

Social Thinking

Social Thinking is an approach that strengthens social competencies of children with social cognitive difficulties. There are good praxis experiences with using the approach on children with autism.

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Social Thinking is an American approach that is used to teach and train social competencies. Social Thinking is developed by the speech therapist Michelle Garcia Winner (Winner, 2013).

The purpose of Social Thinking

In the work with Social Thinking subject professionals, e.g. teachers train the children to share the social space with others and to develop social relations with family, friends, classmates and others. The goal is to strengthen social competences of the child (Social Thinking, no year).

Social Thinking is about supporting the development of among other things:

- Self-regulation, e.g. anger and behaviour regulation
- Executive functions, e.g. the ability to plan tasks
- Social-emotional understanding, e.g. understanding of intentions and perspectives of other people
- Reading comprehension and the ability to argue in written presentation
- Social consciousness, e.g. the understanding of own feelings (Social Thinking, no year; Winner, 2013).

Tools of Social Thinking

Social Thinking works with exercises, plays and tools to develop social understanding. The subject professionals work from a combination of simple exercises and learning initiatives that are organised based on the needs of the individual child. The tools in Social Thinking are a further development of different learning elements, which in many cases are substantiated by research, such as for instance the theory behind the use of thought bubbles that strengthen the child's understanding of own and others thoughts (Crooke and Winner, 2016).

An important part of Social Thinking is that the child learns to use their social skills in school. Social Thinking strengthens the child's skills in the schoolwork by working with learning methods, which rest on several competencies such as

- Put things into perspective
- The ability to listen actively
- The ability to formulate own thoughts and viewpoints (Winner, 2013).

Social Thinking helps in this way the child to e.g. analyse and understand thoughts, feelings and intentions, for example in connection with group-work. The child is also supported to be able to argue from own thoughts and feelings through e.g. written work (Winner, 2013).

The target-group for Social Thinking

The target-group for Social Thinking is people with social cognitive difficulties and problems, including children and youths with autism. Social Thinking is typically used on children and young people up to age 18 but can also be aimed at adults. The target-group for Social Thinking can have some of the same social cognitive difficulties, although they have different diagnoses (Social Thinking, no year).

The Purpose of Social Thinking

The central purpose of Social Thinking is that the child should be to learn to see the things from others perspective and could understand their thinking on own behaviour and behaviour of other people (Social Thinking, no year).

Social Thinking is a cooperation between the child and the subject professional. The cooperation has focus on the individual needs of the child, and the basis of the effort is positive and acknowledging. When the subject professional assesses challenges of the child, focus is not on, whether the child has correct or wrong behaviour, but on the child learning to reflect their behaviour in others. It ensures that the child intuitively learns, how their behaviour impacts other people. In this way, the child gets a greater self-understanding and understanding of other people (Winner, 2013).

Social Thinking has an acknowledging basis

Social Thinking has an acknowledging basis that in line with the view of autism, where the behaviour of people with autism, where the behaviour of people with autism is not seen as pathological, "autistic" or deviant. Instead of seeing the behaviour as the child's attempt to communicate with the outside world (Reacraft, 2020).

It is according to Prizant (2016) wrong to try to reduce and remove behaviour patterns. Instead you can as subject professional support the child in cultivating talents and skills and offer aid measures. This support will contribute to prevent worrying behaviour patterns and cause a more desired behaviour (Prizant, 2016).

Social Thinking in praxis

Social Thinking uses several pedagogical tools, including exercises and tasks that are used to make social codes and relations more understandable for the children (Winner, 2013).

You can read more about simple exercises and tools on website of Social Thinking

Social Thinking suggests that the subject professional continuously assesses the child's learning goals and development. The subject professional can use selected tools to assess and evaluate social thinking of the child. The subject professional can follow-up on development of the children in connection with the effort by acquiring knowledge and experiences from praxis, e.g. from teachers on how the children develop their social cognitive competencies in connection with the education (Winner, 2013).

Social Thinking is systematically described in several books, whereof many are translated to Danish, and very precise descriptions of exercises and teaching methods are provided, which easily can be put into praxis. Social Thinking also puts up to the fact that the education is organised from individual needs, challenges and strengths of the child (Winner, 2013).

Elements in Social Thinking

Social Thinking consists of four central elements forming the frame of the exercises and the education, which constitutes the core in Social Thinking. It is about:

- the social, emotional chain reaction
- the ILAUGH-model
- the four communication steps
- the six communication profiles (Winner, 2013)

The social, emotional chain reaction

A fundamental element in Social Thinking is the social, emotional chain reaction. The idea behind the chain reaction is:

- The way, we behave towards others, affects what other people feel.
- What others feel, affects their way to treat us.
- The way that we are treated affects the way, we feel about other people – and ultimately the way, we feel about ourselves (Social Thinking, no year)

Thus, in Social thinking there is a basic view that we each have the power to affect others thoughts, feelings and life, and that we have the responsibility to treat others that do not pose a danger for us with kindness and respect (Social Thinking, no year).

The ILAUGH-model

At the heart of Social Thinking is the ILAUGH-model. The ILAUGH-model is a framework model that should support to define difficulties of the child based on

- Types of difficulties
- Influence of the difficulties on social interaction
- Influence on the teaching in the classroom
- Teaching suggestion.

The ILAUGH-model consists of six effort areas based on six types of difficulties, which education and training are aimed towards (Winner, 2013).

The six types of difficulties and focus areas for training of the child is

1. To be able to initiate a conversation and ask for help, as well as being able to listen with the whole body. This means that the child should show interest with their body language and e.g. turn towards the one who speaks, instead of just registering, when other people speak.
2. Active listening. This means that the child learns to listen “between the lines” and learn to the whole context in what others say, and not only listen to, what other people literally say.
3. To learn to understand abstract messages, from messages and codes in advertisements to interpretation of characters in fiction.
4. Learning to take the perspective of other people.
5. To see the big picture and unite many details into a meaningful whole.
6. To understand and use humour and strengthen the child’s social relations and interactions. Many children with social cognitive difficulties can have difficulty with understanding small, subtle signals in the interaction with other people. (Winner, 2013).

The ILAUGH-model is developed to the school but can be used for training in all the social contexts that the child is included in (Winner, 2013).

You can read more about the ILAUGH-model on the website of Social Thinking

The four communication steps

Another element in Social Thinking of the four communication steps that should make children, subject professionals and caregivers aware of, how the communication occurs. The four communication steps are the steps, you undergo through social contexts, when you meet another person. If you do not make sure to get all the steps in, the communication can be misunderstood and misinterpreted, and it can be difficult for children with social cognitive difficulties. The four communication steps deal with

1. **Put things into perspective and the ability to think of the person that you communicate with.** Specifically, you train sense of empathy of the children and their ability to show interest in other people and their intentions, thoughts and motives.
2. **Physical presence.** Here the purpose is to train the child in showing interest and presence with the body, i.e. by turning toward the person that speaks.
3. **The skill to show interest for people with your eyes.** Here the subject professional work with the skill to show interest at other people by communicating via eye contact
4. **Use of the language to communication with others.** Here the children are trained in using the language to develop and maintain social relations, e.g. by exercising in expressing feelings verbally. Here the children are also trained in maintaining and building further on the first three steps (Winner, 2013).

Within the work with each step several learning and teaching tools can be found. You can read more about the steps of communication and the learning and teaching tools here (Winner, 2013).

The six communication profiles

Social Thinking uses six communication profiles. Each profile represents a specific communication style and describe specific social cognitive strengths and difficulties (Winner, 2013).

The six profiles are developed with two purposes:

1. To explore how the social cognitive difficulties are expressed by the individual child.
2. In order to provide support and training for the communication profile that the child has (Winner, 2013).

The six profiles are on a spectrum of cognitive communication difficulties: from the children, who have many and more difficult difficulties to those, who have slight difficulties, and whose level of function is close to that level of function that children without social cognitive difficulties have (Winner, 2013).

Praxis experiences with Social Thinking and implementation

Social Thinking is an example of promising practice. An approach or effort that can be described as promising practice, if it is not evidence based, but there is particularly good probability that it can create development and welfare for the citizens and the society (Amilon et al., 2016).

Based on the praxis experiences gained, this indicates that Social Thinking is effective towards children with autism. The purpose with using Social Thinking to different target-groups, including children with autism, is

that Social Thinking has basis on the research knowledge, and that praxis experiences at national and international have shown a positive impact in the development of social and communicative understanding of children in social relations (Social Thinking, no year; Beyer, 2019).

Danish implementation experiences

Social Thinking is used in Denmark on several children and young people with autism (Beyer, 2019). The practice experiences indicate that Social Thinking has a positive impact in daily practice to promote social development and understanding of the children in the nurseries, kindergartens and schools, e.g. Municipality of Copenhagen that use the approach (Beyer, 2019; Lassen, 2018

Specialist, e.g. teachers and pedagogists who have used Social Thinking have good experiences with the approach in praxis in Denmark (Was huus, 2019; Lassen, 2018; Beyer, 2019).

Examples of Social Thinking in Municipality of Copenhagen

Nurseries and kindergartens in Municipality of Copenhagen that use Social Thinking have very positive experiences, both with children and without social cognitive difficulties (Obeid, Beyer & three pedagogical managers, 2018).

The pedagogues in the institutions work with Social Thinking as a mutual pedagogical basis for all the pedagogues. The pedagogical basis is also developed in cooperation with the parents to create a common effort. The cooperation firstly entails being able to work with mental understanding of the children, even before the children have developed a spoken language. Secondly the cooperation entails that even small children can understand that other people have thoughts, take them into account and join in a positive social relation. (Environment manager, three pedagogical leaders and consultant, 2018).

The principal of the school in Charlotttegården and the employees from the district Valby-Vesterbro-Kongens Enghave in Municipality of Copenhagen express that the staff experiences that the children profit from Social Thinking. The school in Charlotttegården has experienced that the students after relatively short time with Social Thinking has begun to use terms and the understandings from Social Thinking in many different contexts. For example, the awareness that the child has thoughts and that others can have other thoughts has helped to ensure a common awareness in the social interaction (Lassen, 2018).

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