The Next Generation of Treatment:

Defining a Hybrid of Social Interventions for Students with Strong Intelligence and Language Skills

By Michelle Garcia Winner and Chris Abildgaard

Within the autism community, what treatment is "best" is a hotly debated issue. Whether or not there even exists a "best" treatment for this highly diversified community of individuals can be a bone of contention among parents, educators and experts. The vast spectrum nature of autism raises concerns about adopting a perspective that any one treatment option is "right for all" – no matter how well researched it may be. Yet at the same time, there is a tendency among parents and professionals alike to build walls and think in black and white terms when exploring treatment options. As more and more children are being diagnosed across the autism spectrum, and our school rosters are filled with students needing individualized treatment plans, it behooves us, as educators and policy makers, to shift away from thinking there is one way to treat these children and instead, embrace an array of approaches to better meet the range of challenges our students and adults on the spectrum experience.

Riding on the heels of this perception shift is the growing awareness that one's language and cognitive abilities matter greatly when exploring treatment choices. We must look beyond "behavior" and design programs taking into account the whole child and that child's functioning across several domains: language, cognition, sensory and perspective taking abilities.

In the not too distant past we were mainly dealing with children with "classic autism" who exhibited marked challenges in behavior, had little to no language/communication skills, and who were largely taught in self-contained classrooms. Our emphasis was on behavior modification, visual communication, and elementary social skills. Today we have caseloads filled with academically bright ASD students with reasonable to advanced verbal intelligence scores and spontaneous expressive and receptive language abilities. We have had to adapt, teach differently, and adopt a more sophisticated treatment approach. These newer treatments are rooted in language-based explanations (e.g. Social Stories®). They require us to teach more nuance and sophistication in preparing this new generation of "high functioning Aspies" to merge into the neurotypical world of adulthood. Furthermore, we find ourselves needing to also address a multitude of co-existing issues ranging from sensory needs to anxiety, depression, and other compelling mental health issues that impact the majority of our "brighter" students.

As we strive, collectively, to develop models of intervention that serve this diverse population, I hope we are slowly deflating arguments about whether to singularly use Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), Social Thinking, Floortime®, SCERTS®, etc. A more reasonable – and meaningful – approach is to select from the best strategies all these programs have to offer and integrate them into a holistic intervention plan tailored to the specific needs of each of our students/clients.

In keeping an eye on all the factors – visible and invisible – that impact a student, we recognize the importance of teaching with a multifaceted approach. The most effective treatment programs now being developed for our brighter and language rich students increasingly share common tentacles and overlap in their basic strategies. Let's take, for example, Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) and Social Thinking. While philosophically these treatments are based on different core tenants, the actual application of these models are blending when applied to this higher functioning group of individuals with ASD.

If the idea that ABA and Social Thinking dovetail each other leaves you scratching your head, consider this. ABA is far more than Lovaas-based teaching, token systems, and discrete trials. ABA is the science in which procedures derived from the principles of behavior are systematically applied to improve socially significant behavior to a meaningful degree. In

a nutshell: behavior modification systems involving reinforcement and contingencies are used to help an individual acquire more functional personal, social, and life skills. A target behavior can be shaped, strengthened or decreased to improve one's level of social functioning…to a degree, but not without a strong focus on the thinking used to modulate social behavior.

A core tenant of Social Thinking is learning to acquire a new social behavior, but this is only part of a larger process. The process begins with recognizing what people think and feel about each other in different situations and with different people in the same situations, and then determining the expected behaviors that keep people thinking favorably about each other. It is believed that ultimately the motivation for this learning comes more from the desire to be socially validated (socially included) by others than from token reinforcement.

ABA and Social Thinking Merge

Treatment for students with social learning challenges has now evolved to address the more nuanced social challenges our bright students face day to day. Everyday encounters with the hidden social curriculum, the constantly shifting social language peers use, and most recently the advent of various social networking sites has resulted in social roadblocks appearing virtually out of nowhere for our students. We can no longer only focus intervention on teaching spot skills that deal with individual situations, in the hopes our students will somehow string all these lessons together in their head and arrive at some gestalt social awareness. Our guys/gals have to be taught to utilize their social thinking skills to uncover the "what, how and why" of the social behaviors that need to be adjusted based on the dynamics of the situation(s). Understandably then, our treatments need to give students various tools to use across their day and teach them a process through which they can engage in social decision making to choose successful social behaviors, no matter what situation they find themselves in. ABA seeks to generalize behavior changes across settings; Social Thinking seeks to give our students the means to generalize social awareness across settings, which then ultimately helps increase generalization of the related social behavior.

Enlightened behaviorists are noticing that the more traditional reward systems commonly used in ABA are not being as easily accepted by this more verbal, and at times, argumentative group. They are also beginning to notice that explaining social and behavioral expectations to our students makes sense. Behaviorists everywhere are adding language-based social thinking methods to their tool bag of strategies for modifying behavior. As our more clever and socially curious students ask *why* they should care about

others or *why* it matters to others how they behave, the answers can no longer be found within the typical reward systems of ABA (*e.g., if you sit quietly then you get a sticker*). Increasingly, this type of behavior modification involves ongoing discussion of how we think and feel about each other and how that impedes or encourages the development of a relationship.

Yet at the same time, our younger students with social learning challenges or some of our older behaviorally challenged students need incentives for practicing what they are taught in a small group or individual setting. They are not yet mature enough or have yet to have enough positive social experiences to recognize the implicit reward associated with successful social relations. The use of basic reinforcement systems at the core of ABA helps build this motivation. At the same time, we need to pave the way for more finely tuned social understanding to develop.

For example, if a child gets a point for coming into the classroom quietly, taking his seat and getting out his work, he should also be given a detailed compliment. "Justin, we noticed you did a great job entering the class and getting to work! It makes us feel good when you do it that way." In pairing social thinking with a typical reward system we are providing verbal explanation of others' thinking and feelings that relate back to the student's behavior in a way that will shift our students toward exploring natural social emotional consequences of their actions. This direct feedback also helps our students develop a stronger awareness that people have thoughts about each other even when we are not directly speaking to each other! Remarkably, many of our adults report they were not aware people had thoughts about their behavior until they were in later adolescence or adulthood! A language-based explanation helps forge self-awareness and even encourage empathetic connections.

Direct teaching, using explicit language, of social expectations and how a behavior (positive or negative) makes another person feel is central to learning more refined social behavior. As social rules and expectations become more sophisticated with age, so should the focus of our reward systems shift from artificial (token based) to naturalistic to prepare our students for adulthood. Parents are not permitted to call their young adult child's boss at work or their child's college professor to tell them to put their child on a behavior plan. If our children have not figured out by the time they leave high school how to sustain expected social behaviors in all aspects of the community, they will find the community is not as welcoming as they – or you – hoped it would be.

As students move into middle school, high school and beyond they need to be strongly encouraged to learn to evaluate how their behaviors make others

think and feel. We need to transition them from powerful token rewards to more social-based reinforcement, helping them understand that when they keep others feeling good, they tend to feel good themselves and social relationships flourish. We start developing this awareness by first teaching students to be social detectives or social spies in their own world; to notice what makes them feel good or bad around others. We then extend that understanding to how others feel in response to our own words and actions; and we study how to read how others perceive our actions as being intentional and how to monitor how people try to predict each other's communicative intent. Our students begin to recognize how subtle shifts in their behavior can shift people's acceptance of them. The positive thoughts in others – or at least not receiving a negative thought/emotion from another person – become the coveted reward, one that sustains our behavior regulation across adulthood.

Providing increased opportunities for naturalistic rewards, extinguishing negative behaviors, and providing encouragement and reinforcement of positive social behaviors is the focus of all skilled care providers and should not be seen as belonging to one treatment camp or the other. It is common sense; it should be our common treatment goal.

As Social Thinking and ABA join forces, we have to recognize that one key to effectively synthesizing these approaches involves looking deeper into the antecedents for what we construe as "inappropriate behaviors." Often it is a cognitive misinterpretation or social thinking blunder within a student. Therefore, treatment needs to begin at the root, helping them better grasp the social thinking concepts, which includes exploring how others perceive their behaviors and how this perception results in the associated behavioral outcomes.

Rather than argue whether a student should receive ABA or Social Thinking, we should continue to explore how we can merge the best ideas from both treatments into one intervention approach for our higher functioning students, and

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continue to create new ideas in treatment for our population as it ages. Inspired behaviorists are becoming social thinkers, and vice versa. Those who understand the subtle yet varied needs of this segment of the autism population also have an eye on sensory integration, relationship development, stage of development, and mental health issues. Educational and clinical intervention teams need to be multifaceted and operationally define target social thinking behaviors and reinforce our students for using what they are taught. How? We can integrate these philosophies when we start thinking and exploring things like:

- What does the student do or fail to do cognitively and behaviorally that leads us to recognize his social thinking strengths and weaknesses?
- What language can be targeted as a means of teaching the core concepts of social thinking skills?
- How do core deficits in the student's social thinking impact his social behavioral skills? For example, if a student is very literal he may misinterpret another's words or actions, resulting in a different behavioral outcome than had he interpreted it correctly.
- What social behaviors need to be taught in relation to the targeted social thinking concepts?
- What motivates the student to participate in a social behavioral treatment program?

- How frequently are we reinforcing a student for using expected social thinking skills and related social behaviors?
- What types of visuals can we use to help remind our student of the social thinking concepts?

As we move forward in our understanding of the higher functioning end of the autism spectrum, and the unique needs of this population, let's avoid overly simplistic explanations and decisions about providing treatment to students with such complex minds. While the research data may not yet exist that accounts for these complex factors in the treatment process, we cannot discount the need to integrate social thinking and social awareness simply because it is difficult to measure. We are embarking on an entirely new way of teaching our students, and given the paucity of data collected, the way is neither clear nor yet paved for those of us who work with this population. Yet, the feedback is positive. Social Thinking combined with practical concepts developed through ABA are leading to some powerful results, case by case. The difficulty quantifying the progress becomes the challenge… and in accepting the challenge, ultimately the reward will be more clearly defined treatments for our brighter students who can learn through language-based explanations to develop their self-awareness and related social skills. ▐▶

[*This article is an adaptation of a blog post by the authors. Check out the original post at www.socialthinking.com.]

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