Autism Spectrum Disorder: Best Practices and Strategies in the Classroom Setting

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Autism Spectrum Diagnostics & Consulting

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Learning Objectives

- Identify the core deficits of ASD
- Identify common challenges for teens with ASD
- Discuss supports educational staff can provide to individuals with ASD
- Identify the social challenges often seen in teens with ASD
- Discuss social interventions that can be implemented in the school setting
- Define cognitive rigidity and cognitive flexibility and how they impact individuals with ASD
- Identify strategies to support teens with ASD during group projects
- Discuss emotion regulation strategies that can be implemented in the educational setting

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What is Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)?

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Which children were more likely to be identified with ASD?

Boys were 4.5 times more likely to be identified with ASD than girls.

White children were more likely to be identified with ASD than black or Hispanic children. Black children were more likely to be identified with ASD than Hispanic children.

1.2x MORE LIKELY among white vs black children

1.5x MORE LIKELY among white vs Hispanic children

1.3x MORE LIKELY among black vs Hispanic children

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention • Community Report on Autism • 2016

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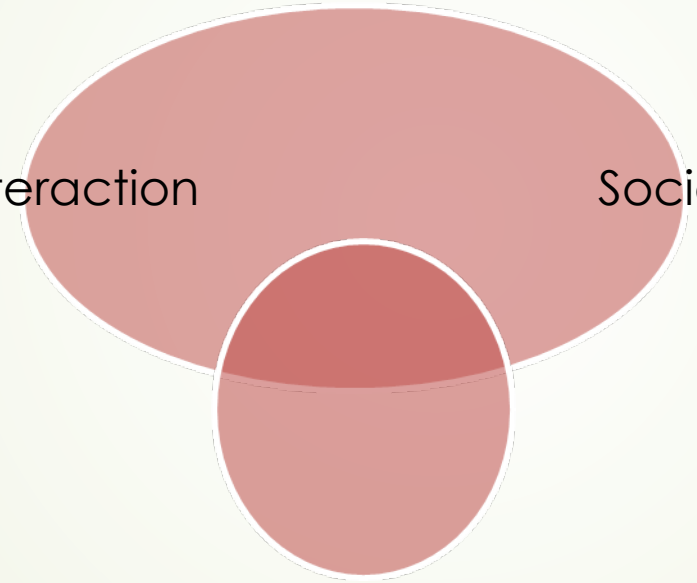
Autism Spectrum Disorder – DSM-V



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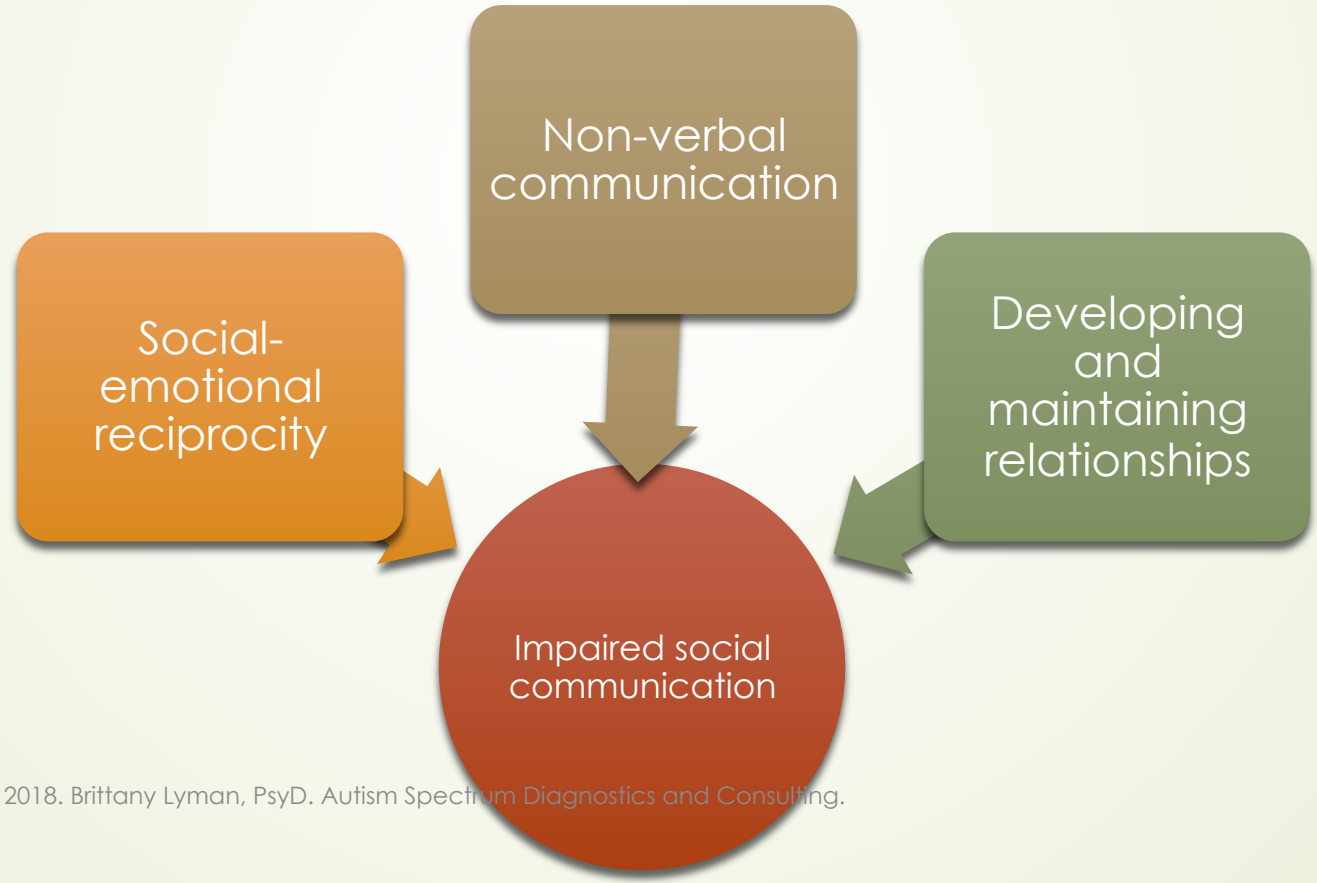
Autism Spectrum Disorders – DSM-V: Criteria A (All 3 Symptoms)

Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across contexts



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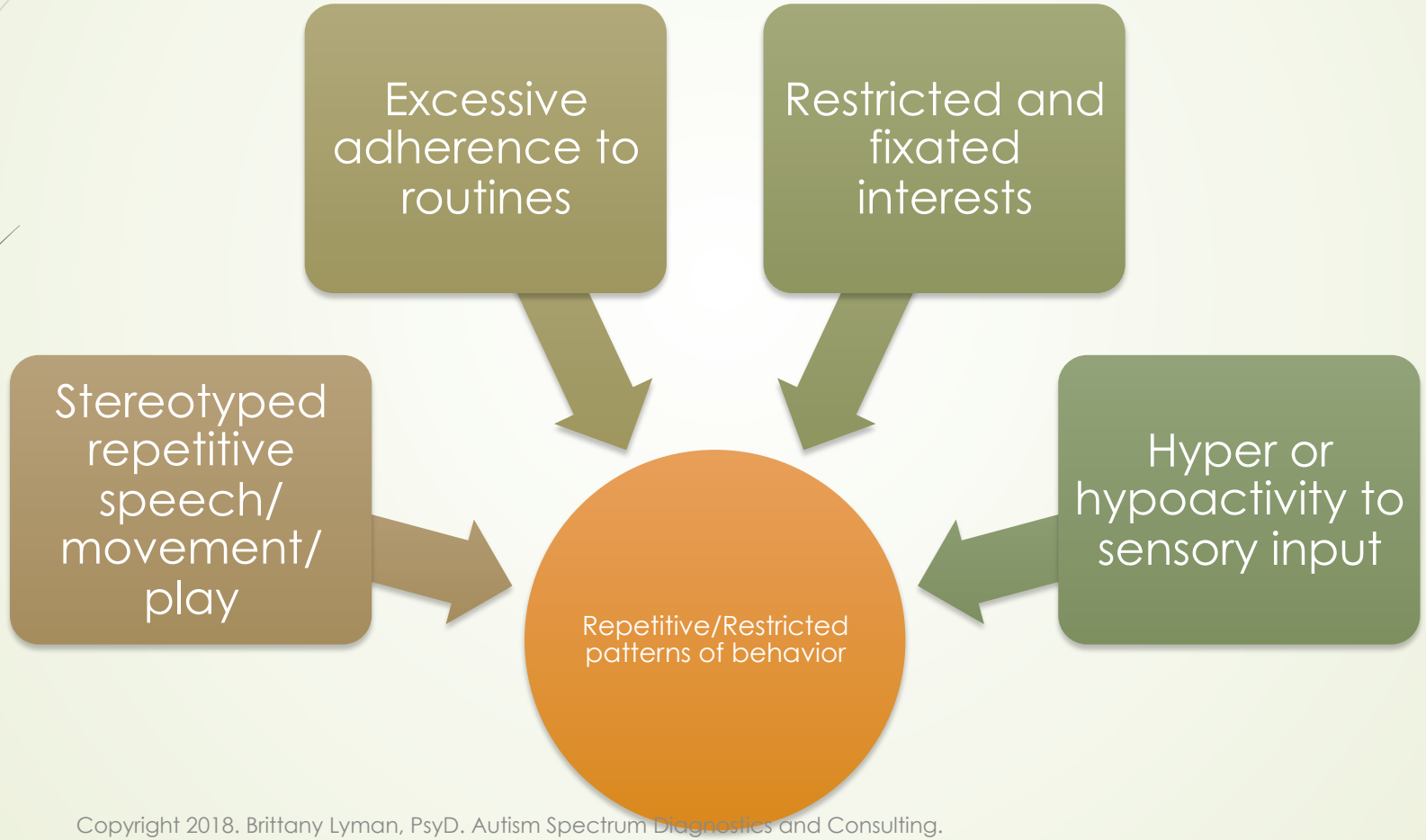
Restricted, Repetitive Patterns of Behavior, Interests or Activities (2 out of 4 Symptoms)



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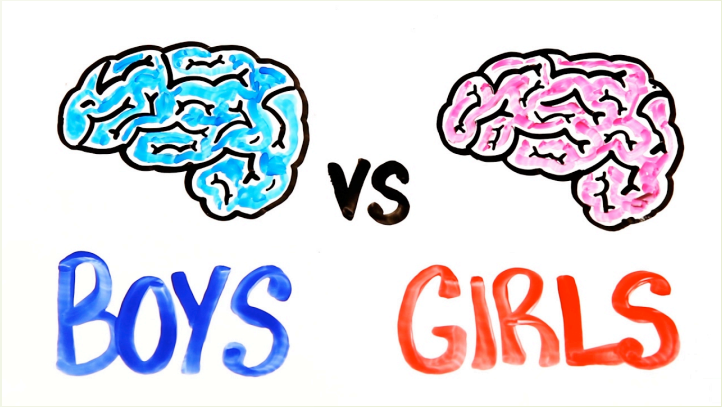
Gender Differences in Symptom Presentation

- Diagnostic criteria based on behavioral symptoms of boys with ASD
- Girls are often misdiagnosed
  - ADHD, OCD, Bipolar Disorder, Anorexia
- Differences in brain studies
- Girls
  - Better social awareness and imitation of others
  - Restricted interests more "typical"
    - Reading, fantasy, animals, dolls
  - Better at pretend play
  - Trouble with social hierarchies and social chit-chat



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Topics Identified by Teachers

- Strategies to support individuals on the Autism Spectrum
- Students having difficulties connecting with others
- Rigid/rule-oriented students
- Individuals with ASD and group projects
- Low frustration tolerance

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Social Challenges in Children with ASD

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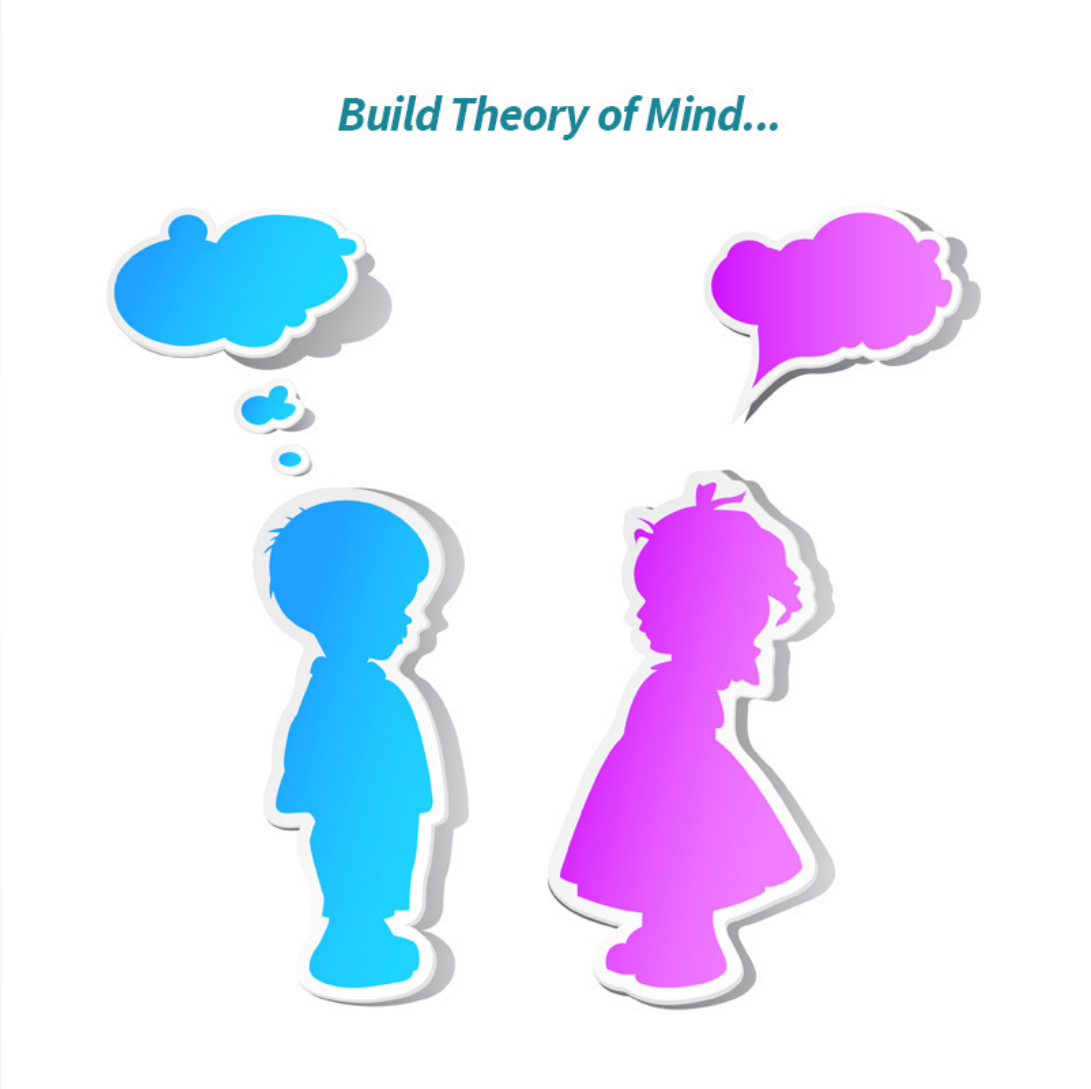
Theory of Mind: Understanding Others in a Social World

- Beliefs, desires, and intentions
- Used to understand why someone acts a certain ways
- Allows us to predict others' behavior
- These skills gradually develop from infancy until 6-7 years of age
- Children with ASD are often delayed and/or don't reach the same level of skill development as their peers



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Example: False-Belief Task

- Show the child a Band-Aid box and ask the child what he/she thinks is inside the box. He or she will likely respond "Band-Aids."
- Open the box and show him/her that there is a toy pig inside, while saying "Let's see....it's really a pig inside!", then close the box.
- Now, as you are bringing a toy boy who has been hidden up until now into view, the adults says "Peter has never ever seen inside this Band-Aid box. Now, here comes Peter. So, what does Peter think is in the box? Band-Aids or a pig?" (Wellman & Liu, 2004)
- Child with ASD will often respond – "A pig"

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Deficits in Theory of Mind Can Lead to Difficulties with:

- Being sensitive to other people's feelings
- Taking into account background knowledge
- Reading the listener's interest level in conversation
- Detecting a speaker's hidden meaning
- Anticipating what others think of one's own social behaviors
- Understanding "unwritten" social rules.

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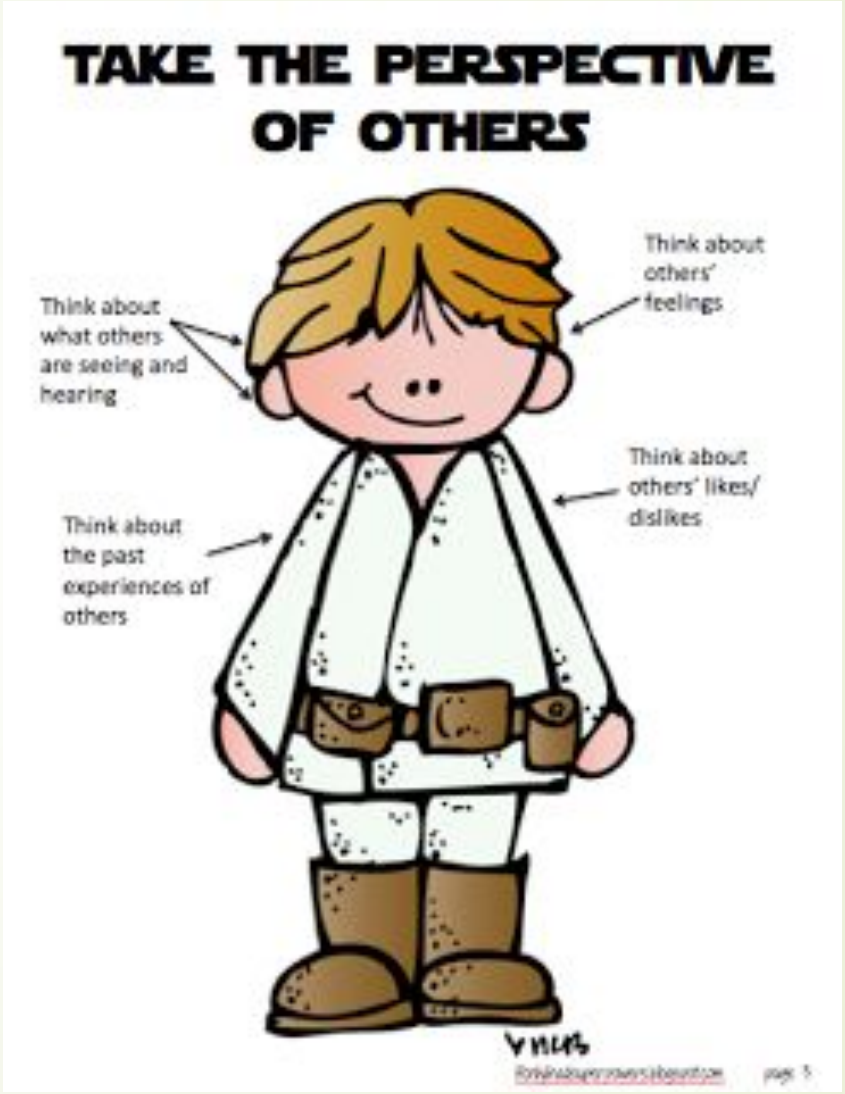
Perspective Taking

- The act of perceiving a situation or understanding a concept from an alternative point of view
- Involves Theory of Mind and Empathy
- Perspective taking skills assist children to be able to
  - Demonstrate empathy and sensitivity in friendships
  - Interpret and react to non-verbal cues
  - Predict other people's reactions to one's own social behaviors
  - Increase self-awareness of interaction skills.



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Common Social Challenges for Individuals with ASD

- Miscommunication/misunderstandings
- Talking too much/too little
- Blunted/Flat Affect
- One-sided conversations
- Bossiness
- Initiating and maintaining conversation
- Socially modulated eye contact
- Others you have seen?

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SOCIAL INTERVENTIONS

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Conversation Starter Ring

- Cut out ideas and put on a ring
- Allow students to use for conversation starters
- Could include in morning routine or as a group activity

What is your favorite television show?

Have you seen any good movies lately?

What did you do this weekend?

What's your favorite subject in school?

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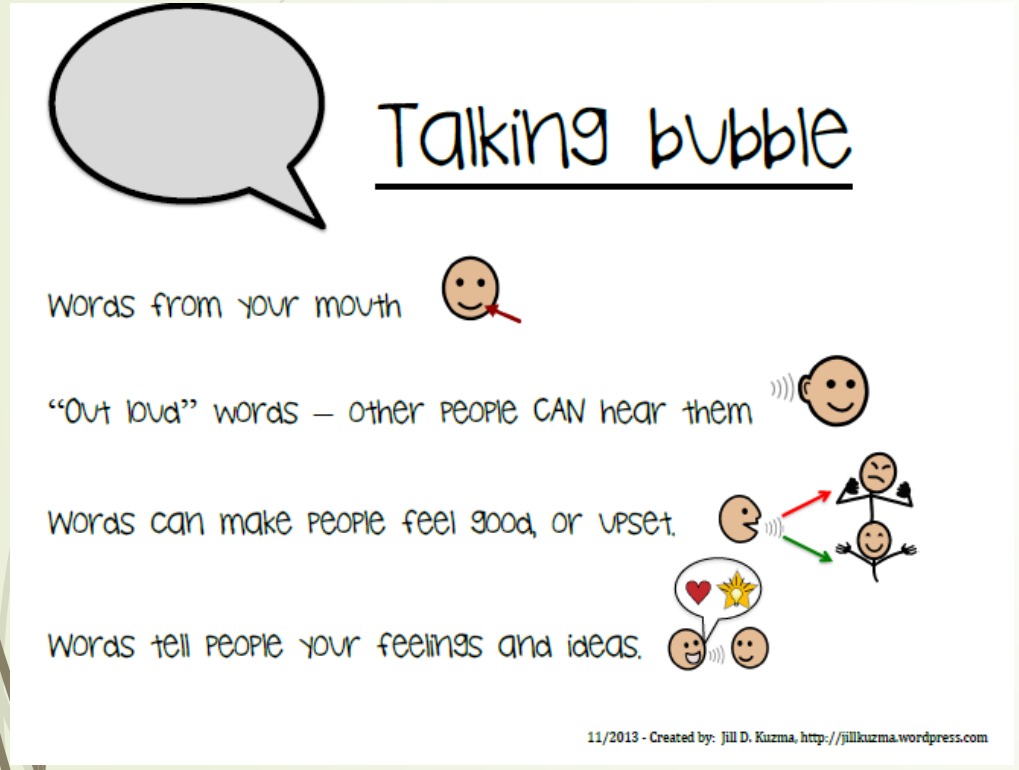
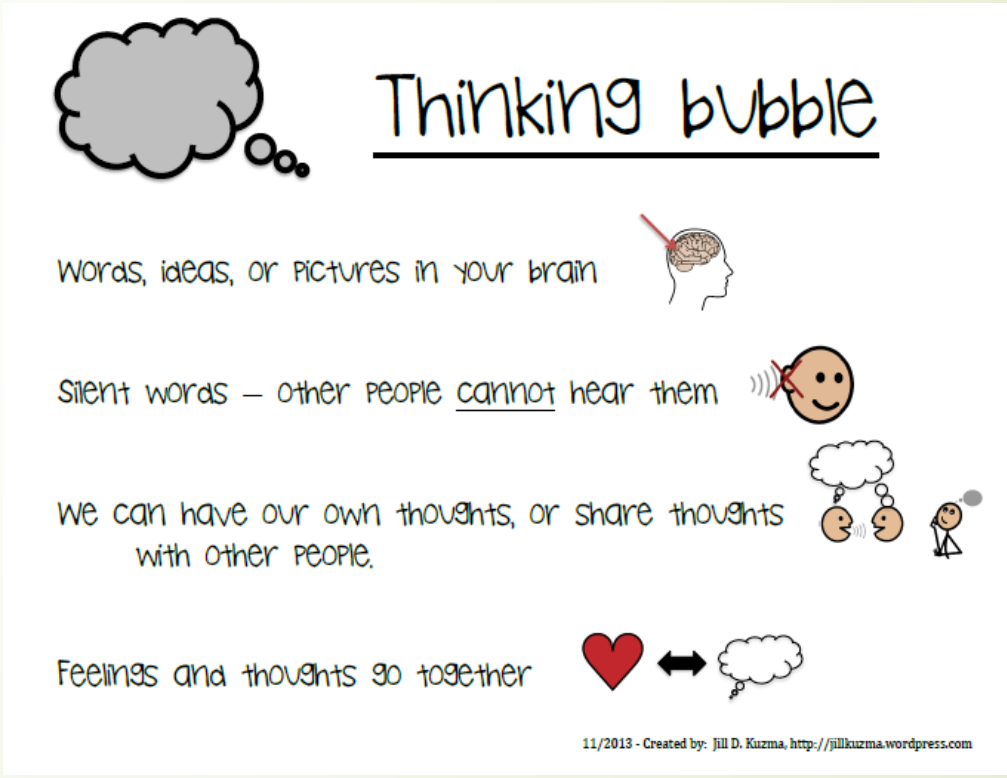
Thinking and Talking Bubbles





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Thinking and Talking Bubbles

- Present the teen with different scenarios (both novel and familiar) and help them identify:
  - Thought Bubble for each person
  - Talk Bubble for each person

- Include scenarios where they are in the situation and ones in which they are not

- Ex. It is a new marking period/semester and Jenny's schedule has changed. Her lunch time was changed and she has to find a new group to sit with. Jenny walks up to a random table sits down and starts eating her lunch. She doesn't introduce herself or talk to the other students. She leaves when the bell rings.
  - What is Jenny and the other students at the the table thinking and feeling and why?
  - What could Jenny do differently?
  - What should they keep in their mind and not say aloud?

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Social-Behavioral Mapping

Expected Behavior

- Behaviors that help a teen to learn
- Behaviors that help the teen be seen in a positive light by peers and adults
- Ex. Staying in your chair, Looking at the teacher while she is talking, Taking turns

Unexpected Behavior

- Behaviors that make a teen standout
- Behaviors that others perceive as "weird" or frustrating or unpredictable
- Ex. Falling out of your chair, Making odd noises, Yelling at a peer or teacher who breaks a rule

http://www.cidd.unc.edu/docs/CommunityTalk/socialbehaviormappingHO.pdf

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Social Experiments

- Identify a social goal
  - Ex. Initiating a conversation, Staying on topic, joining a group activity
- Importance of pre-teaching/skill instruction
  - Can be done in the classroom or social skills group
- Practicing skill during lunch or clubs/ activities
  - Importance of adult being around for support/instruction
- Debrief
  - What went well?
  - What could you do better?
  - Was it as bad as you thought it would be?
  - Peer feedback

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Social Stories

- Provide guidance and directions for responding to various types of social situations
- Promotes self-awareness, self-calming, and self-management
- Meant to clarify social expectations
- How to write one:
  - Identify a situation a teen is having difficulty understanding or exhibiting appropriate behavior
  - E.g., Starting a conversation, Staying on topic, Making eye contact, etc.

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Social Stories

- Written in first person from the teen's perspective
- Combination of descriptive and directive sentences
  - Descriptive
    - State the facts ("My name is _")
    - Include the thoughts and feelings of the student and others in the story ("The teacher will like it when I listen.")
    - Express a shared opinion or reassure the student ("It is okay.")
  - Directive
    - Identify possible responses ("If I need a break, I can tell the teacher")
    - Gently direct behavior ("I will try to_")
  - Focus on more descriptive vs. directives sentences
- https://www.thewatsoninstitute.org/resource/talking/

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Rigid/Rule-Oriented Students

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What Does Cognitive Rigidity Look Like in ASD?

- Insistent repetitive behavior (e.g., saying the same thing over and over again)
- Difficulty with unmet expectations
- Perfectionism
- Compulsions/Perseverations
- Non-Compliance/Agitation/Aggression
- Anxiety
- Depression

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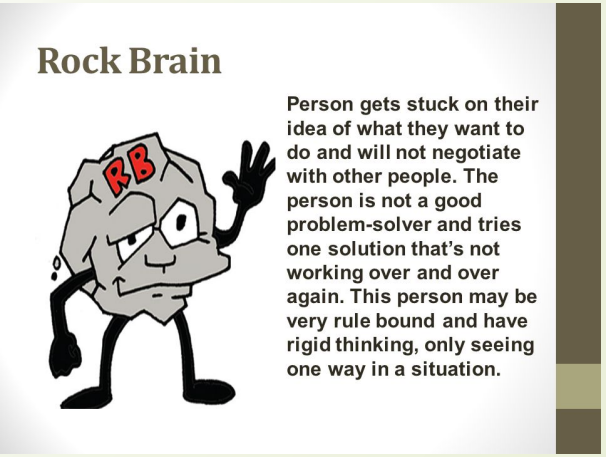
Flexibility

- Trying hard to deal with changes
- Trying to stay calm when things are not just what you expected
- Letting other people have their way too

Rigidity

- Getting really upset over any kind of change
- Getting really stubborn when things are not just what you expect
- Bossing other people to make them do what you want



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Interventions to Build Cognitive Flexibility

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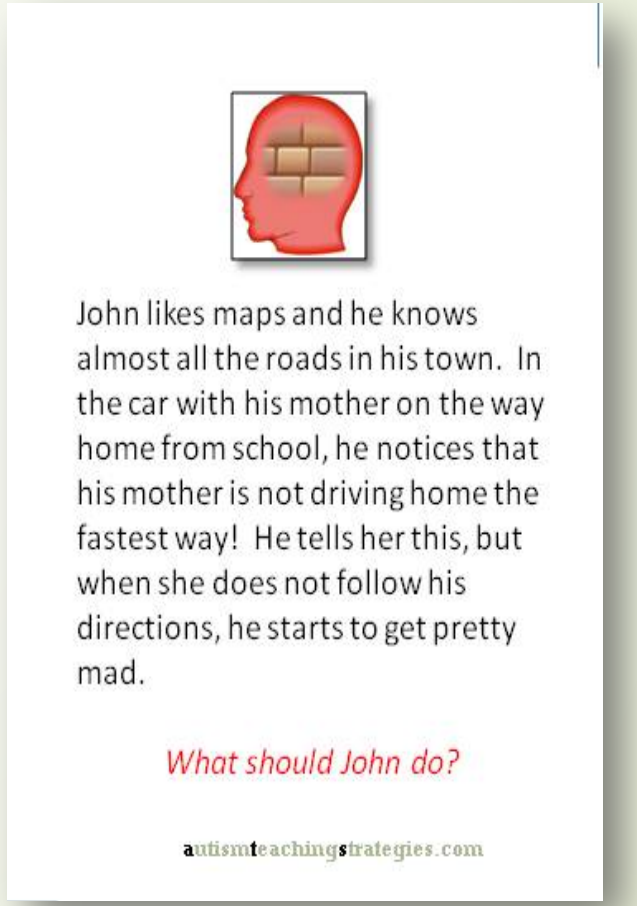
Vignettes and Role-Playing



http://autismteachingstrategies.com/autism-strategies/flexibility-in-kids-with-asd-card-activity-to-teach-this-social-skill-to-children-on-the-autism-spectrum/

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Ridding Our Brain of Injustices

- Teen writes or draws out the situation/issue that they are stuck on
  - E.g., Gender roles, Teacher/Adult correcting them
- Take the writing/drawing and either:
  - Shred in a shredder
  - Tear up
  - Throw Away
- Once the paper is destroyed, the situation is over and we are moving on
- Concrete way for the teen to move on
- Don't speak to the teen while dysregulated/redirect back to the task
- Practice the concept when the teen is calm

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Flexibility Bucks

- Identify a reward that is motivating to the teen
  - Computer/electronics time
  - Researching preferred topic
  - Spending time with a preferred staff
- Identify the number of Flexibility Bucks required to earn the reward
  - Make sure it is an attainable goal
  - Success in the beginning is important
- Teen earns Flexibility Bucks for situations in which he/she was flexible instead of rigid
- Can work with the family to introduce at home as well

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Superflex and The Unthinkables

https://www.socialthinking.com/Products

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Group Projects

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Groups Projects and Teens with ASD

- **Typically two scenarios:**
  - Teen with ASD becomes bossy/ takes over
    - Often a preferred interest or subject they do well in
  - Teen with ASD stays quiet and doesn't participate
    - Often due to anxiety, fear of saying the wrong thing, discomfort with the group members
- **Strategies**
  - Be strategic in picking the groups
  - Provide advanced warning to teen and parent about the assignment/project
    - Allows for pre-teaching from teacher and parents
  - Define the student's role for the project:
    - Ex. Note-taker, Researcher, Presenter, Artist
  - Check-in system with teen and a trusted peer to get feedback throughout the project/ assignment

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Low Frustration Tolerance/Emotion Dysregulation

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Common Behavioral Challenges

- Anxiety
- Emotion Dysregulation
- Irritability
- Sadness
- Non-Compliance

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Accommodations/Supports

Clear Directives

Go-To Person – Guidance Counselor/ Safe Place

Behavioral Challenges

Emotion Identification

Coping Skills

Preparation/Warnings

Choices = Sense of Control

Understanding Function of Behavior/ Identifying Triggers

Mood Monitoring/Self-Monitoring

Behavior Plan/Reward System

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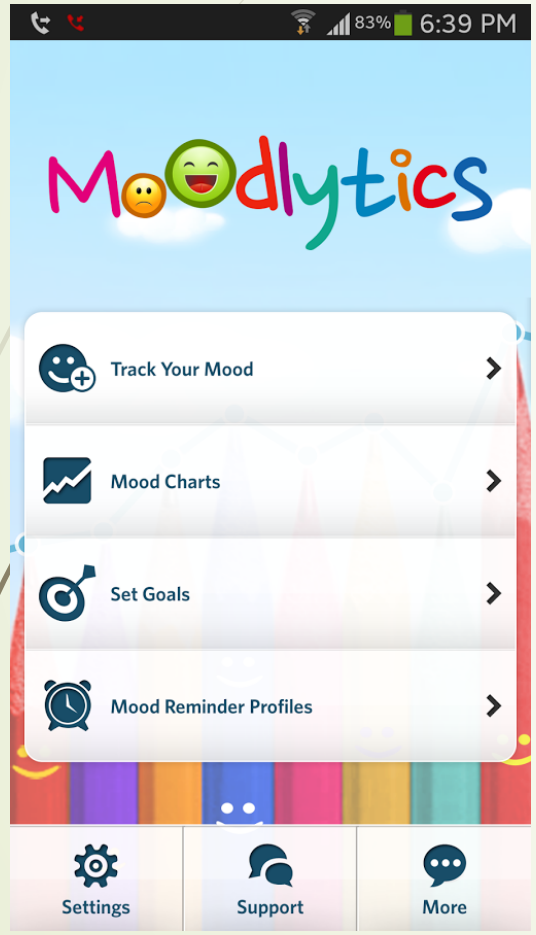
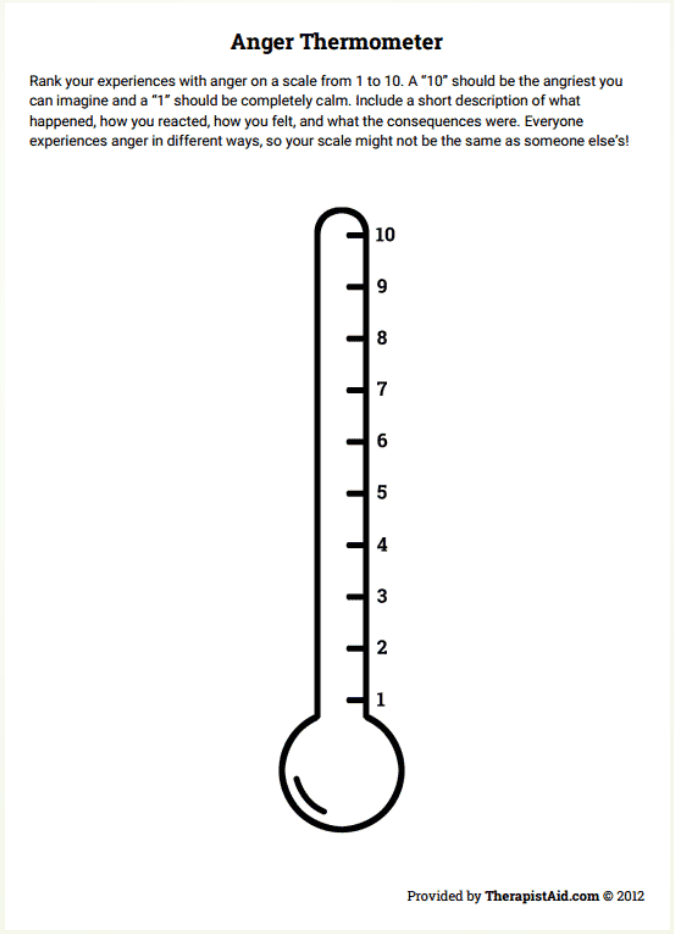
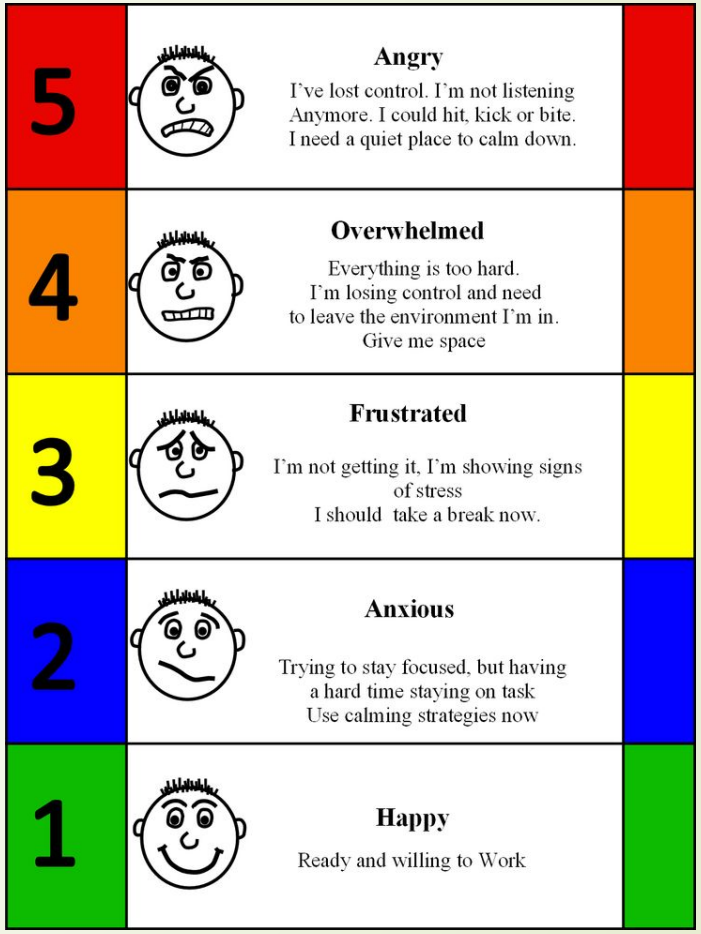
Mood Monitoring







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Zones of Regulation (Leah Kuypers)

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The ZONES of Regulation®

BLUE ZONE	GREEN ZONE	YELLOW ZONE	RED ZONE
Sad	Happy	Frustrated	Mad/Angry
Sick	Calm	Worried	Terrified
Tired	Feeling Okay	Silly/Wiggly	Yelling/Hitting
Bored	Focused	Excited	Elated
Moving Slowly	Ready to Learn	Loss of Some Control	Out of Control

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Being a Teen with ASD

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Common Challenges for Teens with ASD

- Understanding and Coping with ASD diagnosis
  - To whom and when do I disclose?
  - How will this impact my life?
- Increased rates of anxiety and depression
  - Not being included in social outings/experiences (e.g., Prom, weekend plans, Senior Trip, dating)
  - Anxiety about the future (e.g., college, living independently, getting a job)
  - Friendship and romantic relationship challenges
  - Social media
- Difficulties with Self-Advocacy
  - What are my strengths and challenges?
  - How do I ask for help?

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Understanding and Accepting ASD Diagnosis

- Check in with family about diagnosis disclosure/what has been discussed thus far
- Allow the teen space to discuss their diagnosis
  - With a preferred staff and/or guidance counselor/school psychologist
- Diagnosis is one facet of their personality
  - They are a teen with ASD, not an autistic teen
- Discuss famous individuals thought to have ASD
- Provide resources about ASD
  - I am Special. A Workbook to Help Children, Teens, and Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders to Understand Their Diagnosis, Gain Confidence, and Thrive (2nd Ed.) (Vermeulen; Jessica Kingsley Publishers).
  - http://www.autismbookstore.com/Merchant2/merchant.mvc

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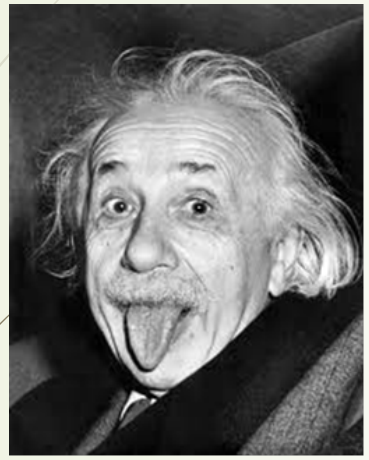
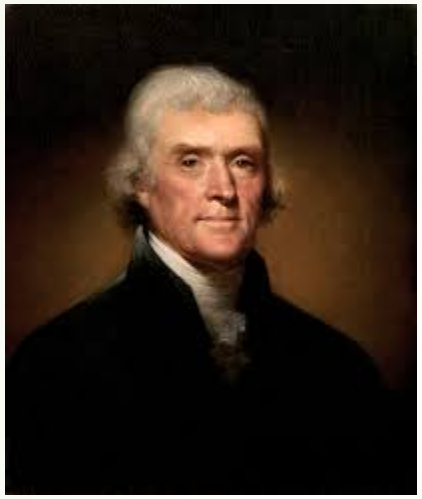
Autism Throughout History





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Teaching Self-Advocacy Skills

- Help teen develop a brief written description of his/her profile of strengths and weaknesses
  - Can be given to teachers/professionals working with the teen for the first time
  - Helps teen develop better insight into their strengths and weaknesses
- Getting their input in school meetings
- Providing them resources on self-advocacy
  - *Ask and Tell: Self-Advocacy and Disclosure for People on the Autism Spectrum* by Stephen Shore
  - *Pretending to be Normal: Living with Asperger's Syndrome* by Liane Holliday Willey
  - *Songs of the Gorilla Nation: My Journey Through Autism* by Dawn Prince-Hughes
  - *Preparing for Life: The Complete Guide for Transitioning to Adulthood for Those with Autism and Asperger's Syndrome* by Jed Baker
  - *The Way I See It: A Personal Look at Autism and Asperger's* by Temple Grandin

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Resources

- www.socialthinking.com
- http://www.zonesofregulation.com/learn-more-about-the-zones.html
- http://www.cindysautisticsupport.com/
- https://www.thewatsoninstitute.org/resources/behavior-stories/
- http://autismteachingstrategies.com/autism-strategies/flexibility-in-kids-with-asd-card-activity-to-teach-this-social-skill-to-children-on-the-autism-spectrum/
- http://www.cccoe.net/social/skillslist.htm

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