

## **Information on Social Cognition Deficits for friends and family**

Have you ever wished that you had a single page or two of information that you could hand to extended family members (or babysitters, dinner guests, whomever...) that would briefly describe what social cognitive deficits are all about? With each individual's area of social struggle being unique, this is difficult to provide perfectly for everyone. I hope the following description is useful for many of you for upcoming family events or wherever it would be helpful to provide 'instructions' to others about how to understand and interact with your child.

What is Social Cognition?

Social Cognition skills are those communication, problem-solving, decision making, self-management, and peer relations abilities that allow us to initiate and maintain positive social relationships with others.

Deficits in social behavior interfere with learning, peer interaction, and acceptance by others. Most social skill errors are unintentional. It is universally accepted that a primary need of all human beings is to be liked and accepted by other human beings. Therefore, if a child conducts himself in a manner that causes others to dislike or reject him, can we not assume that these behaviors are unintentional and far beyond the child's control? Why would a child purposefully defeat one of his primary needs?

If you accept the premise that the offending behavior is unintentional, it becomes obvious that *punishing* a child for social skill errors is unfair, inappropriate, and ineffective.

When in a social situation any problem behavior is often an indicator of frustration and stress. Paying attention to the following can assist in stress reduction:

### **BEFORE THE EVENT**

- ❖ Pre-establish a schedule of events and go over this list with your child.
- ❖ Clarify which family activities are "must do" events for the child vs. "can do" events. Even "must do" events can be broken down into segments if necessary.
- ❖ Be aware that the child may be defensive of their personal space and plan for this with seating assignments, etc.
- ❖ Possibly establish one "focal person" the child can go to for help, rather than everyone jumping in to help solve a problem.

## DURING THE EVENT

- ❖ Assure consistent treatment and expectations from all adults. Others should remain consistent to the actions and expectations the parents have established with their child.
- ❖ Prepare your child immediately before transitions and let him know about any surprise changes to the predetermined schedule.
- ❖ Consider providing the child with “breaks” from the larger group for short periods in a distraction free setting. This allows children to “recharge their batteries”. Establish a specific break spot.
- ❖ Provide brief, precise, concrete instructions and make sure that they understand. Be concrete and allow time for the child to process the information.
- ❖ Remind the child to ask for help and of appropriate methods of doing so.
- ❖ Use a preferred activity as a reward for getting through difficult parts of the day.
- ❖ Watch for siblings or other children who obviously or subtly annoy the child and position them away from the child.

## ENGAGING IN CONVERSATION

- ❖ Avoid abstract ideas in conversation when possible. When abstract concepts must be used, use visual cues, such as gestures, or written words to augment the abstract idea.
- ❖ Avoid verbal overload. Be clear. Use shorter sentences if you think that the child doesn't fully understand you. He may have a problem understanding your main point and identifying the important information.
- ❖ Show physical examples of what is required when giving a task to the child (e.g. “make each place setting look just like this”).
- ❖ Don't expect the child to automatically generalize instructions to other situations or events.
- ❖ Don't rely on emotional appeals or presume that the child will want to please you.
- ❖ If you must address problem behaviors, work on truly unacceptable behaviors and don't worry about those which are simply “odd”.
- ❖ Don't take misbehaviors personally. Usually misbehavior is the result of efforts to survive experiences which may be confusing, disorienting, or frightening.