

Social Skills 1: Foundational Social Skills: Script

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M7T0: Introduction to Module

Hi, thank you for supporting spectrumteaching.org and welcome to this module, Social Skills Part 1. In this module we will cover how we can assist in the development of social and communication skills for children with an autism spectrum disorder diagnosis.

Why is this important? Having fundamental social skills helps integration with peers, which is important for a child's confidence, peer-to-peer learning, emotional well-being, and social development. Impairments in social communication are part of the diagnostic criteria for autism spectrum disorder. Because children with ASD have difficulties socializing with others, this also makes them particularly prone to bullying.

In context of interpreting and applying these modules, we should learn from parents and other support personnel to understand the relative strengths of a student's social profile and the priorities for social development. Our goal is to provide you with a foundational understanding and some basic skills that will allow you to begin working with your students. However, the application of these skills will vary depending on the individual. We need to prioritize which areas to work on, build the foundations for a child to succeed in learning a certain skill, and matching our support with the child's ability. Please consider that we do not want to overwhelm our students with too many goals or skills to learn. We should always remember to utilize our guiding principles of understanding the individual, empathy, and patience throughout this module, and application into real life.

In Social Part 1, you can expect to learn about challenges associated with ASD that impact social development, and ways to teach students fundamental communication skills. In Social Part 2, we will discuss peer relationships, bullying and helping support social integration.

Hope you enjoy these videos, and feel free to contact me, Eric, using our online form. Thank you, and in the next video, we will start by discussing some social communication challenges related to ASD.

M7T1: Social Communication Challenges

In order to better understand how to help a student with ASD develop basic social skills, we must first understand what these challenges are. In this video, we will go through an overview of some social communication challenges that are related to ASD.

Deficits in social communication is one of the core criteria in the autism spectrum disorder diagnosis as specified in the DSM-5. As with the autism spectrum, communication challenges also widely vary between individuals and encompasses many different traits. We will focus on 5 areas of social communication challenges: understanding of language, non-verbal communication, reciprocity, fixations or restrictive interests, and sensory processing challenges.



For challenges in understanding language, students with ASD may have challenges sarcasm, analogies, jokes, metaphors, and other aspects of abstract language, or may still be learning the basic skills in language, such as one or two-way communication, and sentence formation.

One aspect of this that we focus on at spectrumteaching.org is the tendency to interpret language literally. For example, if we were to say we were “in a pickle” when referring to being in a difficult situation, a child with ASD may be confused because you obviously are not inside of a pickle and wouldn’t even fit in one.

To compound on these challenges in understanding language, children with ASD may also have difficulties in reading nonverbal language and tone. Considering the theory that 55% of communication is nonverbal, and 38% is through vocal elements, even if this theory is not entirely true, a lot of our communication is not through what we explicitly say. Because of these challenges, students with ASD often have difficulty reading social situations, leading to seemingly inappropriate behaviours. For example, a child with ASD may have difficulty reading facial expressions that their peer is sad. This misunderstanding around body language may also lead to stiff presentations of their own body, which peers may perceive as awkward or uncomfortable.

Reciprocity is another area children with ASD commonly struggle with. This is the natural back-and-forth of conversation, and can be conceptualized as a game of catch between two people. When one person speaks, it is like throwing the ball to the other person, giving their turn to say something, and return the ball. When a student has trouble understanding reciprocity, they may be disinterested or not realize the importance of what others have to say, having one-sided conversation that peers may not want to be part of. We can think of this as a person throwing a ball to themselves while the other person watches.

Students with ASD often have restrictive interests and fixations on certain topics. In Educator-Student relationships, we discuss how this can be used positively, but for social interactions with other children, if others do not share a student’s interests, they are less likely to engage with them. All people build friendships better when there is mutual interest, and this might be a bit harder for children with ASD because their interests are often very specific. If we can find students that also share these interests, these can be opportunities to facilitate friendship!

The last area of challenge that we will discuss in this video is sensory challenges. Remember students may face many unique challenges in social settings, we just can’t possibly cover them all. As you learned from the introductory module, sensory processing challenges may impact any or all senses, and are categorized into hyposensitivity (under-sensitive) and hypersensitivity (over sensitive/sensory overload). For social settings, we should realize that due to someone’s sensory profile and needs, a student may be less comfortable participating in certain activities, or may be less focused on interacting with others due to prioritization of other needs that need to be met. We can think about it in this way, if we are really hungry, we might be more focused on getting lunch than talking to strangers. Now the severity of that urgency may be much more powerful for a student with ASD.

In this video, we looked at 5 general areas that can pose challenges in social situations for students with ASD: language, nonverbal communication, reciprocity, fixations and sensory processing challenges. This was just a brief overview to give you an idea of these challenging



areas, and it is a good idea to further learn about these if they apply to your student. Many of our other modules go deeper in these areas and there other great resources available online. Thank you for watching, and in the next topic, we will go through a simulation activity.

M7T2: Simulation: Playground Overload

To better understand how different types of sensory processing challenges can influence focus and communication during classroom instruction please go through the Stacey: Playground Overload, simulation on the Sensory Simulator app.

Stacey experiences auditory and visual hypersensitivity. The audio of a typical playground setting is played throughout the simulation, with the first 10 seconds being a reflection of how neurotypical individuals might filter out to perceive the area. Stacey has difficulty doing so and hums to self-regulate herself to make herself more comfortable. She is able to drown out the distressing environmental noises, giving her more agency over her experiences. This is an example of a behaviour that is driven by a sensory need.

Because of this stress from the environment and focus on sensory regulation, Stacey is not focused on socializing with others. You will hear a girl say “hello” to Stacey, but is ignored due to Stacey experiencing sensory overload.

As with all the simulations, these are just a representation of some of the experiences that some individuals with ASD may face. Some aspects have been modified to allow for neurotypical individuals to better understand these scenarios. Please note that we have not shown other aspects that affect individuals with ASD, such as the way of thinking, emotions, and social aspects into the simulation.

Once you have finished the simulations please proceed to the next video. Thank you!

M7T3: Theory of Mind

Thank you going through the simulation. I hope that the activity helps you better understand how these sensory challenges can also play a role in social scenarios, although they might not be directly related to social skills. In this video, we will discuss theory of mind, which is a common area of challenge for individuals with ASD. If you have seen our educator-student relationship module, much of this will be a repeat, but we will use peer-examples. Feel free to skip ahead if you feel comfortable with this concept.

Let’s begin by defining theory of mind. Theory of mind is the ability to understand another individual’s thoughts, beliefs, emotions, perceptions, and intentions. We use this as a compass to navigate social scenarios, as it helps us understand the reasons behind what other’s say or do. Theory of mind commonly begins development around age 4-5, however, for children with ASD, this may be delayed, take longer to develop, and/or may never gain the higher-level skills.

In addition, individuals on the autism spectrum often place a high value on truth, being extremely honest, and may view the world in a concrete or black-and-white way. As you can imagine, without theory of mind, understanding what to say and how to act in different social contexts can be very challenging, especially if truth is prioritized. As much as we like to believe it is always good to be honest, in many of our daily situations, we only provide parts of the truth, choose not to say anything, utilize white lies, or wrap our truth in more comforting



language. These are aspects of “normal” social interaction, as dictated by our norms, that can be challenging to understand for a child with ASD. Because of this, we should be aware that often, the “mean” things that a child might say, are really just truthful opinions that are not maliciously intended.

Let’s take a look at an example of a situation in which deficits in theory of mind may impact student peer relationships. We have a student with ASD named Tim, who struggles with theory of mind, making it difficult to understand the emotions and perceptions of others. During lunch break, his classmate Mark, is upset that he is the last person chosen for their pick-up soccer game. Mark complains under his breath “why am I always chosen last?”

Others might realize that this question is rhetorical, and can see that Mark is visibly upset, knowing that they should probably not respond to the statement. Tim, however, struggles with reading this situation, and with values in truth, responds “because you are the worst player.” As you can see this can hurt the feelings of Mark, leading to negative impacts on Tim’s relationships with his peers. In addition, Tim may be confused at why Mark is mad at him, as he simply answered a question Mark had asked.

Theory of mind is a difficult area to help a child build, but as a teacher, we can try explicitly explaining to Tim, how Mark was asking the question rhetorically, and when already upset, did not want to hear something else that might further hurt his feelings.

In this video, we introduced the concept of theory of mind and how it can impact peer relationships. Thank you for watching, and in the next video, we will discuss understanding intent & peer mistakes.

M7T4: Intent & Peer Mistakes

Hi, in this video, we will build on our discussion of theory of mind, and talk about a similar topic: understanding intent. As we mentioned in the last video, children with ASD may have challenges with theory of mind, and this may involve understanding of other individual’s intent in their actions and words.

~~We should mention that a study in 2017 (Mazz et al.) did show that a comparison between groups of youth between 5-13 there did was no significant difference between children with ASD and the control group in their ability to understand intent. Despite this, we should also realize that this was done in experimental settings, and as a group finding, does not necessarily mean a child with ASD might not have difficulties in understanding intent. There are behaviours that are seen in classrooms and home situations that involve a misunderstanding of intent. Let’s take a look at an example.~~

One area that understanding intent can commonly impact social situations is understanding of others mistakes. As we have talked about in other modules, children with ASD often prioritize precision and can have a black and white view of how things are supposed to be done. This all combines into a dislike for errors, from both themselves and others.

If another student, Rakan, accidentally bumps into Tim, our student with ASD, during an art class, he might unintentionally cause Tim’s pencil to draw a line across his work. Tim,



frustrated that his drawing is “ruined,” is now mad at Rakan, and claims that he was purposefully pushed.

In this situation, as an educator we can talk to Tim and clarify that there was no negative intention. We should try to facilitate Rakan apologizing to Tim, while also stating that he “did not mean to bump him.” Mistakes do happen, and students in these integrated settings should be supported in developing this understanding of accidents.

To further help with understanding of mistakes and intent, we may choose to work with Tim to identify this incident as an “accident.” If we have not previously, we should set a concrete definition of accident: “an action that happens by chance with no intention.” We should clarify that it is a mistake and that everyone naturally makes mistakes.

After labelling this as an accident and explicitly communicating no intent in the action, we should help Tim understand that errors are “no big deal.” We can do this through explicit communication, as well as showing him that many accidents can be corrected. Depending on the drawing, we can try erasing the line, giving Tim the option to restart the drawing with more time, or any other creative ways you might think of. The goal of this is to show Tim that this action does not have significant impact over the time and that his perception of order can be restored.

To summarize, as an educator, we can label an action as a mistake or accident, show that mistakes are often correctable, and that it is no big deal – there are no significant impacts in the bigger picture. Remember, we want to explicitly explain these to students and support attempts at apologies between students as well. That concludes this video, thank you for watching!

M7T5: Greeting, Initiating & Closing

In the next few videos, we will cover fundamental social skills. These are very important for a student to develop to facilitate positive interactions at school. We will go through Greetings, Initiating, Closing, Choosing Activities, Turn-taking, Sharing, Waiting, and Playing Games. Teaching social skills often requires one-on-one engagement and it is difficult to find this time in the daily flow of the classroom. Try to find time during independent working activities, such as reading time, supervision during lunch breaks, or other activities that can allow you to step away from the rest of the class for a few minutes. It might also be beneficial to gain support from an EA.

In this video we will start by covering greeting, initiating, and closing. Greetings are important to learn for a child with ASD as they are both a social norm, but a way to introduce themselves in a positive way. They help with first impressions and is the first step of social interaction.

When teaching or helping students to greet someone, we should observe how the student’s peers socialize and to teach age appropriate interactions. For example, handshakes are common in the adult world, but don’t make much sense for a 9-year old.

Initiating is the process of starting a social interaction, and for younger children often involves asking to participate in an activity. This is something many children struggle with, as it can be intimidating to engage peers, especially those that may be unfamiliar. It takes a lot of



confidence and courage for a child with ASD to approach their peers, and unsuccessful attempts can greatly hurt this confidence. Being able to initiate properly ensures that a feeling of being welcome is established for all members in an interaction. For example, we are all familiar with the feeling of intrusion when an individual joins an activity uninvited. Simply introducing and asking to join prevents this.

Closing involves ending an interaction. Being able to do this in a socially appropriate way, is not only part of common social expectations, but helps disengage from the other members in the social context and can support more willingness for future interactions. As an example, it is commonly perceived as rude if someone just walks away during a conversation.

So how can we teach these social skills? Many of these fundamental skills do require more one-to-one support, but we have tried our best to recommend strategies that can be incorporated in a larger class setting.

To help with initiating and greeting, if we have multiple activities during class, we can ask the student with ASD which activity they want to join. We can work with the student before or during this time to teach and practice a greeting and initiating statement that they can be used. For example, “Hi Ahmed, do you want to play building blocks with me?” If appropriate, we can even accompany our student to their classmate, “Hi Ahmed, can Joseph come play building blocks with you?” and then prompt Joseph to say ask their question for Ahmed to respond to. Or we can model the interaction by asking Joseph’s question first (Hi Ahmed...), and then having Joseph ask himself.

This strategy of preparing statements can be similarly used for closing, making sure Joseph has something prepared such as “thank you for letting me play with you.” When we know that activity time is about to end, we can head over to Ahmed and Joseph’s area to remind Joseph to utilize closing statements if he forgets.

For children needing more support, we can utilize a social script. For a social script, common/expected interactions are written down and played through with the child. For example, we could have taken the previous initiating conversation, and practice this interaction with the student. “Hi Mr. Zhang, do you want to play building blocks with me?” “Sure, come join.” “What are you trying to build?” etc. This requires more one-on-one support, so possibly EA or parental assistance might be requested to help. Generalization across different scenarios can be difficult for children with ASD, so remember to be patient if these social skills are not immediately demonstrated or generalized to peers.

That concludes this video. Thank you for watching, and I hope these strategies in preparing statements and social scripts can help you develop these basic social skills with students that can benefit from this support. In the next video, we will look at choosing activities and turn taking.

M7T6: Choosing Activities & Turn Taking

Hi, in this video we will continue taking a look at fundamental social communication skills, focusing on choosing activities and turn taking. Choosing activities is important for students to develop independence in social situations, and be able to engage in social scenarios. Turn



taking requires development of patience and understanding of other's interests, which is important in positive social interactions.

For choosing activities, this may have additional challenges for students with ASD, as this often represents a transition from the previous activity. Children with ASD often have difficulties with these changes, in a very general explanation, this may stem from preferences in structure, routine, activities, and predictability within the day. Individuals may have their own internal schedule, and deviations from this can cause anxiety and stress, which may lead to unexpected behaviours. The Supporting Daily Transition modules covers this topic in-depth, and one of the strategies we focus on is the use of visual schedules.

By utilizing a visual schedule, and having these available early, we can let a student understand early on what events will happen in the day, allowing them to better incorporate this into their own mental schedule. We can help prepare the student for the uncertainty in having to make a choice in activity by listing on the schedule "activity time" and possibly even list the choices before hand.

During the selection process we can utilize a visual choice board. In here, we would have all the activities and a visual representation of each, as the example shows. Of course, you can utilize your own visuals, which might be better for everyday use. The student can then see visually, which activities are available and pick-out their preferred activity.

Some activities may only be able to have a few students participating at a single time. If we factor in theory of mind and the difficulty in understanding the interests of others, along with possible restrictive interests, behavioural manifestations may occur if the child is unable to do the activity they want. Turn taking is an important social skill to develop, and is also necessary to ensuring fairness to the rest of the class. We should remember that we need to prioritize which skills to teach children. So, if we are teaching choosing activities knowing that the child has yet to learn turn taking, we should utilize the choice board ensuring that activities will be available. If we are teaching turn taking, we can utilize the choice board when activities may have limited spots.

Again, Turn Taking may be difficult as it requires understanding of what others' interests and desires are, which is something students with ASD often struggle with. Since this is a more complex skill, it may require one-on-one support. When we do not have support from therapists and other professionals, we may look to EAs and parents for this help. We can begin to teach turn taking by taking a toy they might like – for example, a toy train – and work through "my turn" and "your turn." We can use a combination of verbal prompts, visual cue cards, and reinforcement, and when we prompt "my turn" we can give the toy train to the student to play, and when we prompt "your turn" ask and take away the train to play ourselves. When doing this, we would want to reinforce the behaviour during this exchange process. This would then require practice before attempting to generalize in interacting with peers.

In classrooms, in addition to explaining that others are interested in activities as well, we can help with turn taking by setting rules. Students with ASD often value justice, and we can work with this to support the child's social development. We should be aware that this might cause challenges with concrete interpretations of these rules. To help the class with turn-taking, we can set rotations between the activities, where every 5 or 10 minutes a student must let



someone else take their turn, unless no one else is waiting. To help with waiting we can write down a list of who is waiting for each activity on the visual choice board. This way we can set expectation for the entire class, to help everyone get a chance to participate in the activities they enjoy.

Thank you for watching, in the next video we will cover sharing and waiting.

M7T7: Sharing & Waiting:

Hi, continuing our discussion on the development of fundamental social skills, let's take a look at sharing and waiting. These are two concepts quite similar to turn taking and you might see some overlap in the types of strategies we can use to support children with ASD.

Sharing, like turn-taking, requires theory of mind to recognize that others also want to use a toy, tool, snacks or object. For students with less developed social skills, it might be better to teach these skills in a one-on-one setting.

One way to teach back and forth sharing is to have a shareable snack and utilizing prompting. For example, we could first model sharing for the student by having a pack of gummies, and then passing one to the student. During this we would prompt "share" with a visual card and verbally. We would then repeat this to help a student understand this concept.

Next, we would give a new pack of gummies to the student and prompt to share. When the student shares the snack with us we would then reinforce this behaviour through praise, and maybe a candy reward. After the child is comfortable with this, we would fade prompts and reinforcement over time, and work on generalizing this skill with peers.

When the child becomes more comfortable with the skill, it may seem intuitive to fade out the use of the visual card, and only use verbal prompts. However, fading verbal prompts is more difficult than fading out the use of visual prompts, so consider prioritizing a reduction in verbal prompts first. Some children with ASD will require consistent use of visual supports and that's okay!

In a classroom setting, we would need to be confident that the concept of sharing has been developed enough to work with peers. We can try simply reminding the student before beginning or during an activity to share. Or for example, during an art class with limited supplies, we can define some supplies as shared between the class. We can place supplies into a "Share Bin," such as paint bottles, and brushes, so any item is to be shared among the class. Alternatively, we might also label certain paint brushes with "share." Be careful that due to concrete interpretations, students may be unwilling to share non-labelled supplies.

Waiting is another skill that is related to sharing and turn taking. One simple way that we can help promote the development of waiting is through praise. We can complement our student when they wait their turn or in line, "thank you for being patient, great job staying quiet."

We can also work with their preference for structure to help promote willingness to wait between activities by incorporating times into the schedule. For example, if we have a student that really wants to go for gym class, we can point to the schedule to remind that gym class is at 10:30am and they need to wait another 10 minutes before going. To help visualize with the



passage of time, there are visual clocks available that can be very effective in supporting transitions for students.

That concludes this video. To summarize, we looked at the use of one-on-one instruction, share bins, labelling, providing reinforcement through praise or other rewards, and visual schedules to help with sharing and waiting. Thank you for watching, and in the last video, we will look at playing games.

M7T8: Playing Games

Hi, thank you for watching the social skills 1 module. In our last video, we will cover our last fundamental social skill: playing games. For students at an elementary and primary level, playing games is extremely powerful in building relationships. This carries through the rest of our lives as well!

The fundamental skills we have discussed in this module all help to allow participation in games. However, for some students, these alone are not quite enough to facilitate inclusion, especially since some games have complex rules.

To help support students learn games, it can be beneficial to teach the student how to play the game before interacting with peers. We can also have peers help instruct games as well, but we will discuss peer support more in-depth in Social Skills 2. In a step-by-step manner we can deconstruct a game and teach it to the student. To understand this, we can use task analysis. This is a process of identifying a task, breaking the task into subtasks, and identifying the steps in the subtasks. This creates various incremental steps in understanding that can be connected to allow understanding of the game. During the process, we can evaluate which areas a student may be lacking skills which guides which areas we may need to focus on.

Task analysis is discussed in-depth in Instructional Communication, so we will go through it quickly in this video. Let's use an example of "I Spy." Remember, we should pay attention to the games that are played by peers and so that the game they learn is relevant.

We can break down the task into subtasks:

1. Assign chooser and guesser.
2. Chooser picks an object to guess.
3. Chooser gives guesser a clue.
4. Guesser attempts to guess object.

If we look at the subtask number 3, we can break that into steps of:

1. Chooser examines characteristics of object. For students with ASD, we can give them a guide to do so. We would say examine the colour or shape of the object.
2. Decide characteristic to make clue, or for our student, pick one of the colour or shape.
3. Say the clue as "I spy with my little eye, something that is [characteristic]"

Once we have all the steps, we can organize these into what we believe will be easiest to understand for our student. We would then practice the game with the child, to build fluency with the game and feel comfortable to play with other kids. Break time/recess, activity time, and lunch times are great opportunities to spend a few minutes to help a student with this.



As we discussed earlier in the module, initiating requires a lot of confidence, and if the student is unsure of the game, may cause additional stress. We can help with this by introducing a student to a group of kids that are currently playing the game. This may also be an opportunity to get our student to practice greeting and initiating statements as well.

These skills take practice, and generalization can be difficult for children with ASD. If it does not work the first time, be patient, help the student feel better about these challenges and keep working at it! If you need help with supporting a student with mistakes, check-out our educator-student relationship module.

That concludes this module. Through these videos, we have learned about social challenges associated with ASD, theory of mind, intent and mistakes, and fundamental social skills. These included greeting, initiating, closing, choosing activities, turn taking, sharing, waiting, and playing games. Remember that there are always various support tools available online, so if the ones we recommend are not appropriate for your child, please take a quick look at our recommended resources and other online help. Through our guiding principles of understanding the individual, empathy, and patience, I am confident you will find the right strategies to help support your little person. Thank you for watching, and thank you for supporting spectrum teaching.

