

DOs and DON'Ts for Working with Students in Social Thinking® Groups

By Michelle Garcia Winner and Pamela Crooke

As we travel around the country, people are often interested in what we recommend as the “DOs and DON'Ts” related to Social Thinking philosophy and treatment. We start out by saying: be flexible! Be an observer, be supportive, be present! It turns out that what we teach our students and clients is sound advice for us as well.

Knowing how much everyone likes “details” we've put together a list of 30 points to consider (the DOs) and 30 to avoid (the DON'Ts). It's not comprehensive by any means, but it does give us all food for thought. The suggestions are designed to provide guidance on building a curriculum as well as some practical information about running a Social Thinking group in treatment sessions or in mainstream or inclusion settings.

Because we work with preschool, school age and adult individuals, these DOs and DON'Ts apply broadly across age ranges unless otherwise specified. DO keep in mind it is assumed professionals and parents are introducing and teaching Social Thinking concepts *only* to individuals who have language skills strong enough to learn from language-based lessons via discussions.

The DOs		The DON'Ts
DO develop a relationship with your students prior to attempting to teach Social Thinking concepts.	1	DON'T jump into teaching Social Thinking and related social skills without knowing about the individuals you are teaching! Build the relationship by getting to know the group or individual first.
DO start by helping individuals acknowledge their own thoughts and feelings about others' social behavior before expecting them to easily acquire an understanding of different ways in which they should <i>behave</i> socially!	2	DON'T start by teaching how to behave differently!
DO recognize the importance of the situation or context when teaching Social Thinking. How we interpret and respond to information is as much about understanding the hidden rules in a situation as it is related to thinking about ourselves and what others may be thinking about us in that situation and then self-monitoring our behavior.	3	DON'T teach social skills as something that should be memorized and applied across every environment.
DO use the Social Thinking Vocabulary to build social observational skills! This will help the individual not only appreciate that he has thoughts and feelings about	4	DON'T teach Social Thinking Vocabulary as a set of social skills rules to follow. For example, avoid simply stating: “Do what is expected!” or “Keep your body in the group!” or “Think with your

others, but also notice what people are doing well and what people may not be doing so well.

eyes!" and then give rewards for appropriate use of the behaviors. This is a very behavioral way to teach social skills, lacking the deeper insight we are trying to teach our students. It is teaching the *thinking* related to the social skills that helps teach basic social problem solving.

DO teach individuals to recognize that we all have expectations for how other people behave around us. When introducing and using the terms "expected and unexpected" behaviors, make this be all about observing what is expected in the situation and from the other people in the situation! This is key to developing a deeper understanding that others have expectations about our own social behavioral responses as well.

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DON'T make all reward systems based on how a student behaves (e.g., reward for using eye-contact). Instead, give rewards or praise related to how an individual's behavior makes others have pro-social thoughts ("Nice job using your eyes to think about others!").

DO explain the idea that we ALL have some areas of learning that are easier and some that are harder to process. Explain it from a brain perspective: "Your brain makes it easy to learn abc..." (e.g., science smarts) and "Your brain makes some things harder to learn..." (e.g., social smarts). Help individuals learn to be OK with the fact that they—and everyone else— have something their brain needs to work at learning. (See related blog, "Teaching Students About Their Learning Strengths and Weaknesses" available at www.socialthinking.com).

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DON'T structure all lessons on social weaknesses or assume a lack of social learning strengths. Realize that every individual has strengths. Our job is to find and acknowledge them!

DO explain that even though their social learning may be on the weaker side (compared to their other strengths), there are some areas they are able to do well. Another way to say this is to appreciate and point out strengths! They need to hear that and learn to know that!

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DON'T assume individuals know how to self-monitor their own thinking and behavior—NO matter how verbal or intelligent!

DO teach the concept of self-monitoring. This helps individuals identify what they do well in terms of their Social Thinking and related social skills (social behavioral responses) and celebrate their strengths. Have them self-monitor what they are doing well before having them self-monitor their challenges!

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DON'T assume a visual learning strength. Many individuals with auditory processing weaknesses also struggle to understand visually-based social cues.

DO help individuals develop a greater awareness of what's around them. This translates into helping them learn what to pay attention to (context, emotions, words,

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DON'T assume those who can verbally explain social skills also know what to **do** in the moment. Some can "talk the talk" but can't "walk the walk." Never assume an individual is too *high*

<p>body language, etc.) so they can interpret (make a smart guess) about another person's behavior, as well as respond to what is going on around them. Keep in mind that the social mind is as much about interpretation as it is about social responses! Our students will not learn how to respond socially if they have not accurately interpreted the situation.</p>	<p><i>functioning</i> or too old to actually role-play the skill they are working on.</p>
<p>DO practice the related social behavioral responses (aka social skills). Our folks benefit from role-plays, real practice in the group, videotaped feedback, discussions, and good old-fashioned practice. Practice helps all of us develop more accurate self-monitoring skills. Be concrete and explicit in your feedback.</p>	<p>10 DON'T just tell students what they are doing wrong.</p>
<p>DO always give at least two positive comments for every negative or constructive comment you provide. Encourage the individual to find his or her own positive feedback (inner coach) as well as provide personal constructive feedback.</p>	<p>11 DON'T assume individuals will always be nice to each other or that they need to be friends to work in a group. Do teach how to tolerate one another even if they don't like each other. (It's a valuable life skill to learn how to tolerate a person we would rather not spend time with!) Avoid telling group members you expect them to become friends; that is a very personal decision—not one to be imposed by a group leader.</p>
<p>DO create many opportunities for group members to give each other supportive feedback. This does not mean it always has to be positive feedback, as critical feedback can be given in a supportive manner (teach them how to do this!). This helps teach empathy while relating to others. This also teaches that everyone has thoughts about each other and it is not just the teacher who cares or who notices.</p>	<p>12 DON'T assume individuals will naturally generalize this information if they are paying attention and motivated.</p>
<p>DO create lessons that directly teach individuals (third grade and above) strategies for carrying their thinking, awareness and newly practiced social competencies out the door into other parts of their world. In short, don't assume generalization or learning/use in other environments – plan for it!</p>	<p>13 DON'T put individuals in social situations (e.g., playing a game, having a conversation, etc.) and then just tell them what they are doing wrong and right. Do teach a framework from which they can process and respond to social information (e.g., the Four Steps of Communication or the Four Steps of Perspective Taking—see free articles about these on our website).</p>
<p>DO have a plan for each of your sessions: make sure the content in each session is related to what you taught, explored or what happened in the previous session. End each session by jotting down a quick note—even one sentence—to indicate the</p>	<p>14 DON'T give up when an individual doesn't seem to "get" the concept. Instead, break it down further. Don't assume he/she is incapable of learning until you've approached it from many directions.</p>

planned concept for the next session. This is the key to building a thoughtful Social Thinking curriculum (data is critical too).

DO teach the same lessons in many different ways! It helps to approach the concepts or strategies from several different perspectives. It's okay to repeat a lesson right away or at a later time if it is complex. Core Social Thinking concepts and related social skills can be applied in an infinite number of situations so there are a LOT of different ways to explore the information.

15 DON'T follow the order of lessons in our books in a sequential manner (unless it specifically says to do so). Most resources are meant to be dynamic and used in a flexible manner. In other words, make your lesson plan based on the needs of the group, not according to the next lesson in the book.

DO stay flexible to what you are teaching on any given day. At times our students come in the door with strong emotions or problems that can't wait for a different day to be addressed. You may have to put a lesson on hold, or not teach it as deeply to be responsive to what your students need on that specific day.

16 DON'T become rigid with your teaching agenda. Always remain open and available to what your students need from you (socially and emotionally) on any given day. Then adjust.

DO be aware of *normal* social developmental highs and lows for the age of the group members. For example, five-year-olds are more literal, many middle school age kids lie, and high school age kids look grumpy and may argue! Why expect anything different from our kids with social learning challenges? We are not teaching them to be angels, we are teaching them to adapt effectively!

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DO tie the concepts of Social Thinking to the core curriculum. The roots of Social Thinking are embedded in the Common Core Standards and/or State Standards (see our article on the Social Thinking Social Learning Tree at our website, www.socialthinking.com). Talk about the fact that social understanding used in social interactions is the same social understanding used when reading a novel or when considering the audience for written expression.

18 DON'T make social learning be all about the playground and afterschool activities. Social learning applies in the classroom as students work as part of groups and process and respond to social information in the curriculum. Do learn and teach about this social-academic connection.

DO teach that Social Thinking is work! It's important to talk about the fact that what may be difficult, boring, or stressful to them is actually somewhat difficult, boring, and even stressful for many "neurotypical" people, too. It's just that they try to make it look like they are not bored, stressed, or struggling with others.

19 DON'T teach that relating socially is always fun and easy! Recognize how often *you* have boring moments when with people you really like and possibly even love!

DO teach that social relationships are

20 DON'T assume there is an understanding that it is

valuable to them and that they feel better when others support them emotionally. Don't assume this understanding will happen quickly, but do take the time to introduce and reinforce this concept. You may just be planting the seed for later awareness.

worth it to learn to have a social relationship with a similar aged individual. Many of our folks have grown up with few or no peer connections and quite frankly don't see the need. They often get a great deal of attention from adults, and these adults become their peers. Slowly work on developing a face-to-face relationship with just one other person similar in age. If they have online friendships, don't dismiss these as *artificial*. Instead, help them learn that they can also process and respond to social cues in real time.

DO take the time to break down the concepts in your lessons into components your individuals find relevant, can follow, and can relate to. This builds a pathway for acquiring social concepts. Avoid assuming that individuals who excel in other learning can easily map social concepts!

21 DON'T assume the individual is too smart and doesn't need the basics or is refusing because it's too simple. Be wary if you find yourself routinely saying, "He (or she) knows how to do this; he just chooses not to." Realize that you may not be appreciating how hard this stuff is to learn for many of our folk.

DO encourage individuals to mentor each other in the group; allow those with social learning challenges to coach others in the same group. Guide each student to be a coach – they take this seriously (usually) and with guidance it is win-win for everyone in the group.

22 DON'T have the leader (teacher) of the Social Thinking group be the only person to provide feedback or act as the only person having thoughts and feelings about what a student is doing in a group. This conveys that social thinking and related social skills is only important to adults!

DO encourage neurotypical peers to mentor—but please clearly explain how this should happen! Be careful to not assume that putting kids together in the mainstream equals mentoring. Teach everyone the same Social Thinking Vocabulary concepts and be explicit about expectations for all. Our adult clients regularly tell us their lives would be easier if people would just provide them with direct explicit feedback!

23 DON'T think that social modeling of *normal* social behavior is the role of the typical peer! Our students have had many social role models but they still struggle socially. Social teaching needs to be explicit and concretely defined!

DO celebrate every little step of increased awareness and self-monitoring!

24 DON'T only celebrate major social skills milestones!

DO compare the individual *only* to where he or she started when tracking or reflecting progress. Do this often to help celebrate the little achievements!

25 DON'T compare one student's progress to another's as a way to try and motivate the less accomplished student. Each person is on his or her own social learning trajectory; their challenges and accomplishments are highly personal.

DO recognize that some of our folks are used to getting most of their social attention from being class-clowns, defiant, or telling you they don't care. This has been a reliable formula for them in the past and it will take time to learn new

26 DON'T assume that obnoxious behavior is the result of a purposeful choice made to drive you nuts! Many individuals don't fully understand the impact of their behavior on others—especially how it impacts adults!

concepts, strategies, and skills. Be patient and try to not take negative comments as a direct offense against you personally!

DO allow yourself time to simply listen. Be open to hearing about their experiences, how they interpret the world, and observing their actions/reactions. No curriculum can ever provide all the information you need to teach every person. The more you try to understand their history and the manner in which they process the social world, the better you will problem solve what lessons are needed and how to respond on a personal level.

27 DON'T just start teaching lessons or strategies. All good social teaching starts by taking time to learn about the group.

DO put individuals who process and respond to social information in a similar manner together in a group. Use our *Social Thinking Social Communication Profile* to guide your understanding of the different levels of the social mind. (See our free article by this name on our website.)

28 DON'T place individuals into groups based on convenient times to meet without considering if individual needs are matched within the group. Just as we don't put kids who need to learn basic math in the same work group as students learning algebra, we need to be considerate about social learning abilities.

DO use Social Thinking worksheets (we call them thinksheets) as mini-lesson plans which can help you launch a deeper discussion about our concepts and guide you toward giving individuals more practice in learning related social skills.

29 DON'T hand a Social Thinking worksheet/ thinksheet to the student or person and assume you've addressed the concept.

DO enjoy the process of learning about yourself. Our students, families, and individuals push us to question and explore deeper ways of teaching and learning. We often become the students rather than the teachers!

30 DON'T assume the group members are the only ones learning. You'll discover that some of *your* best professional and life insights may come from the students or individuals you're teaching!

BIO

Michelle Garcia Winner is the creator and founder of Social Thinking and spearheads the development of books, products, and materials about the teaching framework. Dr. Pamela Crooke is a key member of the core Social Thinking team, and is lead clinician at the Social Thinking Center in San Jose, CA. A prolific writing team, they also present on Social Thinking topics around the world.

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