

Social Cognition & Perspective-Taking:  
How to encourage these critical life skills

# SOCIAL COGNITION & PERSPECTIVE-TAKING: How to encourage these critical life skills

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## Social Engagement, Defined

*Social interaction for the sake of shared experience or emotion:*  
**CONNECTION**

## Social Engagement Skill Examples

Mostly nonverbal skills!

- Sharing emotion without words
- Looking to the eyes of other people for information
- Sharing attention to and enjoyment of an object/activity with another person
- Doing things at the same time as others (being in-sync)
- Monitoring and adjusting performance according to the reactions of others
- Doing things to create fun for/with others

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Development of Social Connection & Problem-Solving

- Social Problem-Solving
- Social Perspective
- Social Interest & Monitoring
- Social Awareness

Social Cognition

Engagement

The image shows two children, a boy and a girl, stacking colorful wooden blocks. A diagram on the left lists four social skills: Social Problem-Solving, Social Perspective, Social Interest & Monitoring, and Social Awareness. Arrows point from these skills to the children's actions. A vertical bar on the right is labeled 'Social Cognition' and 'Engagement'.



Social Cognition, Defined

*The ability to make adaptive decisions in social situations based on a complex analysis of cultural guidelines, information about the people involved, and changing social cues.*

Social interest is already established – now we're talking about **SOCIAL THINKING**

The image shows a group of dark brown ducklings on a stone ledge, with one yellow duckling in the foreground. A text box is overlaid on the image.



## Social Cognition Skill Examples

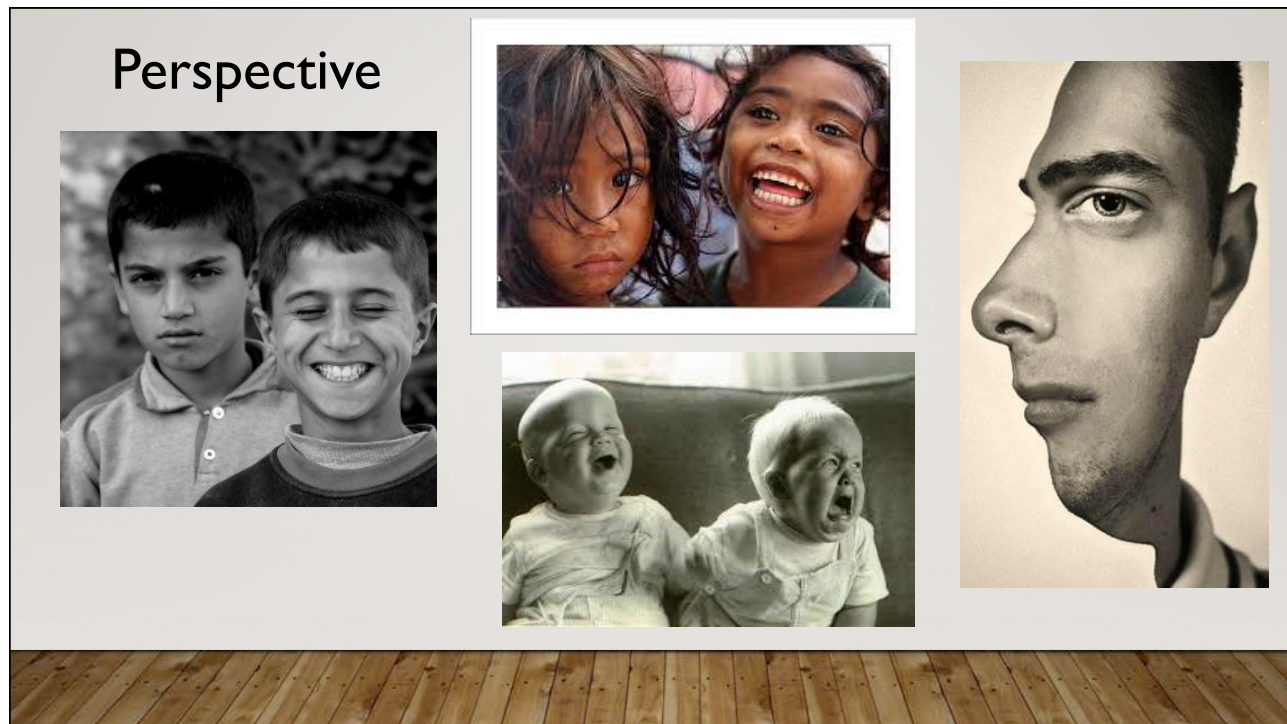
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- Perspective-taking
- Expected and unexpected behavior
- Self- and other-monitoring
- Small talk and conversation
- Social fake
- Making and maintaining a positive impression
- Adjusting behavior to different situations

Social engagement skills, followed by social cognition skills, are the skills that best predict a child's future. They are as, or more, important, than reading and math for a child with ASD.



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## Perspective-Taking Or Theory Of Mind?

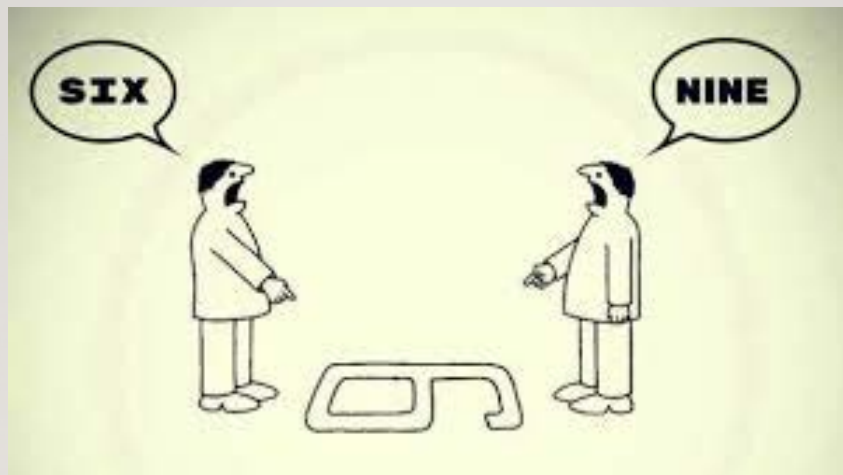
- Theory of Mind (ToM) comes first: the ability to understand that people can have knowledge, beliefs, feelings, and states that are different from your own
  - By extension, those things affect their behavior
- Perspective-taking comes next: viewing and analyzing situations from someone else's point of view -- application of ToM
  - By extension, altering your behavior accordingly to maintain a good impression, build and maintain relationships, and/or to be altruistic

## If perspective seems to be an issue, I want to know if they know:

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- That if we look at the same thing and only they turn in a different direction (and see different things), I will still see the same thing as before
- That if we are in different rooms/locations, we see different things
  - Why we see different things (e.g., we're facing different directions, there's a wall in between us)

### Concrete perspective







## Encourage Concrete Perspective By:

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- Pointing out how you know things and asking how your child knows things
  - “I knew your favorite color is rhubarb because you told me!”
  - “You knew I like cupcakes because you saw me eat one and say ‘Mmmmm’, right?”
- Pointing out when you or others don’t know things and why
  - “You don’t know what I’m wearing because you can’t see through the bathroom door – it’s in the way!”
  - “Daddy didn’t know you were outside because he didn’t see you and you didn’t tell him.”



## Another Strategy: Barrier Games

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- Each player has the same set of materials
- A barrier is put in place so the two players can’t see what the other is doing
- One player gives directions on what to do with the materials and the other follows the directions (no peeking!)
- Lift the barrier and see if the creations are the same

## I also want to know if they know:

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- How they know concrete things (e.g., where something is, someone's name)
  - Answer: see it, hear it, someone told me, read it, remember it
- How others know things/don't know things
- Why others may not know things (e.g., sight line is blocked, no one told me)

## Sources of concrete knowledge

## Encourage Sources of Concrete Knowledge By:

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- Asking a lot of “how do you know/how do I know?” questions
  - “Do you, Nikki, know what color my shirt is? You do! How do you know?” (“Because I see it.”)
  - “Do I, Miss Lynn, know what color your teacher’s car is? I don’t! Why not?” (“Because you’ve never seen it”)
- Notes:
  - Be careful about pronouns, even if you think they’re solid
  - Draw what you’re describing as a cartoon to point out what can be seen/heard and what can’t



## 2-D Perspective

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- Can they put themselves, spatially, in different locations and predict what information people will have?
- Encourage this skill by drawing what you say or read

Manipulating perspective



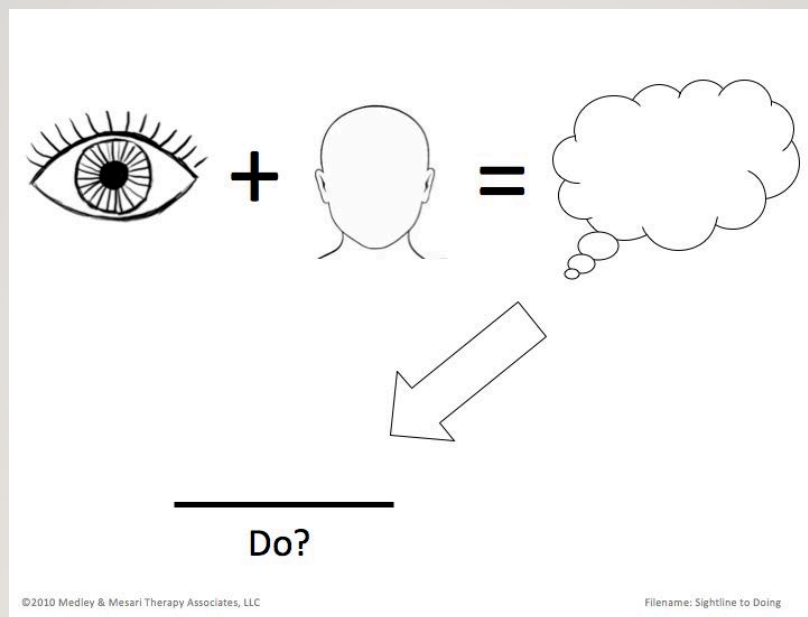
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## Do they know:

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- What people are looking at (e.g., following a “sightline”) is often what they are thinking about?
- How people feel by reading their affect and body language?
  - That words and affect can conflict, and what to believe when they do?
- Sightlines combined with affect are a good indication of what someone is thinking?
- What someone is thinking is a good predictor of what they might do?

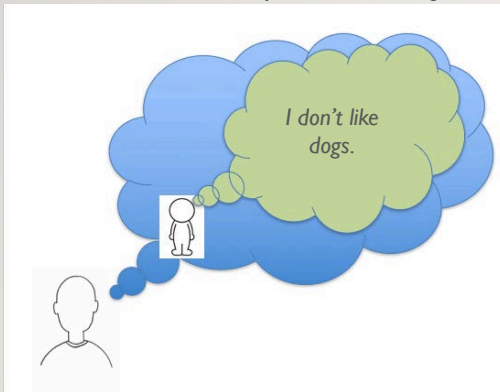
Basic social perspective-taking



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## Can they do 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> order Theory Of Mind?

1<sup>st</sup> Order: I know that you don't like dogs.



2<sup>nd</sup> Order: I know that you know that your teacher doesn't like dogs.



Depth of social perspective-taking

## Wait – This Is Important: Visualizing/Imaging



- This skill allows you to turn situations around in your mind and examine them for additional information
- If you can't visualize what someone says (or that you read!), it becomes very difficult to do 2<sup>nd</sup> order ToM and beyond



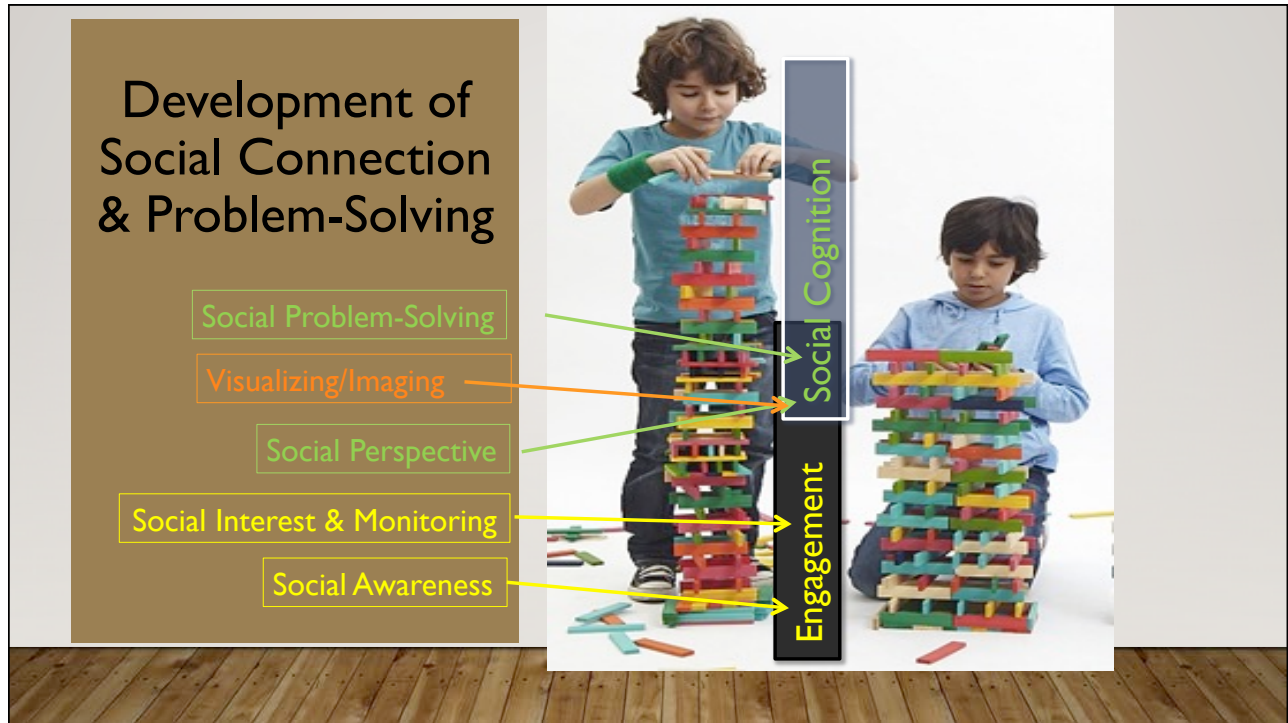
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**Development of Social Connection & Problem-Solving**

- Social Problem-Solving
- Visualizing/Imaging
- Social Perspective
- Social Interest & Monitoring
- Social Awareness

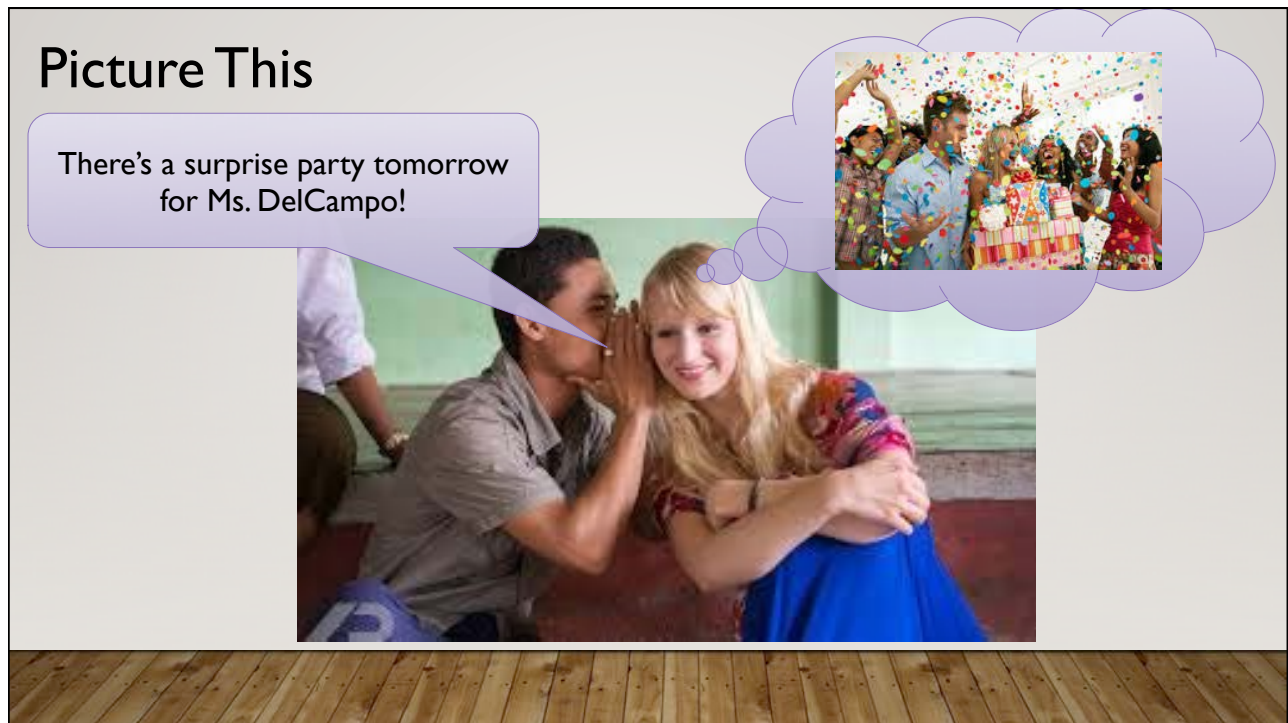
Social Cognition

Engagement



**Picture This**

There's a surprise party tomorrow for Ms. DelCampo!



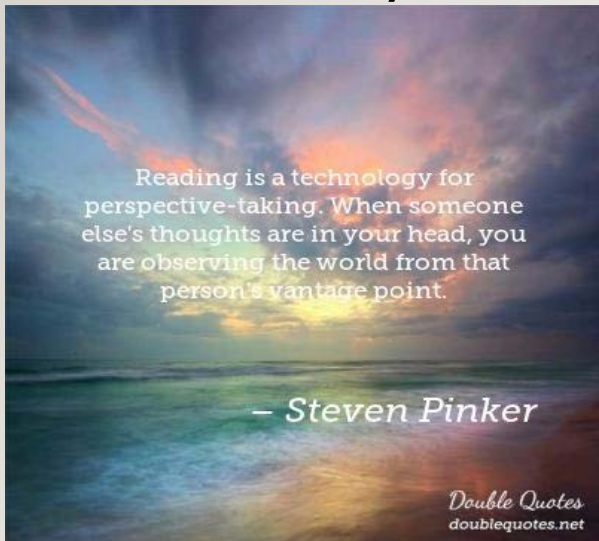


## Encourage Visualizing By:

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- Talking about your mental pictures
  - “When you say ‘beach’, in my mind I see the beach we go to in the summer with all the colorful umbrellas and the lifeguard chair.”
- Asking about your child’s mental images
  - “There’s a bird in this story - what kind of bird are you picturing?”
- Pointing out how specific words change your picture
  - “Oh! I would have pictured a blue car, but you said ‘red’, so now I see a red one!”

## Double Whammy - Academics



Reading *for pleasure* not only teaches the vocabulary and grammar and formats of writing kids will need for middle and high school and for employment, it is also hugely important for learning to take the perspective of others.

- Kids often don’t want to do it because their visualizing skills are weak or nonexistent – let them read below their reading level!

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## Quick Recap

- Social engagement is the foundation for social cognition
- Perspective-taking is an early social cognition skill
- Perspective-taking has many building blocks:
  - Concrete perspective (e.g., “What can I see?”)
  - Sources of knowledge (e.g., “How do you know?”)
  - Manipulating perspective (e.g., putting yourself in someone else’s shoes)
  - Early social perspective (e.g., sightline + affect = thought bubble → action)
  - Depth of perspective (e.g., 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> order ToM)
- Visualizing/Imaging comes in about the same time as perspective-taking

There is perspective-taking,  
then there is *emotional perspective-taking...*





## There's More To "Emotion" Than Labeling

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- People with ASD often have a real disconnect between what they feel themselves and the words that describe those feelings
- They may learn to label emotions in others, even complex emotions, but not be able to tell you when they feel the same emotions and/or how the emotions feel in their bodies
- This may need to be directly taught – usually a counseling goal

## Maybe You Know These Two Types Of ASD Learners

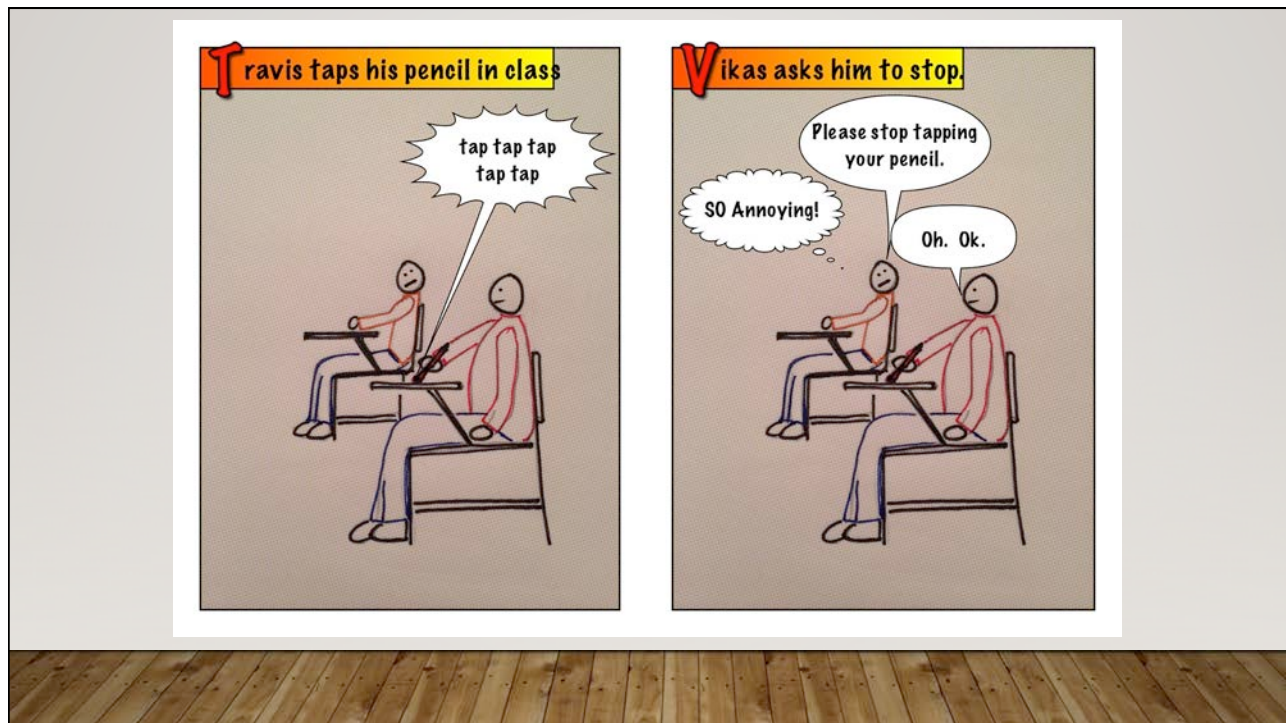
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1. The one who doesn't seem to notice the emotion in the room
  2. The one who can read the emotion in the room immediately but doesn't know why it's there
- These are both perspective-taking issues because neither has the information needed to put themselves in the "shoes" of others

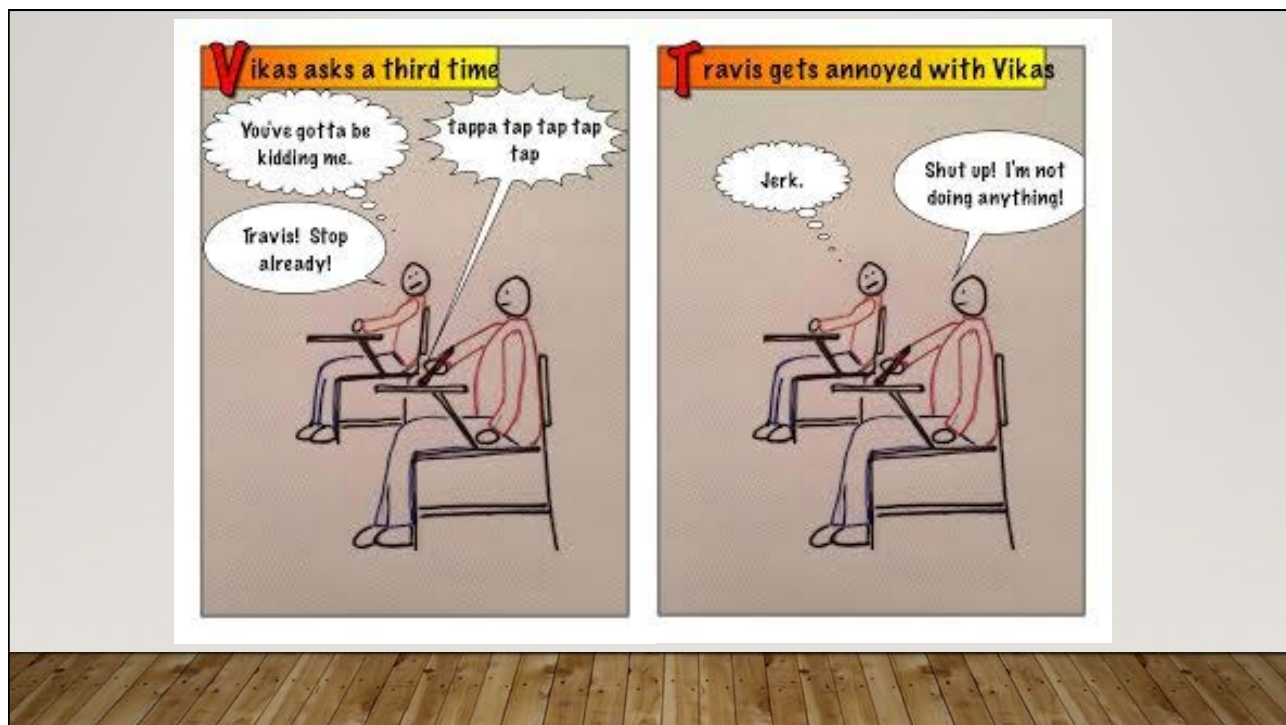
## The One Who Doesn't Seem To Notice The Emotion In The Room

This learner needs to be taught that:

- Most people notice and monitor the actions and emotions of others and factor them in when sizing up a situation and deciding how to react/ behave
- Why? Because they need to notice the emotions of others in order accurately predict their thoughts and actions, and in order to give the impression of caring about others

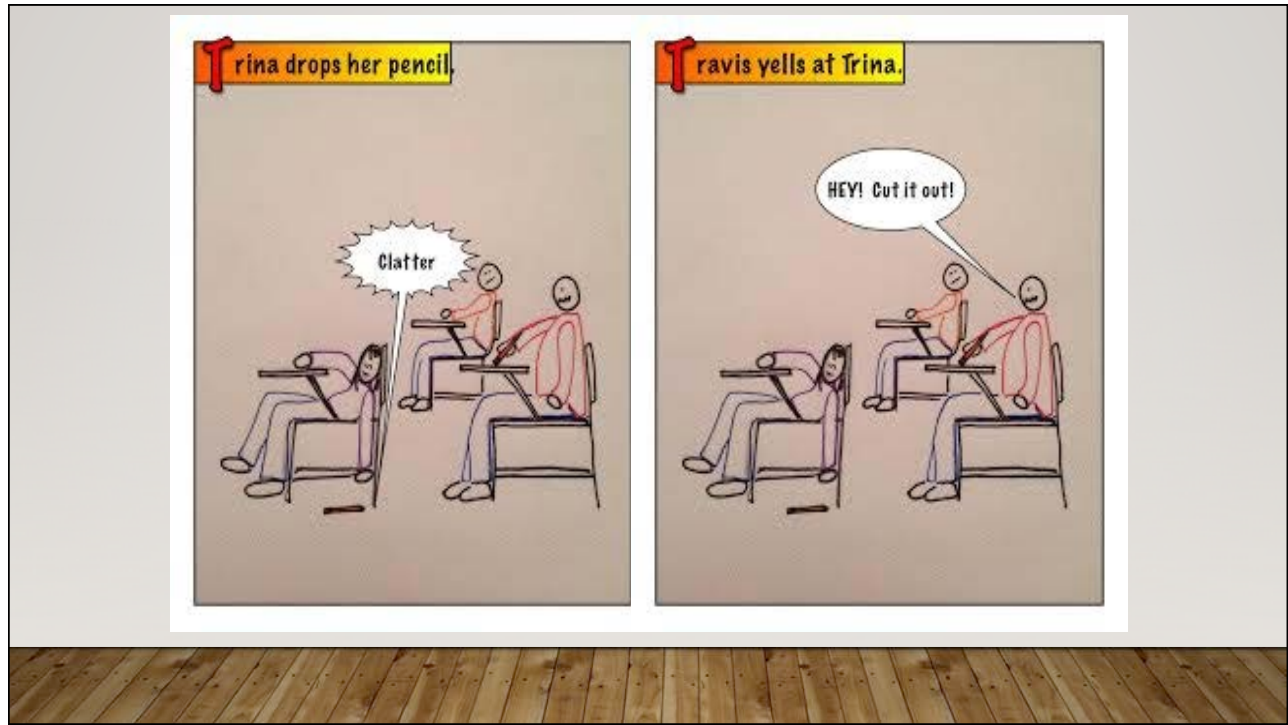


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## The One Who Can Read The Emotion Immediately But Doesn't Know Why It's There

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- Teach how to read the available emotional information
- Teach how to manage their own reaction to the feelings in the room so that they have the mental/emotional space to tackle the cues and do the necessary social problem-solving to stay socially engaged



## Rules Are Important Until Social Problem-solving Is Strong, But...

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- When there's a gap between age and social-emotional development, rules are necessary, even if they:
  - Seem too strict
  - Won't be perfect fixes
  - Will need to be adjusted over time
- Be very thoughtful about what you teach

### High 5 Example

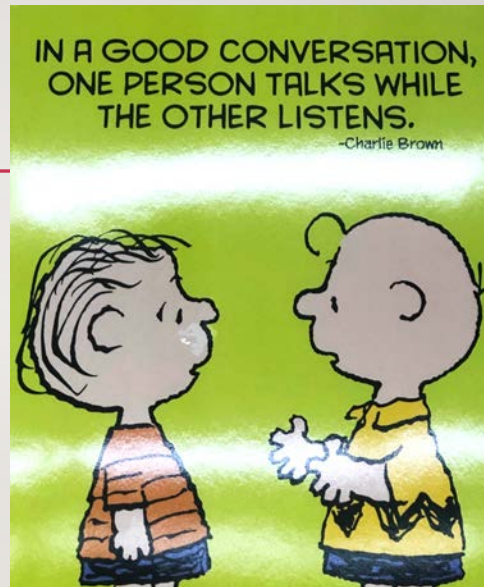


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## The Golden Rule

*Do unto others as you would  
have them do unto you*

- This advice is tricky – it assumes everyone, across situations, will want what you want



## The Platinum Rule

*Do unto others as they'd like done unto them*

- From the 1996 book The Platinum Rule by Tony Alessandra and Michael O'Connor
- This rule will make you much more socially-successful, but it requires emotional perspective-taking and social motivation





## A Word About Social Motivation

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- All the social cognition skills in the world may not make you socially-motivated to apply them:
  - There are many other factors involved: sensory regulation, emotional regulation, sustained attention, social engagement, anxiety, mood, reinforcement history, trauma, etc.
  - Some aspects of social motivation can be traced to very specific areas of the brain, and any one of them may have structural or chemical differences that affect levels of social motivation

## Social Motivation, cont.

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- It can ebb and flow because of feelings of success and failure, hormones, changing social requirements, etc.
- We often need a team of people looking at the stumbling blocks for high-verbal pre-teens, teens, and adults (i.e., OT, psychologist, SLP, behaviorist)



## Try to Avoid Asking “How Does That Make Your Friend Feel?”



- They don't know or they probably wouldn't have done what they did
- Their impulsivity is too hard to overcome and they already feel badly about it
- They don't know what else they could have done so now they hurt their friend's feelings AND they don't know what they should have done
- People often use “friend” to mean “classmate” or “that kid in the cafeteria”
- Child may hear you saying “friend” and they're thinking “I don't have friends”
- *This is a strategy you use with a child with intact perspective-taking, not one with limited perspective-taking*

Social engagement, followed by social cognition, are the skills that best predict a child's future. They are as, or more, important, than reading and math for a child with ASD.





## What Kind Of Services Go With These Skills

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- Individual therapy (usually with an SLP or a counselor or both) to learn the individual social engagement and social cognition skills
- Group therapy to apply them with guided practice
- Counseling to learn their own emotions and strategies to manage them
- OT to support a calm and ready nervous system
- Social lab