



## Social Thinking

Social thinking is the ability to label and describe one's own and other's feelings and realize the causes of emotional experiences. This skill helps an individual to recognize the needs of others and is very important in seeing things from another's perspective. This skill is also essential for cooperation in social settings. Social thinking requires the ability to read non-verbal cues, understand social conventions, and show care and concern for others.

### Home and School Situations Requiring Social Thinking

- Completing group assignments or projects
- Understanding why a sibling or peer is upset
- Modulating one's attitude to be appropriate for the setting
- Helping a parent to clean or do chores
- Letting another child borrow a possession, such as a toy or pencil
- Helping a teacher with classroom chores
- Being a member of a sports team or club

### Hints and Strategies to Improve Social Thinking

- Help your child set up a play date with a friend. Prior to the friend's arrival, try to anticipate some of the friend's needs and interests. Have your child prepare activities that her friend is expected to enjoy. Additionally, have her help you in preparing for other house guests, such as grandparents, cousins, or family friends, with a similar theme in mind.
- Use a digital camera or digital video camera to record a range of social interactions. Later, review the pictures or video with your child, while asking her to describe her observations of these social and emotional cues. Provide your child with hints and specific observations, such as facial expressions, physical gestures, tone of voice, eye contact, or movements that may have predictive value.
- Watch DVDs or a television show without the sound to discuss nonverbal cues. Help your child to create a "script" to what she is seeing as practice for understanding social situations. For example, asking your child to predict what will happen next in a particular scene can be very useful.

- Find opportunities to discuss what others might be thinking. For example, discuss how another child might be feeling before giving a speech in front of the school, putting on a performance at a dance recital, or staying home alone for the first time. Find other opportunities to discuss how people are feeling while they are watching a sporting event on television, learning about a death or an accident, or while observing someone earning an award for an accomplishment. Initially model and verbalize your experience or feelings while engaged in a joint activity and then ask your child to briefly describe her thoughts or feelings.
- Practice complimenting others and being positive. This is an important skill that can help your child to get along with others because it is encouraging to others and often increases one's likeability. Model this behavior and praise your child when she makes an effort to compliment someone.
- Have a Family Game Night. This can be done using either traditional board games or interactive movement-based games that can be used on a Nintendo Wii. Traditional board games such as Monopoly and Boggle, are available electronically, as well as new family games such as Rock Band and Guitar Hero, World Tour. All have multi-player modes in which cooperation and encouragement are necessary. These games also offer great opportunities for your child to praise others who are on her team, demonstrate how to use the electronics so others can understand them, or learn how to give advice or suggestions in a helpful fashion.
- Require participation in at least one after school group activity per week. Many children who struggle with social thinking skills do not have opportunities to practice these skills due to avoidance of social situations or difficulties they have experienced in the past. It is best for them to be involved in an after school activity in which they have a distinct interest and some expertise. Practice and training prior to involvement in the after school program will help your child to have some type of expertise to offer peers and will also serve to enhance her self-esteem. For example, a child who joins a computer club should be given opportunities to use computers at home, and directed to learn about computer-based activities in which peers are likely to share an interest.
- Find after school activities that are welcoming to children who have experienced some difficulties in social thinking skills. One such activity is cross-country teams, particularly at the elementary and middle school levels in which a child's individual performance is highly unlikely to have an impact on the overall team performance. This is a good example of an activity in which all children receive encouragement from their peers. Involvement in theater activities often requires stage crews, lighting, and technical support that are done behind-the-scenes which would be appropriate for children who have difficulties in areas of social thinking. Volunteer activities which provide community service are also opportunities to improve self-esteem and social skills in a non-competitive fashion.

## Books on Social Thinking

Cooper-Kahn, Joyce, Ph.D. and Laurie C. Dietzel. (2008). *Late, Lost, and Unprepared: A Parents' Guide to Helping Children with Executive Functioning*. Bethesda, MD: Woodbine House. [Chapter 16]

Cox, Adam J., Ph.D. (2007). *No Mind Left Behind: Understanding and Fostering Executive Control--The Eight Essential Brain Skills Every Child Needs to Thrive*. New York, NY: Penguin Books. [Chapter 8]

Csoti, Marianna. (2001). *Social Awareness Skills for Children*. Philadelphia, PA: Taylor & Francis Group.

Plummer, Deborah M. (2008). *Social Skills Games for Children*. Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley.

Richard, Gail J. and Jill K. Fahy. (2005). *The Source for Development of Executive Functions*. East Moline, IL: Lingua Systems.

## Websites and Articles on Social Thinking

LearningWorks for Kids (<http://www.learningworksforkids.com/EF/social.html>): The premier resource for executive function information, offering a detailed explanation of social thinking, tips for parents, and activities to improve this skill.

Everyday Health Network (<http://www.everydayhealth.com/adhd/living-with/tips/adhd-children-improving-social-skills.aspx>): Author provides five tips to help children, specifically those with ADD/ADHD, successfully develop their social skills.

National Network for Child Care ([http://www.nncc.org/Guidance/sac32\\_wo.friends4.html](http://www.nncc.org/Guidance/sac32_wo.friends4.html)): This site offers step-by-step recommendations for improving social skills, in the form of a "coaching session."

## Games and Activities That Can Practice Social Thinking

- Wii Games (e.g. Wii Play, Sports, etc.)  
Playing Wii games with a friend or sibling allows your child to practice taking turns, making conversation, sharing techniques, and accepting defeat in a face-to-face setting.
- The Sims  
In creating Sims characters, your child has the opportunity to initiate and observe characters interacting socially with one another. The Sims also offers a variety of ways for characters to socialize with one another, including networking, acting friendly, and using ice breakers, which allows your child to experiment with different social mechanisms.

- **Rollercoaster Tycoon**  
Customers of your child's rollercoaster park will report their likes and dislikes, forcing your child to make appropriate changes based on this feedback in order to maintain the park successfully.
- **Webkinz**  
This site allows your child to chat and interact safely with other pet owners online.
- **Joining a sports team or club (e.g. Little League, Scouts)**  
Joining an organization, such as a sports team or club, provides your child with the opportunity to interact with a diversity of peers, offering an outlet to practice introductions, perfect social skills, and plan play-dates.
- **Apples to Apples**  
This game allows your child to interact with friends and family members in a face-to-face setting and emphasizes trying to predict what other players will like, allowing your child the opportunity to practice recognizing what others are thinking.
- **Guess Who?**  
This classic guessing game offers your child the opportunity to interact with a peer, while recognizing facial expressions and physical features on the cards and reinforcing effective verbal and conversation skills.
- **Visiting or volunteering in an unfamiliar environment**  
The unfamiliarity will help your child to gain practice in making conclusions based on her own observations and also to practice introducing herself and interacting with any strangers encountered in these settings.
- **Taking on different roles during make-believe play**  
Role-playing will allow your child to learn to take on the roles of others during imaginary play, hopefully allowing her to extend this skill to real-life settings.