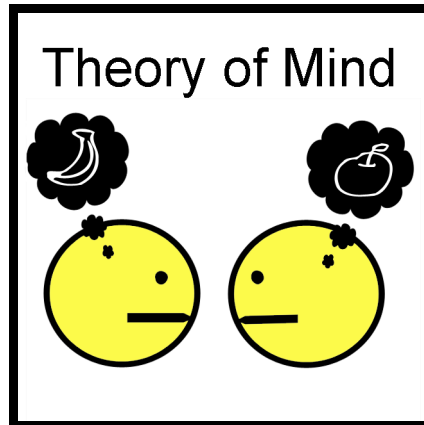


COMMUNICATION SPOT.

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A study in 1988 by Gopnik and Astington involved showing a child a Smarties box and asking them what they thought would be inside. Most children, of course, answered “Smarties”. The researchers then showed the same child that there were pencils inside. Next came the interesting part... The researcher closed the box and asked the child what *another person* would think if *they* were asked what was inside Smarties box. Children under 4 years often got this wrong. “Pencils”, they would answer.

This response may seem odd to you as an adult; but young children’s understanding of what others think, know and feel is largely dependent upon what *they* think, know and feel. A young child knows there is pencils in the box – so everyone should know!

The understanding that someone else’s mind can be different to your own, develops as a child grows older, but it remains difficult for many children with autism. So what does this have to do with communication?

Theory of Mind and Communication

The understanding that another person’s mind may be different to your own, is referred to as “**theory of mind**”. If I thought about why I communicate it is to convey something that I have in *my* mind to someone else who may not yet have these thoughts or knowledge in *their* mind. In order to do this, I have to make a judgement of what the other person would already know and “fill in the gaps.” **Sounds complicated, but we do this all the time, often subconsciously...**

Here are some examples:

1. When I explain something, I must think about what the other person already knows or understands and what gaps I need to explain in more detail. (*I shouldn’t tell them that that Auntie Carol’s house is next to Bob’s if the listener doesn’t know who Bob is*).

2. I should take into account the feelings of the other person and assess how my message may affect them. *(I won't tell Nanny that I hated the present she gave me. I really hate it, but she would feel sad if I told her that.)*
3. I should try and understand *why* someone is saying something, not just *what* they are saying. What might they thinking when they say that? Can I get some hints from their face or their actions? *(Mum says "Go and watch TV" as she sighs and looks sad. I want her to read me a book , but I'm guessing that she is really tired).*
4. I need to take into account what another person seems interested in and change what I say accordingly. *(Just because I love talking about Thomas the Tank Engine doesn't mean that everyone will also enjoy talking about him at length).*

Theory of Mind and Autism

Children with autism, whether low or high-functioning, usually exhibit some difficulties with "reading someone else's mind". This should be considered in any communication program. Two examples of children with poor theory of mind include:

A child who is non-verbal may scream and scream assuming you know what they want (because it is so very clear in their mind).

Or a child who has high-functioning autism may get upset if someone else does not understand a game that they, themselves, find simple. They may not be able to adapt their explanation of the rules so the other person understands.

In fact, "theory of mind" can be used to explain why many children with autism seem in egocentric. If you thought that everyone else's mind was just like yours – that others thought, knew and believed as you did – then imagine how this would affect your communication.

Assisting A Child With To Develop Theory Of Mind.

The relevance of the following tips will depend on the age and functioning of your child, but if you have specific questions, please feel free to email.

1. Many communication programs include activities that work on recognising facial expressions. Can your child recognise photos of people who are happy, sad, angry and scared? Interpreting facial expressions is a good first step to a child understanding how another person is feeling. Theory of mind can be developed further by thinking about when and why people would display these emotions. Comment on real-life situations to help transfer these skills. If you see a girl crying in the supermarket with her mother, make a comment "That

girl's crying. She seems sad... I wonder why?" Most importantly, comment when there are different reactions between your child and another. "You look happy because you like dogs, but that boy looks scared. I think he is scared of dogs. He has different thoughts to you." Another way to work on feelings is to present a situation and to discuss how different people think or feel. Eg. If you opened a present and it's a skateboard. How would Nan feel? How would you feel? How would Dad feel? Always make the comment that people's minds can be very different to others'.

2. State what you do and don't know when your child is trying to communicate. For example, "I know you are cross. I know you want something. I don't know what you want"... Next state what will help you to understand. "You need to... use your words/use your pictures/ show me... what you want." If your child then follows through with some good communication, you could praise them. "You showed me a picture of juice... now I know you want juice". This technique also works with more verbal children – state what you know, state what you don't know, and let your child know what they need to say so you can understand.
3. Explain to your child that every body has a different mind. Thoughts can be different. Interests can be different. Knowledge can be different. Reactions can be different. Use language that your child will understand and where possible, use pictures. Real life examples will be best for your child.
Your favourite colour is red. Your sister's favourite colour is yellow.
She thinks different things to you. The pictures below can be used to show different thoughts and interests. **(See: Thoughts can be different: Explain that these boys were asked what they loved the best. One thought of trains, one thought of tricycles. Many people have different thoughts.)**
4. Explain to your child that your words can change what someone else is thinking. Pictures can explain this well. Write words in speech balloons and thoughts in "thought bubbles". Try and get your child to imagine what another person is thinking when different words are said. This is particularly useful to go over situations that have not gone smoothly. Discuss what your child's teacher might have thought when your child told her she had funny teeth (even though your child was being honest and even though the teacher returned the comment with a polite smile!) **(See: SPEECH AND THOUGHT: Together with**

your child, you can write something in the speech bubble and then write what it makes the other person think).

5. "Referential Communication" is the ability to clearly convey a message to another person. Barrier games "force" children to hone their verbal messages by putting a barrier between the speaker and the listener so that communication relies on clear speech.

Recommended Resources For Developing Theory Of Mind:

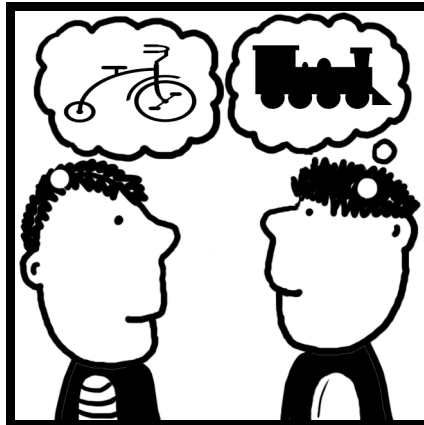
- * **My First Barrier Games** - by Pelican Talk www.pelican-talk.com
 - activities to develop referential communication
- * **Teaching Children With Autism to Mind-Read** (Howlin, Baron-Cohen, Hadwin) 1999
 - A great read that contains theory and activities that address recognition of feelings, reactions to different situations, and seeing things from another's perspective

Please contact me with any questions.

Lucia Smith Pelican Talk Speech Therapy Resources

www.pelican-talk.com

THOUGHTS CAN BE DIFFERENT



SPEECH AND THOUGHTS

