentre.



The [Book Creator App](http://BookCreatorApp) remains one of our favourite apps because it allows educators, parents and students to create, read and publish digital books according to needs and interests of the learner. You can include, pictures, videos, and audio and it is available for Chromebooks, Windows, Mac, Android as well as iOS. Visit bookcreator.com for more information and video demo.



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Our team is composed 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 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://coeasd.lbpsb.qc.ca>

Try This!

The "Whole Body Listening" handout provides a visual cue for the concepts of *listening* with your eyes, your brain, your heart, etc. to keep the student's entire body properly engaged and aware of the people around them. This tool helps to teach self-regulation to children who may be struggling to sit still and focus. It can be preceded by an introduction to the student of what it means to listen with different parts of the body, in order for them show the person speaking that they care about them. This explanation will allow the student to use the handout afterwards as a reference point and reminder. Keep this tool visible near the student's desk for easy access.



Read All About It

Thinking About YOU Thinking About ME

Author: Michelle Garcia Winner

An essential tool for improving interpersonal relationships by teaching individuals with ASD or other related neurodevelopmental disorders how to improve their communication, social awareness and perspective taking skills. Michelle Garcia Winner's practical approach is based on theory of mind research and is adapted to a variety of settings for individuals who present with a range of language and cognitive profiles. The book's chapters include content on The Four Steps of Communication and related concepts and activities, IEP goals and how to teach them, Social Behavior Mapping, The Social Thinking Dynamic Assessment Protocol, and Garcia Winner's practical informal assessment strategy. This book is a must have for educators, consultants technicians, and professionals working with individuals with social communication deficits.

Student Artistic Expression

