

Social Competence and Individuals with ASD

An OCALI Parent Package



Welcome to the presentation on social competence and individuals with ASD. This presentation is part of the Ohio Center for Autism and Low Incidence's (OCALI) Parent Packaged materials series; materials designed to be used by parents and parent groups to increase knowledge about topics important to families of those with disabilities. These materials were developed by the expert staff at OCALI with funding from the Ohio Department of Education, Office for Exceptional Children. For further information on all the parent packaged materials please contact Donna Owens, family and adult services administrator at OCALI, 614-410-0381 or donna_owens@ocali.org

Objectives

- Participants will be able to define social competence
- Participants will be able to identify why social competence is important for success and satisfaction in the lives of all persons
- Participants will recognize how the underlying characteristics of autism spectrum disorders (ASD) effect the development of social competence

Today, we will be defining social competence, talking about how social competence and social skills fit together, learning why social competence is so important in the lives of all persons, and then seeing how the characteristics of autism spectrum disorders affect social competence.

Social Competence

The ability to interact successfully with peers and adults; social effectiveness

Assumes a certain set of expectations:

- Knowing the rules
- Reading facial expressions and body language of other people
- Reacting consistently to your own and others' emotions
- Communicating appropriately with different groups

So, what do we mean by social competence? Social competence is the ability to interact successfully with peers and adults in a variety of situations and environments. An individual that possesses social competence is therefore able to participate in social situations. Social competence is more than simply learning or mastering discrete social skills (saying hello, how are you today or please and thank you). There are many things to know, remember, and react to. We all try to follow the social rules we have acquired; we are able to know that other people have thoughts and what those thoughts might be by listening to their language while watching their facial and body language; we can identify and understand our own emotions and the emotions of others, or we converse about them until we can gain understanding; we are able to enter different situations and know how to dress, talk, move, and behave. Knowing the differences between how I can talk and act around my friends in comparison to my parents is one example of social competence.

What Is Social Competence?

“Social [competence] means one is able to adapt to an ever-changing landscape that takes into consideration the environment, the people in it, the thoughts, beliefs and needs of the individual and others who share the environment—whether or not they are in direct communication—as well as individual and collective history of knowledge and experience.”

Winner, 2002, p. 21



Consider this quote from Michelle Winner, an author who writes about social thinking. (READ SLIDE)

Social interactions and behaviors are extremely complex, which is what makes social competence difficult to teach. Because social competence comes naturally to us neurotypicals, it is not a natural process for us to break down how to acquire social competency nor how to teach it. We use social abilities pretty much every waking moment—choosing what we will wear for the day; interpreting what is happening when watching TV or reading a book; and how we behave when we are with people. As neurotypicals, we keep mental records of people we know and how to interact with them—such as not talking about politics with someone we know can be disagreeable about it. This is an intricate procedure, recalling information about a particular person and reacting in appropriate ways.

Social Skills

Need to know how and when to use them to be successful

- Asking for help
- Using names
- Listening
- Sharing ideas
- Helping others
- Communicating clearly
- Following directions
- Taking turns
- Greeting others
- Using good manners
- Using friendship skills
- Showing empathy
- Showing a sense of humor
- Knowing how to share
- Initiating a conversation



We usually talk about teaching social skills to persons with autism. How many social skills do you think there are? Thousands? Hundreds of thousands? Those listed on this slide or on an individual IEP are only the tip of the iceberg! It would be impossible to teach them each individually, so with most individuals, we teach a process of thinking about social situations, rather than teaching one item at a time.

Are individual social skills still important? Absolutely! They are the foundation of social competence. However, instruction in specific social skills needs to be done in conjunction with teaching the tools that allow social thinking to take place. In determining what needs to be taught, we will need to use assessments to decide what the strengths and needs are for each individual and then teach to those specific skills.

Differences

Social Competence

- Overall ability to interact appropriately in a variety of social situations
- Learn to read social environments

Social Skills

- Ability to perform a list of discrete interactions appropriate to one social situation
- Each skill learned separately

Social Skills are part of learning Social Competence.

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Social skills are a part of social competence. Social competence is the big picture encompassing all of an individual's abilities to interact, while social skills are separate pieces that support it. Social competence involves teaching foundational strategies that cover many situations. For example, teaching an individual the range of situations when it is appropriate to say I'm sorry, that is when something sad has happened to them like the death of a pet, a friend, or family member.

Need for Social Competence



Next we are going to talk about why focusing on teaching social competence is important in the lives of persons with autism spectrum disorder.

Success in School

Top 10 Skills as identified by a survey of
8,000 teachers

- Listen to others
- Follow the steps
- Follow the rules
- Ignore distractions
- Take turns when you talk
- Ask for help
- Get along with others
- Stay calm with others
- Be responsible for your behavior
- Do nice things for others

(Elliot & Grisham, 2006)



Two researchers, Frank Gresham of Louisiana State University and Stephen Elliott of Vanderbilt University conducted a survey of more than 8,000 teachers to ask what ALL students need to succeed. What was identified by the survey? As you can see, the skills are about having social competence.

How Does Social Competence Help School Success?

“If we increase social skills, we see commensurate increases in academic learning. That doesn’t mean that social skills make you smarter; it means that these skills make you more amenable to learning.”

Elliott, 2008



Consider this statement. (Read it aloud) If you can understand an environment and get along with others, you are more prepared to learn and have a better chance at a successful future. This includes students with autism. The more they understand about the social environment of the classroom, the lower their anxiety level, the more they can participate appropriately, and the more they will be able to use their cognitive abilities.

Prepares Young People for Success in Adulthood

Common list of soft skills employers want:

- Social skills/interests/involvement
- Communication skills
- Interpersonal abilities
- Problem solving
- Teamwork
- Adaptability/flexibility



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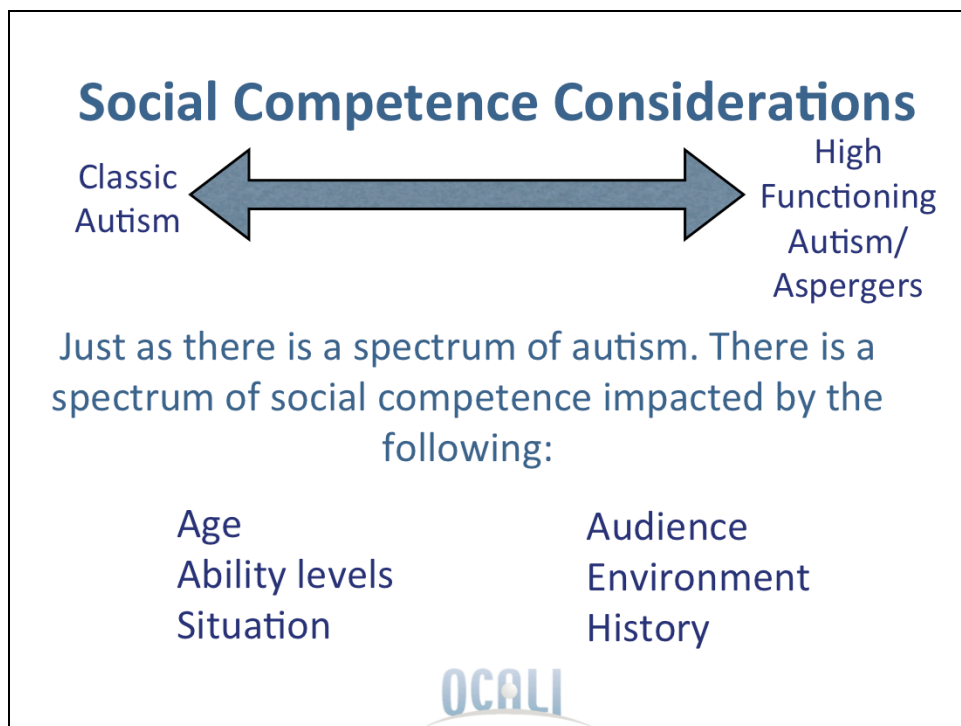
What skills do employers value? Take a look at this list. To obtain and maintain a job, the top skills employers look for reflect social competence. Getting along with others, being able to communicate effectively, working with the team, and adapting to change are all important work skills that may not come naturally for individuals with ASD. These are as important to teach as the “hard skills” for jobs, like data input or operating machinery.

Necessity of Friendship

- Although work is rewarding, most humans are fulfilled by social time
- Individuals with autism struggle with social competence, especially friendship skills
- Persons with autism want to have friends
- To help individuals with autism develop social competence, we need to understand the characteristics of autism



Persons with autism want and deserve a good quality of life as do all people, including social activities and friendships. This is not an easy task for them, and requires instruction, coaching, and support. Developing a satisfying life that includes social connections and friendships can depend on other's ability to understand the social challenges of autism and how to support those that are faced with these challenges.



Although the terminology we use for autism may soon be changing when the next revision of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual comes out, we will continue to talk about autism as a spectrum disorder. So, individuals may be on the classic end of the spectrum and be very affected by their autism while other individuals may be at the high functioning or Aspergers end of the spectrum and be mildly to severely affected by their autism, and still others will be in between these extremes with varying strengths and challenges. As a result, social competence is going to vary in individuals with autism. It is dependent on their age, ability levels, audiences, and the environments they participate in. It will also be affected by how they are able to manage the histories of their past social situations. We are going to look at eight characteristics of autism that have an effect on social competence.

Underlying Characteristics

- Social
- Communication
- Restricted patterns of behavior
- Sensory differences
- Cognitive differences
- Motor differences
- Emotional vulnerability
- Medical or biological differences



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(Aspy & Grossman, 2007)

These are the eight underlying characteristics of autism as identified by Ruth Aspy and Barry Grossman in a program called The Ziggurat Model. The first three are the current diagnostic criteria use to identify autism. The other five are associated features, meaning not necessary for current diagnosis but are often present in individuals diagnosed w/ASD. We are going to discuss each one and how they might affect social competence.

Characteristic: Social



Difficulty with:

- Eye contact
- Taking turns
- Understanding emotion
- Understanding facial expressions and body language
- Unaware of how they are perceived
- Beginning, ending conversations difficult
- Don't know hidden curriculum
- Seems uninterested in interactions



The first characteristic area is Social. There are many traits you might see in someone with autism that can affect their social abilities. Eye contact: too little, fleeting, too much/ don't get the "knock it off" look/ difficulty with communication, eye contact, and reading body language then it makes social interactions pretty difficult/ Although some individuals may appear uninterested in being with other people and interacting with them, according to accounts by persons with autism that is an inaccurate interpretation of their behavior and we need to help/ Understanding that other people are in a line, waiting to take a turn, may not enter the thought pattern of a person with ASD—WAIT is a 4-letter word / When you don't understand that other people are thinking about you and don't understand how social interactions work, then it is difficult to connect that others are thinking about you from their point of view./The Hidden Curriculum refers to those things that neurotypicals naturally pick up, like not swearing in front of the principal but it's okay around your friends/ Temple Grandin (world renowned expert in autism and animal behavior/also individual with autism) , even today as an international presenter to thousands, can find it difficult to

Social: Effect on Social Competence Development

“Social interactions that come naturally to most people can be daunting for people with autism. As a child, I was like an animal that had no instincts to guide me; I just had to learn by trial and error. I was always observing, trying to work out the best way to behave, but I never fit in. I had to think about every social interaction...I was a scientist trying to figure out the ways of the natives.”

Thinking in Pictures, Grandin, 2006



Let's read this quote from Dr. Grandin. (Read the quote) She describes a person with autism who may appear aloof as if they don't care about other people, or they may seem awkward or odd when they try to interact, or they may seem defensive when others approach them to talk or to do an activity with them. For a person with autism, social competence does not come naturally. It is more a learned subject, like reading or math. To learn it, we need to provide instruction and supports so they can learn about emotions, how to think about what others are thinking, and how to approach social situations.

Characteristic: Restricted Patterns of Behavior, Interests, and Activities

- Routines and rituals
- Repetitive motor behaviors (physical, vocal)
- Need for sameness
- May not have interest in a variety of objects/toys/games/books
- Possible special interest areas
- Difficulty transitioning



The next characteristic we will discuss is the restricted patterns of behavior, interests, and activities. This may show up in an individual with ASD as pacing, flapping, jumping, rocking, and other physical movements. Persons with autism usually want things to stay the same. They enjoy routine and can be very upset when schedules, routines, or environments do change. Change can bring high anxiety and extreme emotions. This is not a choice, but how the brain is wired. They may return to the same items for play or work when given a choice because once they become familiar with something, it seems safe. Some may have a fascination or special interest—expert in something, but usually different from typical peers or co-workers interests like vacuum cleaners or cars from 1952. These interests can override their ability to discuss other topics and have reciprocal (back and forth) conversations. Changing activities, especially if the individual is not finished, can be a challenge so transitions may need to be supported with timers and visual cues.

Restricted Behavior: Effect on Social Competence Development

“One day I went out into the road. In the back of my mind I sensed that a car was coming, but it didn’t mean danger to me. My obsession was too strong and I felt invincible. I had to see the speedometer! The man driving the car stopped, grabbed hold of me, and took me to the house. I couldn’t imagine what I had done—why was he so angry with me when all I wanted was to look inside his car? At this age I lacked an imagination...



[Presenter: This slide and the next go together, read aloud] Sean Barron, a young man with autism, wrote a book with his mother called “There’s a Boy in Here”. This is a story he shares in the book.

Effect on Social Competence Development

...I simply could not picture things in my mind. It was many years before I could do so. I wasn't afraid of moving cars because I couldn't imagine that they could hit me—to me, a moving car was the same as a parked car, just an object without potential.”

[There's A Boy in Here](#), Barron & Barron, 2002

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Notice that Sean's special interest in speedometers overrode any social or safety rules that would apply. He also is able to explain that he could not imagine things at this age. When you try to enter a social situation, being able to appropriately express special interests is key to getting along. Also, imagination is a large piece of play behaviors in younger children, so not having that ability can set you apart.

Characteristic: Communication



- Verbal/non-verbal
- Difficulty with expressive language
- Echolalia: immediate/delayed/scripts
- May babble, hum, make repetitive sounds
- Eye contact
- Expressive and receptive language levels may not match

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The next characteristic area is communication. Individuals with autism may have no speech or gestures, some words, may use pictures or a device, or may speak. Some can have some understanding of speech, but have a hard time processing what was said to them and responding. Others may exhibit echolalia, which means they repeat what is said to them. This may be immediate, or they may repeat a phrase later, or they may have whole scripts (like a scene from a video they watched) they repeat. Eye contact varies also. Some may not make any, some stare constantly, and others are between those extremes. Another point to keep in mind is that some individuals can be very verbal, but they may not actually be understanding the conversation. This can be very confusing for both parties and requires investigation and checking about comprehension.

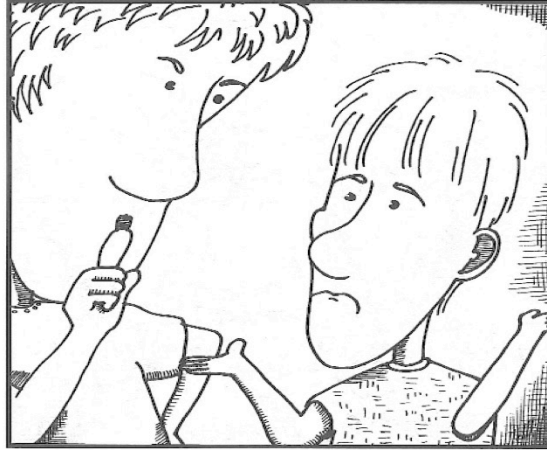
Characteristic: Communication (Continued)

- May be very literal
- Trouble reading non-verbal communication, such as facial expressions, body language, or body space
- Difficulty understanding that other people may have a different perspective; interests
- May communicate with behaviors



Here is more information about communication. Many individuals with autism are very literal with language, so idioms like “it sounds like you have a frog in your throat” or “hit the road” can cause a different reaction than you might expect! Individuals with autism see faces and bodies as they see objects, so the slight changes in facial expressions and body language are not seen and interpreted in their brains. Makes communication very difficult. In some situations, a person with autism may be able to repeat a rule, consequence, and how they broke the rule. However, they may not make the connection that it applies to them personally. This can be very confusing and frustrating for teachers, friends, and employers. Keep in mind that all behaviors have an aspect communication, so if I can’t talk or tell you in some way what I need or what I am feeling, I will show you through how I behave.

Communication: Effect on Social Competence Development



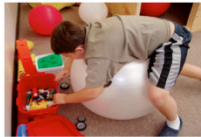
My teacher says I'm rude. I think I'm honest. I don't understand why I can't tell someone that they have bad breath, ugly hair, or to go away because I'm busy.

This is Asperger Syndrome.
Gagnon, E., & Myles, B. S. (1999). *This is Asperger syndrome*. Shawnee Mission, KS: AAPC.

This is an example of how an individual with Asperger Syndrome may have a difficult time establishing friendships because of their inability to understand the hidden curriculum in communicating with others.

Characteristic: Sensory Differences

- Responds in an unusual manner to sounds, pain, taste, light or color, temperature, smells
- Seeks or avoids activities that provide touch, pressure, or movement
- Makes noises such as humming or singing frequently
- Reacts with a fight or flight reaction due to anxiety



Now we will talk about sensory differences. Usually, we talk about 5 senses but we are going to add 2 more: proprioception (body position & balance) and vestibular (movement). Our senses take in sensory info., our brain processes it, and then we react to the input. This experience is not the same for an individual with autism spectrum disorder. The information from the senses may be amplified or lessened. For example, sounds can be extremely bothersome to a person with autism as their system may have difficulty filtering what to listen to and they may be highly sensitive to sounds, like from fluorescent lights or a heater fan. For others, the sense may be under responsive, so they may be able to eat very spicy foods that would bother most people. You will find they either seek or avoid things because they may need more input to raise their alert level or less input to lower their alert level. They may make noises which can make them appear odd to their peers. When sensory issues build up, the individual can have an anxiety reaction that can cause a fight (defend themselves from perceived pain) or flight (get away from the source of the pain to a safe place) reaction. Sensory issues can be a barrier to thinking about how to interact socially and to

Sensory: Effect on Social Competence Development



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This is Temple Grandin, an adult with autism, who experiences sensory issues that interfere with her ability to socialize when she can't tolerate being in certain environments. When individuals with autism struggle with how they are receiving, processing, and reacting to sensory input, it interferes with their ability to develop and utilize social competence. Helping a person with ASD find supports that lessen their sensory distress can allow for better chances to increase social competence.

Characteristic: Cognitive Differences

- Classic: Usually delayed intellectual abilities
- HFA/Asperger: Usually typical to gifted abilities
- Strong rote memory; knows facts
- Special interests
- Poor organizational skills
- Literal understanding
- Difficulty with abstract
- Inability to generalize
- Attention problems



In the area of cognitive differences, we will again see a spectrum of ability levels which can range from severely delayed to gifted. Delay—doesn't mean learning can't take place, just in a different way at a different rate/Aspergers and high functioning autism can have typical to gifted abilities/Many will remember lists, facts, things you can memorize/At times, a special interest may interfere with learning “novel” information, but can help if you bridge the interest to the current content. It will probably have difficulty with organization and generalizing—teach in variety of situations with different staff/ Multi-step processes and abstract thinking are more difficult/ paying attention can be a challenge, especially knowing what is important to focus on in a busy classroom or at a noisy job.

Cognitive: Effect on Social Competence Development



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Cognitive differences affect what an individual is able to comprehend, how much language they are able to use, and what social competence they are able to develop.

Characteristic: Motor Differences

- Balance difficulties
- Poor fine motor skills; may write slowly or refuse to write
- Poor gross motor coordination; athletics can be difficult
- Awkward gait
- Unusual body postures, movements or facial expressions
- Trouble starting/finishing actions



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There are various motor differences in people with autism. Some students have difficulty with balance, so they may run into other kids or fall off of a chair. They may not like fine motor activities. It may be difficult to hold items which can make writing feel like torture. Those with ASD may gallop or skip rather than walk. Their motor challenges may make gym class and athletics hard. They may have different body positions or seem to be making faces. Some could be the “prompt King” or “prompt Queen” because starting and ending physical actions is so challenging. How does this affect social competence?

Motor: Effect on Social Competence Development



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Motor differences affect social competence by making it difficult for the individual with ASD to participate in games and sports activities. Having a different walk or gait or having unusual facial expressions can set the person apart from their peers. Not being able to participate in physical activities with the same physical ability levels can make you stand out as odd or different and can invite teasing or even bullying. Building these skills can help open the door to more opportunities to develop social competence.

Characteristic: Emotional Vulnerability

- Difficulty identifying and understanding feelings
- May become stressed in novel situations
- Doesn't want to make mistakes
- Anxiety/depression
- Low self-esteem
- Rages/aggression/self-injury



All of the characteristics discussed so far can add to emotional vulnerability. Because they have difficulty reading faces and body language, understanding emotions is hard. Due to different wiring in the brain, new situations can make them nervous. Emotional vulnerability is usually a build-up, so you may not be able to identify an immediate trigger. Behaviors that come from emotional vulnerability can seem purposeful when you have functional language and what seems like understanding. It can be hard to believe when everything can be fine for a couple of weeks and then a meltdown comes from seemingly nowhere. These underlying characteristics can lead to feeling horrible about yourself, having high levels of anxiety, becoming depressed, and also extreme upset or withdrawal. Research is starting to show a tendency towards a higher suicide rate than same age peers. Emotional vulnerability can lead to extreme upset, aggression, self-injury.

Emotional Vulnerability: Effect on Social Competence Development



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Not understanding how people in the world communicate and interact can raise stress levels and make life very frustrating, which does not allow the individual with autism to be ready for social interactions.

Medical/Biological

- Examples may include: mood instability; eating/digestive issues; sleep challenges; attention difficulties; neurological disorders
- Learn what issues exist and what supports are needed
- Communicate between home, school, and medical personnel
- Research medical/biological issues

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Persons with autism can experience various medical and biological issues. These can have to do with digestion, mood, sleep, and neurology. We can learn what issues are present and how to support the person. Communication about difficulties, such as sleeping habits or bathroom issues, can be very important in how we deal with the individual at school or at work.

Medical/Biological: Effect on Social Competence Development



If a person has not slept or has stomach pains or has tics or is unable to attend to a conversation, it will interfere with his/her ability to develop social competence. For any person, medical and biological issues can inhibit one's capability to interact socially. Consider that a person with autism is already operating at a disadvantage, and physical conditions again compound their abilities to gain social competence.



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Thank you for your participation today. We hope you have enjoyed this presentation.