

Bridges Newsletter, Volume 3

Hello, Everyone! Welcome to Volume 3 of the Bridges E-Newsletter. In this issue, we would like to discuss some strategies for teaching social skills and social thinking to students with ASD. But before we get to the heart of the matter, we have a few housekeeping items.

* First, a hearty THANK YOU to those of you who have offered positive and constructive feedback regarding these newsletters and suggestions for improving them. Keep the suggestions coming. It is truly gratifying to know that the information is directly helpful to educators, parents, therapists, and other service providers. Thank you.

** Second, we want to extend an invitation to you all to share and contribute the wonderful ideas and information YOU have to our common goal of helping ASD students succeed in school. Bridges is but one model pilot project housed at Edgerton School, but we understand there are wonderful, effective programs and ideas at each of the other schools in our district. Perhaps the ultimate vision is to share and meld all of these programs and ideas together to eventually have a district-wide ASD program or vision that encompasses all schools and flexibly serves all ASD students. To that end, we would like to create a culture and dialogue for sharing these great ideas with one another. For ease of sharing, I am exploring the use of social media platforms such as a specialized Facebook group and/or page, a private YouTube Channel, and similar modes of sharing. Any comments or suggestions you may have for accomplishing ease of sharing are greatly appreciated. Please email me. In the meantime, until that is worked out, we invite anyone with great ideas, tools, techniques, resources, etc. concerning teaching and inclusion strategies for our ASD students to please send them in an email to me and we will include them in the next Bridges E-Newsletter. Please indicate if you would be willing to share your name and school in the email.

*** Third, we would like to make you aware of a wonderful opportunity for professional development. The MCEC (Montana Council for Exceptional Children) is sponsoring a conference for teachers entitled "*Common Core: Right Tools for Each Student*" in Missoula on February 6 (9-4:30), February 7 (8-4:30), and February 8 (8-11am). Attending this conference would be a great start for expanding your Teaching Strategy Toolbox. Each of the speakers and presentations looks to be fabulous, timely, and relevant to ALL students, but for those of you who have asked how to get more information and training on teaching strategies for ASD students, this conference is for you! Our own Chris Bilant is one of the many gifted speakers. Here are a few highlights of the offerings:

- "Improving Social Skills and Decreasing Disruptive Classroom Behavior with Kids with Asperger Syndrome" - Melisa Genaux
- "75 Quick on the Spot Techniques for Children with Emotional and Behavioral Problems" - Steven Olivas
- "Social Skills for a Group" - Jennifer Closson, Anisa Goforth, CSD & SP Graduate Students
- "Show What You Know with Free Mobile Apps" - Tony Vincent

- "Strategic Mobile Apps and Math Tools for Students and Teachers (K-4)" - Marilyn Jurenka, Teri Fisk
- "Challenging Behavior and Your Bag of Tricks: An Introduction to the Pyramid Model and a Framework for Success!" -
- "Neuroscience Implications for the Classroom" - Dr. Patty Kero
- "A Practical Approach to Treating Youth with Emotional Disorders and Behavioral Challenges" - Heather Torrence Mattson, Shari Morin-Degel, MA, LCPC
- "How To Prepare Students With Aspergers For Successful Post-School Employment As Documented In An Awesome IEP" - Doug Doty, Marla Swanby, Barb Sorenson
- "Leading the Way - IEPs aligned to the Montana Common Core Standards" - Chris Bilant & Gail McGregor

In addition, Alexis Wineman is scheduled to deliver the keynote address on Thursday, February 7. As you may know, Alexis Wineman is the 18 year old student from Cutbank who was crowned Miss Montana and went on to compete last week in the national Miss America Pageant, where she was a semi-finalist and honored with the "America's Choice" award. Alexis has autism, yet has persevered to overcome many of her deficits. She is a dynamic speaker who peppers her story of perseverance with humor and ultimately delivers a powerful, inspirational message. I heard her speak at a similar conference last September after which she was met with rousing applause and a standing ovation by 350 people. You won't want to miss it. For a conference schedule, click here: <http://www.montanacec.org/conference-schedule>
For full descriptions and objectives of all workshop presentations, click here: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/pub?key=0AhqDab9VcfJcdGp5OWZZNk40Ymc5alg5Tjd6eWtyX3c&single=true&gid=3&output=html>

**** On to our topic for this newsletter--teaching social skills and social thinking to students with ASD. This is a very broad topic and difficult to fully explore in the confines of one newsletter. We can discuss some aspects in more detail in future newsletters, but here, we intend to highlight the pieces of the big picture, offer a few tools, and point you to other resources where you can get more information.

Q: Why teach social skills and social thinking?

A: Social skills and social thinking together are a *core deficit* of the diagnosis of autism. Due to the nature of this neurological condition, ASD students' brains are ill-equipped to naturally "read" and attach meaning to the abstract, unspoken communication between people--i.e., body language and gestures; facial expressions and emotion; tone of voice and voice inflection; sarcasm and idioms; and all the other subtle cues we take for granted in our daily communication. ASD students have trouble with the unwritten "rules" and pleasantries of social communication, a/k/a the "hidden curriculum"--i.e., not interrupting; initiating, sustaining, and closing a conversation; body space and body contact; voice modulation; taking turns; waiting; and generally appraising a social situation and knowing what to do. Lastly, ASD students have trouble taking the perspective of others, and ascertaining another person's probable thoughts

and/or feelings in a given situation. Given these examples, you can see how this core deficit of autism--social thinking--significantly impedes an ASD student's ability to function in the classroom, to access the curriculum and learn, to have meaningful friendships, and to hold gainful, independent employment later in life.

Fortunately, ASD is not a static condition. With proper supports and teaching, ASD students most certainly can and do overcome their deficits in social skills and social thinking to be successful in school and later in life. It is a *myth* that people with ASD don't have emotions, don't want friends, or don't have empathy. They possess these qualities, they just don't always know how to show them. The internet is rife with research abstracts showing that the number one indicator of quality of life for people with ASD is adequate social skills and social thinking. Likewise, the pages and pages of blogs and forum conversations among adults with ASD on the internet echoes this statistic as well. These adults with ASD are either attributing their success to social skills training in school, or wishing they had had access to it in their schools to avoid years of heartache from class failures and lost jobs. Teaching social skills and social thinking is one of the most important aspects of an ASD student's education. Even simply tweaking one part of a daily lesson plan to incorporate a bit of social skills and social thinking goes far to benefit not only ASD students but non-ASD students as well. ALL students--whether ASD or non-ASD--benefit by learning social thinking.

Q: Is there a progression for teaching social skills and social thinking based on age or developmental stage?

A: Yes, there are some general guidelines, but please keep in mind that ASD is a *spectrum* disorder, so each ASD student will present differently in the degree of deficit in social thinking and will need individualized tailoring according to his/her needs. That said, the following *general guidelines* seem to apply:

- From Pre-school to about Grades 1 or 2, the focus is mainly teaching ASD students "how to do school," or how to function in the classroom and surrounding areas with minimal disruption and optimal independence--i.e., waiting in line; sitting in circle time; raising a hand to speak; getting comfortable following the daily and weekly schedule but also handling changes in the schedule; completing an activity; transitioning from one activity to another; taking turns; waiting; greetings; school safety and bus safety; the very basic rules of being in the lunchroom and out on the playground, and the very basics of self-regulating his/her emotions and behavior in various settings throughout the school day.
- From about Grade 2 to about Grade 4, we continue fine-tuning the above skills, but the focus begins to shift to include the social skills of initiating, sustaining, and closing a conversation; body space and body contact; voice modulation; beginning to understand subtle nuances in unspoken communication; beginning to understand sarcasm, idioms, jokes; asking a peer to play and maintaining play for the mutual enjoyment of both participants for increasing amounts of time; beginning to interact cooperatively with

peers in group work and play for increasing amounts of time; making friends and how to be a friend.

- From about Grade 4 to about Grade 5, we continue working on the above skills, increasing the independence and time the ASD student can sustain the skills, and decreasing the prompts, cues and supports. Now, we also begin to focus much more on the following skills: perspective-taking and ascertaining the probable thoughts and feelings of others in different situations; beginning to independently appraise a social situation and act accordingly; beginning to understand gradients of friendships and relationships and the appropriate corresponding actions/behaviors; beginning to independently recognize problems and either adjust or ask for help; beginning to self-advocate and get needs met independently from teachers and peers.
- In Middle School and High School respectively, we continue working on all the above skills, keeping in mind that the ASD students are in a new school with new protocols; that they have several different teachers with higher expectations for increased independence; and that as they advance through each year and stage of typical teenage development, social skills and social thinking become more complex and nuanced. Socially, these years are tough for all students, but ASD students especially need help with cooperative group work; making and sustaining friendships; opportunities to engage with other kids in activities for mutual enjoyment; perspective-taking; what to do if they are victims of bullying; appropriate social behaviors in interacting with members of the opposite sex, and increased self-advocacy.

Q: Where do I begin and is there a guide I can follow or do I have to invent my own?

A: First, formulate an overall roadmap of goals and objectives for your ASD student for learning social skills and social thinking for the year (more detailed than his/her IEP). Keep it realistic, simple to achieve, and tailored to the developmental stage and needs of your ASD student(s). In doing this, you will need to individualize the plan to the specific needs of the student, but you do not necessarily need to reinvent the wheel. There are several good curricula you can use to guide you in teaching social skills and social thinking, complete with corresponding books, videos, lesson plans, interactive games, worksheets, visual aids and other complementary tools. Peruse what is available, and then select a framework or curricula that matches the age and developmental stage of your ASD student(s). Also, in formulating your plan and choosing a framework or curricula, you will want to determine the times of the day available to teach these skills and any staff available to help you--perhaps a speech pathologist, para, recess aide, a resource room teacher, a school counselor, school psychologist, etc. I know the Friendship Club Facilitators at Edgerton welcome any and all inquiries regarding their framework and would be happy to share. In addition, here are some suggestions for great ready-made frameworks or curricula:

- Michelle Garcia Winner's resources (for all ages): <http://www.socialthinking.com> ; <http://www.socialthinking.com/books-products/superflex-curriculum32> ; <http://www.socialthinking.com/books-products/new-products/should-i-or-shouldn-t-i-what-would-others-think-detail>
- Brenda Smith Myles's "The Hidden Curriculum" (for all ages): http://www.amazon.com/Hidden-Curriculum-Practical-Understanding-Situations/dp/1931282609/ref=la_B001JS20UA_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1358874869&sr=1-1
- Tony Atwood's resources (for all ages) http://www.tonyattwood.com.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=147&Itemid=622
- Do2learn's Social Skills Toolbox (for all ages) <http://www.do2learn.com/organizationtools/SocialSkillsToolbox/index.htm>
- "Teaching Critical Social Skills to Middle School Students," <http://www.cccoe.net/social/skillslist.htm>

Q: What are some effective methods or tools educators can use to teach social skills and social thinking?

A: Students of all ages will benefit from the following methods:

- **Priming with a Social Story coupled with 1:1 Direct Teaching.** If we want our ASD children to be able to independently join in a game of kickball at recess, transition from one activity to another, maintain proper body contact boundaries, turn homework in on time, etc., we need to provide the scripts and visual supports ASD students need to learn these and other social skills. One way to do this is by priming and previewing the particular social skill with a visual aid such as a social story. A social story/visual aid could be as simple as a sticky note, for example a voice volume scale 1-3 with the words "When I am in class I will use my #1 voice." Or it can be a longer story with pictures. Here are two great examples of a social story for students that teaches the beginning basics of appropriate body contact or body space: <http://www.schooltube.com/video/3cbbdf0f58c2ecd7aae0/A%20Social%20Story:%20Personal%20Space>