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## Doing Your Social BEST

By Julie Wilson

Within the realm of teaching and learning, social skills is a world apart from the more defined and concrete academic skills like reading or math. Not just “sometimes skills”, social thinking is required any time one person is in the company of at least one other person – whether or not there’s any direction interaction. Social ability affects many areas of life including friendships, dating, family interactions, school and academic success, employment, recreation and leisure. Difficulties in social thinking increase the probability that a child or adult will struggle in each of these life areas. A child who lacks social skills can easily be excluded or ignored, the target of bullying, or become the young adult who has learned to withdraw from people rather than involve himself in a situation that requires social interaction. Indeed, social skills deserve our attention.

Excellent social strategies, created by experts through years of trial and error experience, have been developed specifically for youth with autism spectrum disorders. Many parents and educators enthusiastically agree that these proven strategies can greatly increase social growth with spectrum children of various age groups. However, these students often learn a variety of different procedures to help with social skills, and many find it difficult to recall all the pieces and pull them together during interactions. Students are rarely successful in social situations if skills are learned and practiced in isolation from one another. Yet, multi-tasking is characteristically difficult for spectrum students. This is especially true when the “hidden” rules in each situation differ, such as those addressed in *The Hidden Curriculum* by Brenda Smith Myles, Melissa L. Trautman and Ronda L. Schelvan. Students are often on their own to decipher the “social code” and remember to use all of the strategies they have learned.

“Doing your **BEST**” is a mnemonic self-monitoring tool useful for persons on the autism spectrum who are learning a variety of social strategies. **BEST** is an acronym that stands for **Body, Emotions, Speaking, and Thinking**. Virtually all social strategies educators and parents teach children fall into one of these four key areas. During interactions, most individuals self-monitor each of these areas subconsciously, but the social thinking and perspective taking challenges of spectrum students render them unable to do so with ease. Using the **BEST** technique reminds students to monitor and use all four areas of social skills.

**Body** strategies focus on those aspects of social interaction related to body language and nonverbal communication. The majority of our communicative message occurs not through words, but through our body language and nonverbal exchange. Body language is frequently the first mode of communication to others. We immediately receive information from others as soon as we see them and we continue to gather information from them based on the way they project their body during an interaction. Arms crossed over the chest, hands on hips, body turned toward or away, eye contact, head hung low – there are many physical signals we consciously and unconsciously use to communicate. It is important to teach students with ASDs how to read the body language of others as well be cognizant of their own body's expression. Sometimes children who have difficulty in this area also have added sensory challenges. Providing input or outlets for those sensory issues plays into the success of social interaction.

It is vitally important for students to learn to monitor their own body and the nonverbal messages they send to others. Many ASD students are not aware of this aspect of communication, nor how they appear to others. The book *Think Social! A Social Thinking Curriculum for School-Age Students* by Michelle Garcia Winner discusses specific strategies to address many of these issues: adjusting one's own personal space appropriately in different situations, reading the body language of others, showing whole body listening, and keeping your body as part of the group. *Social Stories™*, developed by Carol Gray, can also be effectively used to teach appropriate body use in social situations.

**Emotions** is the second piece of the Doing your BEST strategy. Anxiety and increased emotional reactions are very common among youth with ASD. It is important that we teach students to self-monitor their own emotions as part of a social interaction, as well as read and understand the emotions of others. Students first need to understand their own feelings – what they are and different levels of expression - before being able to decipher the emotions of others. *My Book Full of Feelings* by Amy V. Jaffe and Luci Gardner, a workbook for younger students, addresses feelings and what to do when feelings get out of control. Another valuable resource is *The Incredible 5-Point Scale* written by Kari Dunn Buron and Mitzi Curtis. The 5-point scale is applicable to a variety of situations but can be extremely effective for exploring and self-monitoring emotions and emotional reactions. Dr. Tony Attwood has authored two cognitive behavioral therapy workbooks to address both anxiety and anger, *Exploring Feelings: Cognitive Behaviour Therapy to Manage ANXIETY* and *Exploring Feelings: Cognitive Behaviour Therapy to Manage ANGER*. Each offers a very thorough process to help students become aware of their feelings and how to manage them.

The third element in doing your social BEST is **Speaking**. The social use of language - pragmatics - is often a huge hurdle for kids with high-functioning autism (HFA) and Asperger's Syndrome (AS). The free-flow give and take of communication can be confusing and the lightning-quick pace of a social exchange can render many of these individuals literally speechless. These students may need to be taught specific social-communication skills, such as how to initiate a conversation, greet others, give and receive compliments, ask for help, listen to others speak, change a topic,

sustain and end a conversation appropriately. These skills are in addition to related conversational elements like maintaining appropriate voice tone and volume.

All of these skills need to be used simultaneously with the other BEST social skills. This can be quite confusing for youth who have significant deficits in Theory of Mind (the ability to perceive thoughts and feelings of others), and who process information through a different mode or speed than the typical conversationalist. A variety of complete lessons and activities to help students learn and practice these social communication skills can be found in *Super Skills* by Judith Coucouvanis, as well as *Think Social! A Social Thinking Curriculum for School-Age Students* and other books by Michelle Garcia Winner.

**Thinking** is the last, and perhaps the most important part of the **BEST** tool. Theory of Mind and perspective taking is a deficit area for most children and young adults with ASD, even those with strong verbal language and high intelligence quotients. These students need to be specifically and systematically taught to think of the thoughts and feelings of others in each social situation. Frequently the tendency of people on the autism spectrum is to focus on themselves and they often miss the subtle and not-so-subtle cues of their communicative partners. In each area of the BEST strategy, it is important to emphasize not only monitoring themselves, but auditing what is going on with others around them.

Thinking about the context and significance of the situation is equally important. Individuals with ASD often possess black and white thinking, characterized by extremes without any middle ground. What looks to them like an insurmountable problem in the moment may actually be a situation that disappears within an hour or a day's time. Students need to think about the relevance of a situation they perceive to be difficult or a "problem". Is it really such a huge issue? Will it continue to be an issue? Will it affect many others? Will it cause anyone pain? What might be the consequences? These are questions students need to be taught to stop and ask themselves when they feel a social situation might be overwhelming. In addition, students need to have repeated opportunities to practice "flexible thinking" and hone their ability to adapt to difficult or uncomfortable situations. Life is unpredictable; people are unpredictable. It's only through trial and error that any of us learn the skills that lead to social success.

As students are learning social skills and social thinking strategies encourage them to classify each specific strategy under the BEST system of Body/Emotions/Speaking/Thinking. Students can reinforce use of the BEST system themselves or parents and educators can reinforce it with them by repeating phrases like, "do your BEST" and "try your BEST."

Implementing the social BEST strategy isn't beneficial on its own. It is a technique for helping students remember and integrate strategies they are learning. However, the nature of the strategy makes it beneficial for several reasons:

- It's a quick "self-check" tool that when used visually or verbally does not draw negative attention to the student needing help.

- It's easy enough for even younger students to use. Students need only think through the acronym "B-Body, E-Emotions, S-Speaking, T-Thinking".
- Family members and teachers don't need to completely understand each specific strategy in order to help students self-monitor their social thinking and social behavior. They just need to give the cue.
- Its appeal is timeless. The strategy stays the same while the student's social skills grow and more sophisticated strategies become part of the social BEST system.
- It's simple and fun to develop "Do your BEST" visual aids to place on a student's desk, write on a board, incorporate into his daily schedule or design into a keychain.
- Educators and parents can also use the BEST system to categorize topics and educational materials for teaching social skills.

Perhaps most valuable of all is the positive reward students receive when they hear statements reflected back to them such as, "I can see you are doing your BEST!" It's then we know our students are truly achieving social success!

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## BIO

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