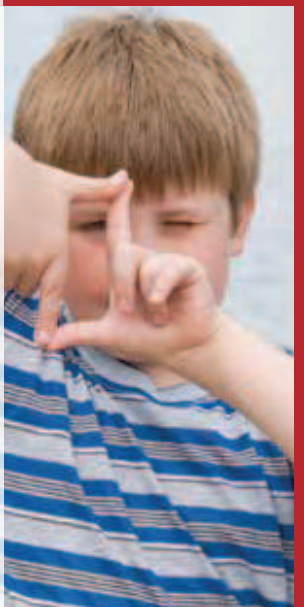


**SOCIAL
LEARNING
AND SOCIAL
FUNCTIONING**



Base social skills instruction on abilities rather than diagnostic labels

by Michelle Garcia Winner MA, CCC-SLP, and Pamela Crooke, PhD, CCC-SLP

THINGS ARE NEVER QUITE AS SIMPLE AS THEY SEEM, and this is most certainly the case with social learning. As children, most of us followed a similar developmental journey when acquiring social skills, but rarely do we now give thought to which skills allow us to function across different people and places each day. In fact, it is likely that we have no idea when we acquired the ability to take multiple perspectives, initiate communication at the right time and place, enter in and out of groups, play cooperatively or collaboratively exist with one another—it just happened. We certainly didn't place a milestone on when we began to understand context-specific concepts and the relationship to how people think, act, and behave in that situation. And yet, development marched on and we emerged with these concepts and skills. Our innate ability to engage our social awareness and attention to self and others paved the way.

Now imagine the effects on social learning when an individual's innate driver of his or her own social attention and awareness is delayed or driven by a brain seeking the details that may or may not be a critical part of the social situation. The result is a Pandora's box filled with social challenges that foster more struggles and social issues and so on. So, the question becomes, Can we address the individual needs of different types of social learners in one-size-fits-all social skills program?

Social learning and ADHD

Social learning can be considered one of our many forms of intelligence (Gardner, 1993, Goleman, 2006), ready to kick into action based on our neurology from birth and expand and evolve across our lifetime. There is no end to this learning process. However, the road to acquiring these competencies is a lot bumpier for about sixty percent of persons with ADHD who have social learning challenges (Barkley, 2010). Many students with ADHD end up with a variety of diagnostic labels across the years. Roughly one-third of all students with ASD are also diagnosed with ADHD (Rao & Landa, 2013).

As professionals dedicated to social learning and longtime practitioners, we've spent years considering the research as it relates to our own clinical observations

and how to develop individualized treatment plans for those with attention, executive functioning, and social self-regulation issues regardless of the diagnostic label. In the process, we've found that a student's diagnostic label merely raises a flag to indicate the probable presence of social learning challenges, but does little to direct how to approach treatment. This prompted several years of work delving into concepts that ultimately helped us to define different levels of the social mind.

The obvious result is that different types of social learners should have different types of lessons. Simply placing students with social challenges into generic social skills groups makes the assumption that all social learning needs are the same. We disagree and have spent a great deal of energy helping professionals and families understand how to differentiate which types of lessons are appropriate for which type of student rather than assume all students need all lessons. However, before developing treatment ideas, we had to develop a conceptual model from which we could organize who to teach, what lesson, when, and why.

We've developed a framework that has six critical synergistic concepts related to social abilities. We refer to this as the *Cascade of Social Functioning* (see the sidebar). Each element in the cascade is based on current research, and

As we study each of our students' social behavior based on the six areas addressed in the cascade, our understanding of his/her level of the social mind should become more clear and a pathway to developing a treatment trajectory more relevant.

The Cascade of Social Functioning

DEVELOPED BY MICHELLE GARCIA WINNER AND PAMELA CROOKE, the Cascade of Social Functioning is comprised of six critical synergistic concepts related to social abilities:

Awareness to the situation: Ultimately, we are expected to adapt our social behavior to the situation, but we must first be able to take note or be aware of the situation or context.

↳ **Attention to social expectations** within the situation requires one to consider the different perspectives of others one shares space or interacts with in order to figure out the related expectations. The expectations are often unstated social rules, which are also referred to as the "hidden rules" or "hidden curriculum."

↳ **Social self-awareness** is critical to help figure out how one is perceived as meeting or failing to meet the hidden rules according to another person's perspective. A student who struggles to attend to the first two steps in the cascade is usually observed as being "aloof" and lacks the social self-awareness to consider other's perspectives to self-monitor, therefore demonstrating a lack of self-control over their social behaviors.

↳ **Literal versus abstract interpretation of communication within the situation:** A weaker ability to understand another's perspectives for social attention and self-monitoring results in difficulty trying to interpret what others mean by what they say. For this reason, those who have limited social self-awareness tend to interpret verbal and non-verbal language in a more literal manner. Those who have more awareness of how their ideas and behaviors may be interpreted in multiple ways by others are most likely to have the ability to understand and express their ideas with abstract language.

↳ **Concept versus detailed interpretation within the situation:** Those with a more literal manner of interpretation are more likely to see the concrete details of the situation rather than the concept. It can logically be argued that when a person is so detailed-focused that she cannot take note of the situation or how people are governed by the situation, she would consequently struggle to gain a "main idea" or concept. Our highly literal thinkers tend to also be very detail focused in how they see and interpret the world. Those with stronger conceptual awareness tend to have stronger perspective taking skills and be more successful at interpreting and responding to information as long as they can organize their response in a timely manner using their executive functioning skills. This particular concept is the one that could possibly go higher in the cascade as it is central to all parts of processing, making this be a bit of a chicken-and-egg scenario.

↳ **General versus social anxiety.** Those who lack social self-awareness are typically very literal and detail oriented leading them to experience anxiety dealing with transition and change. This world-based anxiety appears in our students who envision their world as maintaining sameness and cannot anticipate change (nor learn from past experiences as how to cope with change) due to inflexibility in how they interpret and respond to information. On the other hand, those with a stronger social attention, self-awareness and interpretation are more likely to develop social anxiety in their adolescent years as they understand more clearly how they are perceived by others -even if unsure as to what part of their social skills creates that perception.

the relationships between the concepts are drawn from our clinical experience. Consider how information in one part of the cascade impacts how a student functions in another part of the cascade and each subsequent concept. In other words, each concept flows into one another, highlighting the social executive functioning involved in social interactions. While it can be argued that some of these concepts could cascade in a different order, we chose this path as a way to explain the information the most efficiently.

Differentiating instruction based on social learning abilities

As we study each of our students' social behavior based on the six areas addressed in the cascade, our understanding of his/her level of the social mind should become more clear and a pathway to developing a treatment trajectory more relevant. At this point we begin to differentiate what types of lessons will benefit the individual. For example, a student with weak perspective taking, poor self-awareness, highly literal, detail-focused with world-based anxiety, will need a treatment program that builds upon very basic Social Thinking concepts along with other resources. We would start teaching from a perspective of what the student currently understands about the social world and then gradually help to expand his/her knowledge in a highly detailed step-by-step treatment program. This type of student would likely benefit from a combination of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) alongside some very basic Social Thinking concepts. One resource to help illuminate these basic concepts for elementary level students is entitled, *You Are A Social Detective* (Winner and Crooke, 2008).

However, for an individual with solid awareness of other's perspectives, a good understanding of what the expected behavior is in a particular situation (even with difficulty self-monitoring in the moment), the ability to abstract information, and more subtle social differences which make them appear neurotypical, a more nuanced Social Thinking approach is critical. In stark contrast to the treatment approach for the literal learner described previously, this nuanced learner would require a deeper level of discussion about social expectations, how to consider and manage different perspectives/emotions, and how to translate that knowledge into social behavioral responses (social skills). We would also closely monitor signs of depression or social anxiety during adolescence, as this is often an issue for students with a greater level of awareness. *Socially Curious and Curiously Social* (Winner and Crooke, 2009) explores some of the critical information related to social learning and is written directly for the nuance-challenged adolescent. Parents and professionals have found the book useful as well.

Other core Social Thinking treatment strategies provide information to help students improve the ability to share

space with others (for example, working side-by-side with others in a classroom), develop relationships with different types of people (peers, teachers, coaches) for different types of reasons (friendship, team collaboration, cooperation, hidden rules, etc.). It is important to note, however, that most social concepts across a school day expand beyond interpersonal relationships into interpreting and responding to the academic classroom curriculum. With the Common Core or State Standards, all students—no matter the age—are expected to participate in lessons that encourage them to consider another’s point of view in written material, movies/videos, and classmates. Students are also expected to efficiently sort out the difference between a concept and related details in order to participate in social conversations, classroom discussions, or express one’s ideas through written expression. The analysis of information that relates to understanding others’ perspectives requires Social Thinking; the expression of those thoughts requires not only Social Thinking but also social skills.

When developing treatment plans related to social learning and social executive functioning, our decisions should have less to do with the student’s actual labels and more to do with the exploring the student’s social functioning and self-regulation abilities across a range of situations at home, in the community, and at school.

For more information (including free articles, blogs, strategies) related to Social Thinking for parents, professionals, caregivers, and adults with social learning challenges, visit socialthinking.com. Resources for products are also available on the website. To learn more about the different levels of the social mind and the impact on treatment planning, read the article “The Social Thinking-Social

Communication Profile,” available on socialthinking.com.

Michelle Garcia Winner will be speaking about Social Thinking at the CHADD annual conference in Virginia on Thursday and Friday, November 7 and 8, 2013. 📍

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