

Applying Social Thinking to AAC

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Social Thinking can be used for individuals who use AAC devices. All the elements in ILAUGH work together for effective success in social communication, however, professionals can focus on each one individually. Prior to beginning therapy, professionals (just like any other assessment), should establish the student's baseline. Do they have significant challenges with social communication? Are some skills emerging? Social Thinking abilities are not based on cognition and professionals must tailor therapy goals to each student's specific social needs.

In conversation, individuals have a short window of time to respond to their communication partner and having pre-programmed phrases can make conversations flow more smoothly. The AAC device can be organized so that greetings, goodbyes, comments, and questions are easily accessible when initiating conversation. These preprogrammed phrases can also be tailored to conversing with a specific audience because students will talk differently to their siblings and peers than they would to an adult or stranger. Students' AAC device can also have organized pages of conversation questions, comments, and phrases based on their setting or environment around them. For example, having designated pages for when the student is in school (or for each class), when the student goes to the park, the store, etc. Depending on the most appropriate set-up for the student, the pages may have a picture of a classroom, store, etc, including "hot spots." For example, when the student clicks on a book, it may prompt phrases such as, "I want to read a book," "can you read this to me?" or "I really liked this book!"

When listening, students are taught concepts such as "whole body listening," and "listening with your eyes." Whole body listening is related to body language. When having a conversation, students should be facing the speaker and maintain eye contact to show they are engaged. Students can have phrases and questions programmed on their device to ask for clarification, "what did you say?" or to check for understanding, "so what you said was..." This provides opportunities for them to participate in the conversation in an appropriate manner. When teaching a child to clarify information in a conversation, the teacher can ask the student to put the information in their own words.

Reading books and using real-life situations can help when teaching students how to understand perspective. Teachers can explain the icons with emotions on them, by relating the facial expressions to a time when the student felt happy, sad, angry, etc. This binds a connection between the emotion and helps the student understand the perspective of others. When reading books, allow the student to look at the character's facial expressions/ body language and have them identify the emotions correlated to the character's demeanor. Students and teachers can also role-play situations to help students use theory of mind and perspective taking.

Social Thinking can be used for all ILAUGH fundamentals when working with students with AAC. Professionals and parents can work together to make social goals as functional as possible to ensure the student has countless opportunities for success in all environments.

Sample Activity

Professionals and parents must also be conscious and program vocabulary that the student is comfortable using to make social interactions successful. An activity in therapy can involve

the child picking a “topic card” (pictures/ phrases to start a conversation) to practice asking a question or adding a comment about the topic. Students must gain the attention of the communication partner in a socially appropriate way to begin the conversation. During this activity, students can also practice identifying facial expressions and body language. Topics differ depending on age of child and activity should be modified regarding student’s abilities. For example, if the phrase card says “what is your favorite food?” the child can answer the question, then choose to add a comment or ask someone else in the group the same question. Scripts and visuals (example: picture of a question mark to help student realize they can ask a question or a checklist indicating questions and comments) can also be used to practice initiating, asking for clarification, and turn-taking. Professionals and parents can target various Social Thinking skills in all activities to help students generalize these concepts.

Resources

Tarshis, N., & Meringolo, D. (2014). *Social Thinking Across the Home and School Day: The I LAUGH Model of Social Thinking*. Lecture presented in Kean University, Union.