Interview with Michelle Garcia Winner

AS: What is social thinking?

MGW: Social thinking is something that most of us take for granted. It is generally an intuitive process that allows us to consider the points of view, emotions, and intentions of others. In neurotypical people, social thinking is hard-wired neurologically at birth and learned intuitively from infancy. Children with autism spectrum disorders do not intuitively learn social information the way neurotypical children do. For those with ASD and related social learning challenges who are "higher functioning", we have to cognitively teach them how to think socially and understand the use of related social skills.

AS: What does it mean to have "good social skills"?

MGW: Other people determine each of our social abilities or what they perceive as our "social skills". Having good social skills simply means adapting our behaviors to do what is socially expected based on the situation and what we know or don't know about the people in the situation. Given this definition, having good social skills is not dependent on being involved in a social interaction; it simply means you behave in a way that is expected for the situation you are in. Students not talking when a teacher is talking is one example of an "expected behavior" that is perceived as a "good social skill".

AS: What is the main idea behind Social Thinking treatment?

MGW: The Social Thinking treatment approach requires students to learn to recognize when they and others are expected to think socially, and to respond with specific behaviors based on what they know about the people, the situation, and the implied expectations. We use social thinking and related skills not only when we are interacting, but also when sitting quietly in the presence of others, social problem solving, etc. This type of thinking is used in all aspects of life – at play, in the classroom, with social relationships, at work, and in the community.

AS: Who are the best candidates for the Social Thinking approach?

MGW: It is best taught to students with near-normal to way above-normal verbal intelligence who use language spontaneously, as it is a language-based learning approach.

AS: How is teaching social thinking different from teaching social skills?

MGW: Traditionally, we have tried to teach students social skills by simply telling people what they should do, such as "use eye contact." Even though they may use some form of eye contact, they do not intuitively understand that eye contact has a deeper social meaning. Social thinking teaches about that meaning. It teaches why we use certain social behaviors. This teaching method goes deeper than teaching a social behavioral response pattern. It is based on the understanding that people's "good social skills" or social behaviors stem from their accurate use of social knowledge. The more "neurotypical" a person appears socially, the more likely he or she is to use a more finely tuned social thinking process that helps to navigate more nuanced social responses.

Starting with elementary school students, we encourage them to be detectives who have to learn to observe the people and the context within which they are communicating to help them make more well-educated or "smart guesses" about the nature of the communicative exchange. We encourage them to simply adapt their social behavior to share space with others even when not interacting. This is a much deeper approach than simply telling someone, "Look at me."

AS: You talk about a social thinking vocabulary. Can you give us an example of what that is?

MGW: I developed a "social thinking vocabulary" because I realized we didn't have a vocabulary for talking about social expectations in an explicit manner. We simply expect people to be socially appropriate. At best in our culture, we explain to students that they should "respect, cooperate, and negotiate" with others. When you really stop and think about these terms, you realize how difficult they are to define. When a student is told to be more "respectful," he or she doesn't know what they are actually supposed to do behaviorally.

When we use the social thinking vocabulary, students learn exactly what is expected in a more positive manner and better yet, teachers and caregivers learn how to explain it. A few examples: "Think with your eyes," instead of teaching just the behavioral expectation of "use eye contact." "Keep your body and eyes in the group," instead of saying "pay attention." The goal is to encourage younger children to make a prediction or inference, and to teach younger students to make "smart guesses" rather than "educated guesses."

AS: What is a "rubber chicken moment"?

MGW: On a fairly regular basis, every one of us messes up a social response or misinterprets what someone says or does. When working with our students with social learning challenges, I wanted to find a way to be able to point out when a student's response was less than adequate or not "expected" given the situation, without making the student feel bad. With a group of high school students, I began to tap them with the rubber chicken when it was noted that their response could use fine tuning. They appeared to enjoy this strategy of focusing attention on a negative response in a more positive way. I continued to use it with a larger array of students and found that it helped in decreasing anxiety or fear of making an error when students were working on their social thinking and related skills. We use it to help our students accept that they don't do everything perfectly, and that that is okay. To be a social thinker is to realize that it is okay to make mistakes.

At the clinic, the rubber chicken is placed on the therapy table for students to "tap themselves on the head" (gently) when they make a social error. For example, when a student explained how he had written a long letter of complaint to someone because that person did not smile at them, they got to tap themselves on the head with the chicken. As odd as this strategy sounds, it appears to work well in helping students recognize and laugh at their own errors, rather than get really uptight about them. Teachers get self-imposed rubber chicken "taps" when they make errors as well.

Once the chicken is introduced and the concept of the head tap during socially goofy moments is reviewed, we don't always have to use the chicken. At times we just say, "That was a rubber chicken moment." This concept appears to have great carryover into the home and at school when kids can then define their goof-ups as "rubber chicken moments". The fact that we can laugh at errors and then learn from them is a key component of a positive approach to helping students develop better self-awareness, which is critical for social success.

AS: Where can people learn more about Social Thinking?

MGW: You can visit my website at www.socialthinking.com. There you can find information about the Social Thinking Center in San Jose, California, as well as books, products and workshops around social thinking. You can sign up for my e-newsletter there, and also access my blog where I share the latest thinking on the topic.

About Michele Garcia Winner
Michelle Garcia Winner is a Congressional-award winning speech-language pathologist who specializes in treating students who are experiencing social and communication challenges. The Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders published research supporting her Social Thinking approach for high-functioning autism and Asperser syndrome and her methods have assisted students with other diagnoses, such as ADHD, and those who have no diagnosis. She runs a clinic, has authored numerous books on Social Thinking and speaks internationally. She serves on the panel of professional advisers of the Autism Society of America. Michelle's goal is to help educators and parents appreciate how crucial developing Social Thinking and related social skills is to a student's success and growth throughout life.