



Social Thinking and  
Early Learners – Exploring concepts  
through stories, activities and play

Presented by Ryan Hendrix, MS, CCC-SLP

Based on the work of Ryan Hendrix, Kari Zweber  
Palmer, Nancy Tarshis and Michelle Garcia Winner

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Why do we use social skills?

To impact how we make people feel  
which then impacts how they feel  
about us.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

The thinking behind the doing...  
**SOCIAL THINKING**

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

What is ***Social Thinking***<sup>®</sup> ?

- Concepts, curricula, and related strategies that form a framework that can help ALL people better understand the social experience
- A pathway for assessment and intervention developed by Michelle Garcia Winner that has been around and in use 20 years
- A methodology with a global reach

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Social Thinking is **not one tool** or **idea**, instead it provides information on many fronts.

It's a **methodology**.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Goal of Social Thinking  
Methodology:

To **break down** abstract social information into more **concrete chunks** of information that guide people more clearly through their own social learning process

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Where do we begin?**

We begin with understanding our students

- Development: considering the whole child
- Learning style

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Why a developmental perspective?**

We meet them where they are because it gives us context for understanding expectations



---

---

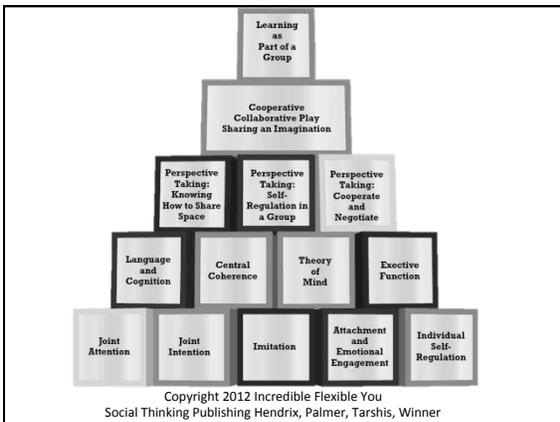
---

---

---

---

---



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Now consider...



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Skills vs. Thinking

- It's natural we attend first to behavior – it is what is most in our face and interrupts the learning process.
- If the focus is predominately on the social ACTIONS of our students...
- We create programs that teach SKILLS (waiting in line, raise hand in class) to teach the child to act in a certain way.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### What's missing?

Attention to the **thought process** behind the action



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### This is a Paradigm Shift

- Intervention is not as simple as teaching “better social skills”
- We need to teach children to be more efficient **social thinkers**, before we can expect them to produce better social skills.
- When people learn how to think differently and flexibly they can think **anywhere**.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Keep in mind

Social thinking is a language-based approach

Therefore we want to use it with children who have average to strong language and cognition

---

---

---

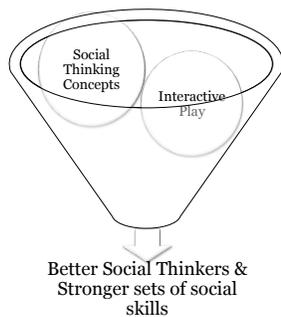
---

---

---

---

### Working with our Early Learners



---

---

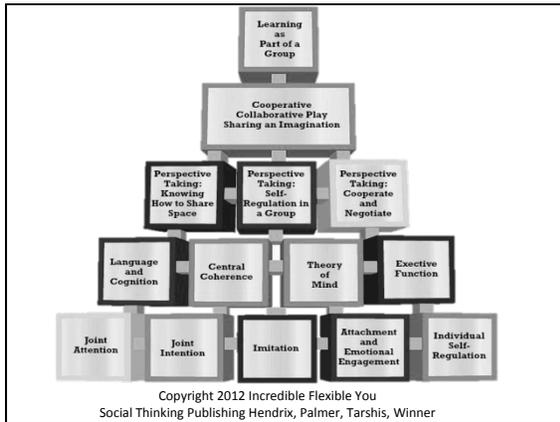
---

---

---

---

---




---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Social Thinking Vocabulary**®

An **explicit** user friendly vocabulary

Used **across environments, situations** and people

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

- Thinking Thoughts and Feeling Feelings
  - The Group Plan
  - Thinking With Your Eyes
  - Body in the Group
  - Whole Body Listening\*
- \*Suzanne P Truesdale

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Expected/Unexpected
Smart Guess
Flexible Thinking and Stuck Thinking
Size of the Problem
Sharing an Imagination

---

---

---

---

---

---

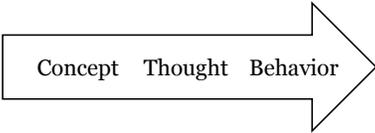
---

**More than just words**

It is not about the vocabulary, it is about the concepts underneath

We use the language *because* the language triggers the thought and the behavior

Concept Thought Behavior



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Use the vocabulary in context**

- Use the concept in the moment
- Keep a consistent vocabulary across settings



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**How do we teach this to our early learners?**

**Through:**

- Stories
- Structured activities
- Music
- Play

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Teaching social.**

Social learning is all about thoughts and feelings!

Make abstract concepts concrete




---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Make it big and obvious**

**Then talk about it!**

- Do something “unexpected” in your routine (e.g., wear your shoes on your hands)
- Model the language:
  - I’m thinking about...
  - I’m feeling...
  - You’re having a thought about me
  - I’m having a thought about you
  - I’m having a good thought
  - I feel comfortable
  - I feel good about...
  - You changed my thought

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Make it visual**

The Group Plan

- Book
- Music
- Build
- Parent Talk \*Legos

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

A caterpillar is shown with a thought bubble containing icons for a lollipop, a flag, a banana, a lightbulb, and a triangle.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Focus on the Process not the Product**

- Give them more information
- Draw their attention to the important information in the environment and situation
- Talk about what people might be thinking and feeling
- Consider the information and help they need to get there

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

When it comes to social,  
CONTEXT is the key

Context

- Anything (person, place, object, etc.) in a given situation that creates meaning
- Sets expectations, dictates hidden rules, creates a framework for interpretation

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Making the Context Explicit:  
The Group Plan

- Explicitly teach:
  - you are part of a group
  - that group has a plan.
- Contrast **group plan** with following your **own plan**
- The books, games and activities we all do together *are* **The Group Plan**
- Knowing The Group Plan provides the context for anticipating what will happen and therefore what is expected

---

---

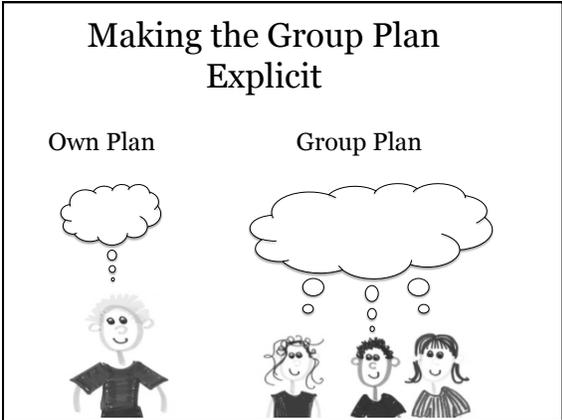
---

---

---

---

---



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Helping kids to be better social observers: **Thinking With Your Eyes**

- Teach ***think with your eyes*** so they understand the purpose for observing others and the environment.
- We use our eyes to gather information about:
  - what is happening around us
  - the group plan
  - what other people are thinking and feeling.
- We also use our eyes expressively to show others we are thinking about them.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Thinking with Your Eyes**

- Eyes are like arrows, they point to what someone is looking at
- What I am looking at is what (or whom) I am thinking about
  - "What am I looking at?"
  - "What am I thinking about?"
  - "What is my plan?"
  - "Show me you are thinking about me."
- To observe: "Think with your eyes."

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Teaching Thinking With Your Eyes**

- Looking at...
- Thinking about...
- The plan...

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### T.W.E. Telescope!



---

---

---

---

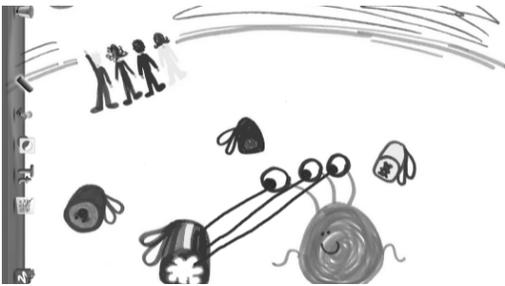
---

---

---

---

### Doodle Buddy



---

---

---

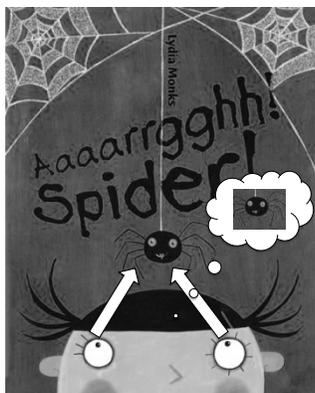
---

---

---

---

---



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**More Thinking with Your Eyes...**

- Making choices using only eyes
- Calling on students for turns
- Gathering items from around the room or selecting items on the table

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Aaaarrggh! Spider!  
Thinking with Eyes  
Extension Activities**

- Spider Hider, Spider Finder
- Spider making
- Act Out Story

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**GO PLAY!**

It's not be as easy as it sounds...

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Skills that develop through play**

- Thinking about others
- Observing what they are doing
- Predicting what they will do next
- Setting a goal and seeing it through
- Reading another person's plan
- Communicating and meshing our ideas with those of others
- Self regulation

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Exploring imagination**

<p><b>Singular</b></p> <p>Ability to think about things that are not real</p> <p>Something that only exists or happens in your mind</p>	<p><b>Shared</b></p> <p>Share an idea, so we can create and sustain play with contributions from all of the play partners</p> <p>The basis of play and conversation</p>
---	---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**To **SHARE** an imagination...**

Communicate our ideas

Coordinate to pursue a group plan

Imagine or hold in our minds:

- The same thing (concept, picture, idea)
- The perspective of character/role
- The plan as it shifts

---

---

---

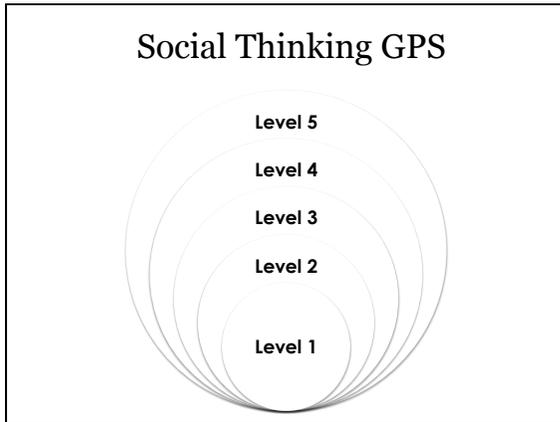
---

---

---

---

---



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Why the Social Thinking GPS?

- Means of observing and categorizing play
- Helps us with intervention planning and realistic expectations

---

---

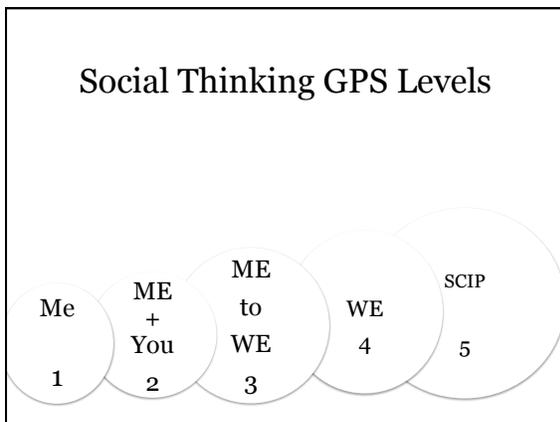
---

---

---

---

---



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

What's the difference between a **ME** and a **WE** based player?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

<b>ME</b>	<b>WE</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Self-focused play</li><li>• Object-oriented play</li><li>• Singular Imagination</li><li>• Include adults when adults actively seek their attention or follow the child's lead</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Emerging or emerged in their ability to socially attend to peers</li><li>• Shared Imagination</li><li>• Able to engage in peer based play (with differing levels of support)</li></ul>

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

What does play look like?

What is the child focused on?

What kind of imagination?

---

---

---

---

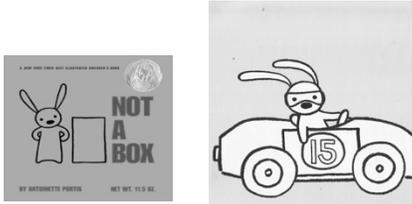
---

---

---

## Sharing an Imagination

*Not a Box* by Antoinette Portis



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Provide Context



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Set Up Dramatic Play: Space

What do we know about space?

Astronauts  
Space ships    Space Aliens  
Planets    Rockets

What do we know about what people might say and do?

Ride in a rocket ship  
Fix the rocket  
Find Space Aliens  
Talk to Space Aliens  
Gather space rocks

What materials will we need?

- Space suits/Gravity Boots
- Helmets/Tools
- Rope/Rocket packs
- Space ship
- Planets
- Space Aliens
- Food for the astronauts
- Space alien snacks

---

---

---

---

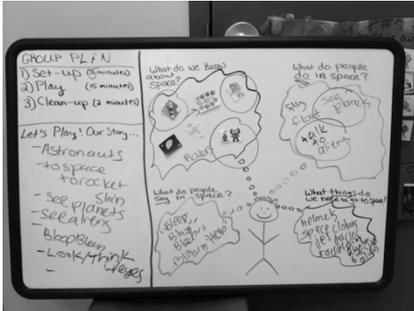
---

---

---

---

### Playing with the concept




---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### What can I do?

- Understand the value and importance of play
- Provide the opportunity and the environment for play
- Give *yourself* permission to play!

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Context and Inspiration for teaching can come in many forms!

- Books
- Toys
- TV shows
- Movies
- Apps and Games




---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**My student loves animals...**

- **Animal books:**
  - What are the animals doing?
  - What are they thinking about?
  - How are they feeling?
  - What do you think they will do next?
- **Hide animal figurines or stuffed animals around the room and go on a safari**
- **Make homes for the different animals**
- **Feed and take care of the animals**
- **Help an injured animal**

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Use the language to talk about what you are observing and doing**

- Our group plan is to...
- I was thinking we could...
- I notice that you are...
- That makes me think you...
- I have a thought! Let's...
- It looks like we had different ideas...
- Let's put our ideas together...
- When we play together I have good thoughts
- It makes me feel happy when we play together

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Planning for success**

- When is play successful?
- When are they really rigid or stuck in their thinking?
- When do they let me in?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**We help our kids by helping ourselves**

- Expect challenging behaviors
- Understanding challenging behaviors are temporary until we can figure out better ways to manage and prevent these difficult situations
- Do not see our children's actions as a sign of our own incompetence but rather their inability to cope with frustration

- Jed Baker

---

---

---

---

---

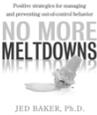
---

---

---

“When it is hard to use one’s imagination, it becomes harder to solve new problems, and the likelihood of frustration increases, which may lead to meltdowns.”

- Jed Baker




---

---

---

---

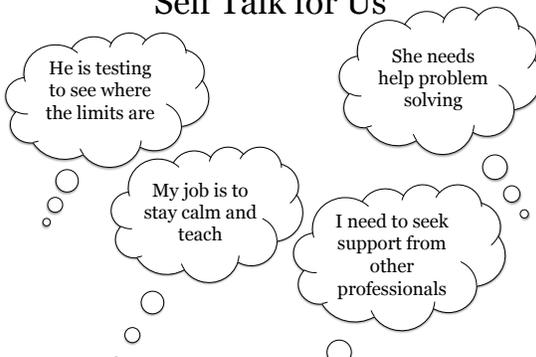
---

---

---

---

**Self Talk for Us**




---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Take Home Messages

- Avoid Assumptions
- Talk about what you're observing, thinking, feeling, and planning!
- Help children to notice and put together the social clues around them
- Remember this is slow and deep learning for all of us!
- Know that they will improve as compared to themselves.
- Play with your kids!
- Have fun...be present...you will be so glad you did.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Thank You



Ryan Hendrix  
rhendrix@socialthinking.com

Social Learning for a Lifetime of Well-Being



www.socialthinking.com

---

---

---

---

---

---

---