

## TOPIC: SOCIAL COGNITIVE SKILLS

**DEFINITION:** Social cognition is a learning theory that states that most people learn behaviors by watching what others do. This capability to learn through natural, uninstructed observation is typically present from birth, and often occurs without the individual intentionally trying to learn. This unintentional learning happens especially with social rules which most people learn as children without effort. Social rules are often learned so subtly that individuals cannot identify when a rule was learned or explain how they know the rule is true. For example, no one tells children they may not take their shoes off at school but they know it.

Critical social communication skills are also typically acquired by children through the incidental learning of social cognition. From birth, babies naturally learn to look at people's eyes and follow what objects they are looking at. Playing *beside* peers in preschool quickly turns into playing *with* peers by kindergarten.

Social cognitive skills are skills relating to how well one understands and carries out social expectations such as conversational rules and rituals- both verbal and nonverbal in addition to understanding and following through with perspective taking. These skills are layered and are complex. Adequate social cognitive skills rely heavily on executive functioning skills in addition to language skills and emotional regulation.

**CHARACTERISTICS OF SOCIAL COGNITIVE DEFICITS:** Components of social communication and social cognition include BUT ARE NOT LIMITED TO:

Non-verbal communication:

- Eye gaze
- proximity/ space
- body language
- facial expressions

Verbal discourse:

- Initiating
- Topic choice
- Turn taking
- content/ length

Each of these concepts can be analyzed on two levels:

1. is the individual able to perceive and correctly interpret the concept in others, and
2. is the individual able to demonstrate appropriate use of the concept himself/herself.

For example, does Billy understand that when someone is looking at their watch it means they are in a hurry and he needs to stop talking *AND* does Billy know how to appropriately communicate to others that he is in a hurry.

Other characteristics may include:

- Big reactions to small problems
- Lack of understanding / broad vocabulary of emotional terms
- Difficulty with Theory of Mind (understanding that others have thoughts/ feelings that are different than our own)

### RECOMMENDATION FOR SERVICES:

- Seek a consult or social cognitive evaluation with a therapist who is experienced in assessing these areas. It is important to determine a student's strengths and weaknesses across many areas in order to develop a treatment plan and list of priorities for treatment regarding the many areas of social cognition that may need to be addressed..

### WHAT TO DO AT HOME:

- Encourage your child to use "I feel statements" ( ex: I feel happy, I feel upset) if possible encourage them to also tell you why (ex: I feel upset because he took my toy).
- Encourage your child to understand that people think differently about things (ex: You love McDonald's but I think it tastes gross and is not very healthy for us. It is ok that we have different thoughts about McDonald's and we can eat it sometimes.)