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Theory of Mind Therapy to Boost Social Skills and Comprehension of Literature

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Peer Review Process

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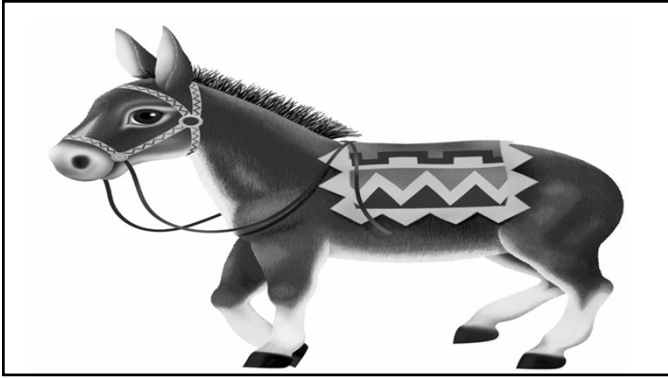
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Theory of Mind

What it is, Why it's Important, What You Can Do









Theory of Mind is the ability to understand that the perspectives and intentions of other people are different from your own perspective and intentions.

Most research shows that children's Theory of Mind is well-developed by age 3 to 4, and most children understand false belief at around age 4 years of age. (Wimmer H. & Perner, J. (1983) Belief about beliefs: Representation and constraining function of wrong beliefs in young children's understanding of deception. *Cognition*, 13, 103-128)

However, children with autism show a *specific deficit* in understanding Theory of Mind.

Jerilyn, here is a Yoda figure.



Jerilyn, put Yoda where I can see him.



Put Yoda where *you* can see him but I *cannot* see him.



Do you know what I am holding up?
Does Jerilyn know what I am holding up?



Informational States

What someone can know, based on the information he has been given

- Visual information
- Auditory information
- Other sensory information
- Someone tells him

Too much visual information!

Theory of Mind is the ability to know that the perspectives and intentions of other people are different from your own perspectives and intentions.



How would you behave if you could not discern what people *wanted*?

What does your teacher want you to do?
 What do peers want you to play?
 What does your parent want you to do at home?

How do children develop Theory of Mind?

- At birth – face-to-face interaction
- 8 months – joint attention
- 18 months – symbolic play; pretends to do routine tasks
- Age 3 – assumes another perspective
- Age 4 – can pass a test of false belief

Sally-Anne Test

Source: Baron-Cohen S., Leslie, A. and Frith, U. (1985) Does the autistic child have a "theory of mind"? *Cognition*, 21, 37-46

The "Smarties Test"

Gopnik & Astington found that children pass this test at about 4 years of age (1988)

Theory Theory

- I see you fidget. I know that people who fidget are often uncomfortable. Therefore, I deduce that you must be uncomfortable.
- A highly cognitive process.
- Problem: Sally Anne test was given to normally developing children, children with Down Syndrome and children with autism. Normally developing children pass the test at about age 4. Children with Down Syndrome, who often have cognitive challenges, also pass the test at about age 4. Children with autism who can pass more rigorous cognitive tests, mostly fail the Sally Anne test at age 4.

Mirror Neurons

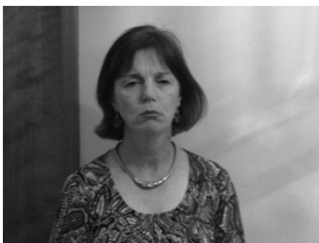




Your muscles *mirror* what I am doing.



Your mirror neurons enervate your muscle to do what I am doing



“Happy! My muscles are saying ‘happy’!”



- It now seems that in autism the mirror system is not broken, but simply delayed....it appears likely that autistic individuals have two core deficits. Their brain directs their attention less to the social world and it also establishes fewer associations between processes that occur in different brain areas. Hebbian learning is disrupted, the child is consequently less socially connected, and his mirror system delayed. - Keyesers, Christian [The Empathic Brain](#) Copyright 2011 Social Brain Press



How do we test for Theory of Mind?

- Sally Anne Test
- Smarties Test
- Questions from a story

Sally Anne Test



Smarties Test



Theory of Mind Questions from a story:

In the Frog and Toad story The Hat by Arnold Lobel,

1. Why did Toad trip over a rock, bump into a tree and fall in a hole?
2. Why did Frog enter Toad's house quietly?
3. What does Toad believe happened to his hat?
4. What really happened to his hat?
5. Toad no longer tripped over a rock, bumped into a tree or fell into a hole. Why not?
6. What was the trick in this story?

How to Teach Theory of Mind:

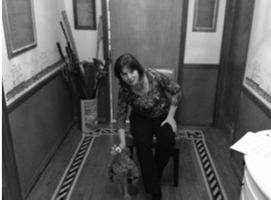
- Step by step
 - Informational states first: Who can see?
 - Who can hear?
 - Intentions next: What does she want?
 - More complex ideas last: False belief

The Rule:

- If I see something, I can know about it.

Playing Jack and the Beanstalk

"Wife! Bring me my golden hen!"



"I'm tired. Zzzzzz"



The Rule:

- If I hear something, I can know about it.

The Rule:

If I hear something, I can know about it.



The Rule

- People do something because they *want* something.
- If they get what they want, they will be happy. If they don't get what they want, they may not be happy.

False Belief

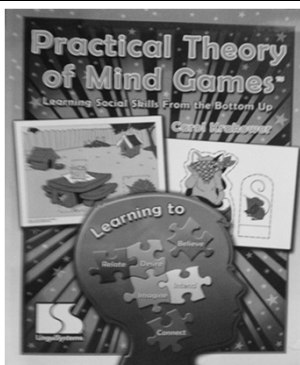


What is the take-home message?

- Understand that a child with autism will likely *not understand* the perspectives and intentions of other people because he lacks a Theory of Mind
- When you are assessing a child with autism, realize that the child may need training in Theory of Mind in order to develop socially and academically
- Help the child understand Theory of Mind on a step-by-step basis.

Practical Theory of Mind Games

by Carol Krakower



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