



# **Social Skills**

## **Developing Empathy**

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## **Developing Empathy**

This is one of my favorite activities and one that I've found to be highly effective at establishing perspective taking and developing empathy through conversational practice. It starts with an extensive discussion of the importance of empathy followed by comprehensive explanations for the terms "spatial inclusion", "conversational participation", "social distress", and "mood". Students can then practice social observation and determination of others' perspectives by using the handout created for use in sessions, and can learn to generalize by using the homework handout for real-world practice. Included are therapeutic notes on how to best use the materials along with suggestions for modified activities.

## Looking Out for Others' Feelings in Conversations

### Philosophy:

It's important to look out for others' feelings for two reasons: for their benefit and for your benefit. Treating others with kindness and protecting them from harm is the right thing to do. At the same time, when you treat others well, they will want to spend time with you, will treat you with kindness in return, and will try to protect you from harm.

Physical harm is easy to spot, but social/emotional harm is more subtle and much more difficult to recognize. People are generally social animals and want to feel socially accepted. Conversations can be complicated social interactions. Many dynamics happening during conversations may cause people some amount of emotional discomfort or distress. In order to look out for others' feelings, you need to observe people closely and pay attention to their facial expressions, body language, and voice to try to determine how they are feeling. You also need to analyze the ongoing circumstances that could hurt other people's feelings or cause them any kind of distress. Then, you can avoid causing others discomfort or distress, and may even be able to help them if something or someone else is causing them distress.

### Terms and Discussion:

Spatial inclusion: means feeling socially included through spatial positions and body language. In a conversational group, spatial inclusion occurs when each person can see each other person and no one is behind another's back. Socially inclusive conversational groups are typically circular whether sitting or standing (or triangular when there are three people talking). Make sure your body is not blocking anyone and that you can see everyone's face.

Conversational participation: refers to being able to participate in a conversation. Ideally, everyone in a conversation should be able to talk for a fair amount of time, whether commenting or asking questions. Of course, sometimes it's okay for participants to speak for more than their "fair amount". It's fine if sometimes a conversation focuses more on one particular person, when, for example, that person is telling about a recent vacation, is teaching the others a skill, or is discussing a personal hardship and the other people are providing sympathy. But generally, in a conversation between two people, each person should speak for about half of the time, in a conversation between three people, each should speak for about one third of the time, and so on. People typically want to feel listened to, liked, and appreciated.

The following circumstances can block conversational participation:

- being interrupted
- receiving poor responses to participation
- another participant unfairly monopolizing the conversation
- an unfamiliar topic
- unfamiliar references (i.e., some of the other participants bring up unfamiliar information, names, or words, without explanations)





Social distress: refers to emotional distress related to social interaction. As stated earlier, conversations are complicated social interactions. Many social dynamics occur during conversations beyond a simple exchange of information and ideas. Conversation participants can feel accepted or rejected, liked or disliked, trusted or mistrusted, angered or soothed, humored or disappointed. People often cover up negative feelings, especially during social interactions, for a variety of reasons. This is why, in order to look out for others' feelings during conversations, it is necessary to observe participants closely and to be aware of the dynamics occurring during conversations.

The following circumstances can cause social distress:

- being spatially excluded
- being conversationally excluded (due to unfamiliar references, poor responses, or interruptions)
- finding out about social exclusion (e.g., hearing about a party to which you were not invited)
- an offensive topic or statement
- having a secret revealed
- TMI: "too much information" (hearing another's personal information that makes you feel uncomfortable)
- being insulted:
  - directly
  - indirectly (toward a group to which you belong)
  - passive-aggressively (in the form of a joke or phony compliment)

Mood: refers to an emotional state. Often, a person's mood may have little or nothing to do with the present social situation. For instance, a person may be in a bad mood because of an argument that took place earlier in the day, because the rainy weather makes him feel gloomy, or because he ate too many carbohydrates and his blood sugar level has dropped. But much of the time we do have emotional reactions to ongoing social circumstances. In a single conversation, social dynamics could cause a person to feel momentarily angered, then relieved, then happy, then insulted, and so on. As stated earlier, people often don't want to reveal their negative feelings during social interactions. So you will need to look for clues to determine how others are feeling. Non-verbal clues can reveal emotions. These include facial expressions, body language, and voice.

The following may be signs of negative emotions:

- facial expressions
  - a lack of smiling
  - avoiding eye contact
  - eyebrows pointing up in the middle or creased in between
  - lips held tightly together
- body language
  - arms crossed
  - biting nails
  - head down
- voice
  - volume increasing or decreasing
  - higher or lower than normal pitch, strained tone
  - flat intonation

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Looking Out for Others' Feelings

### Directions:

- 1) After being assigned a person to look out for, fill that person's name into every blank on this page.
- 2) During a conversation, pay attention to that person: his/her spatial inclusion, his/her conversational participation, possible instances of distress to him/her and the causes, and his/her mood.
- 3) After the conversation answer the questions below.
- 4) Discuss your answers with your assigned person to see if he/she did feel the way you believe he/she felt.

Person you are looking out for: \_\_\_\_\_

Did \_\_\_\_\_ feel socially included spatially? \_\_\_\_ yes \_\_\_\_ no

Did \_\_\_\_\_ get a chance to participate in the conversation?

\_\_\_\_ yes

\_\_\_\_ no      if no, why not?

Did anything happen that may have caused \_\_\_\_\_ to feel any distress during the conversation?

\_\_\_\_ no

\_\_\_\_ yes      if yes, what happened?

What kind of mood do you think \_\_\_\_\_ was in for most of the conversation?

What made you think that?

What could you have done to make things better for \_\_\_\_\_?



Name \_\_\_\_\_

Due Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Looking Out for Others' Feelings Homework

**Directions:** Use "Terms and Discussion" section to review definitions of terms and possible causes of distress and participation blocks. Observe casual conversations (in school, at home, anywhere) and pay attention to others' experiences and feelings during those social interactions. See if you notice any instances when a person was spatially excluded, lacked conversational participation, or may have experienced some distress during a conversation. Fill in at least one of the following.

**Note:** you can use pseudonyms in place of real names if you prefer.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ (person's name) was spatially excluded during a conversation in/at \_\_\_\_\_ (location or context).

Describe the spatial exclusion you observed and whether or not it was resolved:

2. \_\_\_\_\_ (person's name) demonstrated reduced conversational participation in/at \_\_\_\_\_ (location or context).

Describe possible cause(s) of the reduced conversational participation:

3. \_\_\_\_\_ (person's name) may have experienced some distress during a conversation in/at \_\_\_\_\_ (location or context).

Describe situation and possible cause(s) of distress:



## Therapeutic Notes: Developing Empathy

I have found this exercise to be one of the most beneficial I've ever done with my students. Students who need to work on their social skills, including many children and individuals on the autism spectrum, often require concrete discussion and practice regarding awareness of others' thoughts and feelings as distinct from their own (theory of mind), and this exercise works directly on those skills. Many activities can be derived from these worksheets. Every element could be worked on extensively separately, such as spatial inclusion, or reading non-verbal communication clues. Elements could be worked on prior, after, or in conjunction with this exercise. When I have the conversation with my students during which they look out for one another's feelings, I do things to deliberately cause the students some distress, such as interrupt them, spatially exclude them, etc. I do this because a short, innocuous conversation won't typically cause the participants much distress, and one of the goals of the exercise is for students to be able to spot one another's distress. Of course, I do this exercise with students with whom I have established a nice rapport, I usually tell them I plan to cause them some distress, and I engage in annoying behaviors with a shared sense of humor. The homework sheet is a very important component of this lesson, since generalization of social skills into real life contexts is integral. When you discuss with students their observations recorded on the homework sheet, I would recommend asking what, if anything, they did to help out the other person(s), and if they did nothing, what they think they could have done, or would do if they find themselves in a similar situation in the future, to help.

