

Social Communicative Competency Improves Students' Satisfaction and Success

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Those who have never experienced the real-life struggle of someone with social communication deficits may find it difficult to imagine the communication challenges that crop up in simple everyday interactions. "Social communicative competency (SCC) is at the core of the disability for students with Asperger's," noted

Virginia Hodge, executive vice president of autism programs at Chapel Haven and a certified speech/language pathologist. "A student who can't cook dinner can still get take-out food. But a student who can't interact socially will see an effect in every part of his or her life."

Learning to identify and value the perspectives of others is at the core of successful SCC and ultimately leads to a happier and more productive adult life. As students acquire this skill, they often experience increased self-satisfaction because social interaction becomes more intuitive and successful. The benefits of considering the perspectives of others span every kind of relationship and social setting, not only by assisting in creating positive experiences but also by avoiding or de-escalating potentially negative situations.

Social environments are filled with unwritten rules—the "hidden curriculum"—that can shift dramatically with even the smallest change in a setting. Learning how to identify and follow those rules across a wide range of social contexts is especially challenging for individuals on the spectrum, who tend to be more rigid in their thinking. As students become more familiar with this concept and the process, they find it easier to be comfortable and successful in unfamiliar social settings and they become more flexible thinkers.

Through instruction in social cognition and social communication, students learn how to appreciate another person's point of view and how to take that perspective to decide how to effectively interact with that person in a variety



of contexts and settings. SCC lessons also provide instruction in recognizing and reading nonverbal communication; social problem solving; conversational expectations; and "netiquette," i.e., the hidden rules of electronic communication. Through role-playing, videotaping, and continual practice, students can learn how to make social plans, call a professor to arrange for extra help, or interview for a job effectively. Raising students awareness of how to modify their verbalizations and behaviors to address the nuances of social communication and interactions is key to success—for example, understanding how to modulate one's speech characteristics, such as tone of voice, inflection, volume, and rate of speech to denote sarcasm. In addition, students can also learn how to more accurately use and interpret a variety of language forms (e.g., formal vs. informal language, direct vs. indirect language, figurative language, irony, and so on.) and then take those skills out into the real world.



Individuals on the spectrum often have difficulty establishing new relationships as well as managing existing relationships. The process of learning how to classify a relationship, identify strategies for keeping that relationship going, and determine what kind of information can be shared with that person can be quite a challenge. But the importance of understanding the scope, nature and expectations of one's relationships with others cannot be overstated; all individuals experience a wide array of both positive and negative relationships and need to be able to interact in an expected way with each.

Three Success Stories

What kind of benefits can accrue from intensive social communication therapy? The following comments from individuals and their families provide answers.

continued

• “My eye contact has improved. I show interest in other people. I am more empathetic toward friends. I have improved in my ability to terminate conversations appropriately and initiate questions in conversations.” When this young lady first began taking college courses, she recalls, “I did not know how to add or drop a course. I took the wrong classes and did not know how to ask for help from the Disability Resource Center. I did not know how to watch for cues, which professor I should pick, or who would be appropriate to my needs. Now I am able to advocate for accommodations. I’m able to talk to my professors and access resources like the campus writing center, the technology lab, and career services.”

• The mother of a recent college graduate says that the focus on SCC has meant a world of difference. “My son has learned how to listen and, even if he is not engaged, give facial expressions indicating that he is listening. Whereas before he would just walk away, he can sit at the table now at Thanksgiving and Christmas, where there are 20 people at a table, and engage in conversation.”

• Another parent of a young adult with Asperger Syndrome reports that before the SCC approach, her son would “attempt to enter conversations by asking over and over: Do you like pizza? He would have zero timing on that. It would be disconnected from anything going on and he would interrupt. As he has gained competence, he has become confident enough to go up to a group, listen, and comment on what is being said—and his timing has improved.”

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