The Social Thinking–Social Competency Model (ST-SCM)

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Have you ever wondered how we do we know what to do or say in a given situation? The Social Thinking-Social Competency Model breaks down this big, complex process into four foundational steps.

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The social world is vast and filled with countless social landscapes; it becomes increasingly nuanced and complex as we age. From the time we are babies and throughout our lives we are observers and participants in what's happening around us and

someone's social responses aren't quite on *point* within a specific situation.

We learn over time to be a super-sensitive detector to what others are doing, saying, thinking, planning, and feeling in the social world. As children age, most also become adept at simultaneously trying to figure out how others may be thinking and feeling. Our social mind is designed to actively process social information to figure out how the social world works. We use this social process whenever we interact or share space with others. Common scenarios include when we share space with others, when working with a team, and when spending time with family or friends. We also do this to understand how and why someone is feeling and/or thinking a certain way, and to help us decipher meaning and the hidden social rules associated with any text we may be reading, people we are watching on screens, etc.

The Social-Academic Connection

Students use social information processing through the school day when sharing space with others. They also use social information processing within the academic curriculum, although many educators may not realize this. People then to think the social mind is relegated to playground and after-school activities. But many aspects of academic curriculum have standards/benchmarks with socially based information processing embedded across subjects such as language arts, social studies, history, civics, science labs, etc. Any standard/benchmark that focuses on concepts such as point of view, expressing oneself clearly, describing context, characters, traits, motivations, use of feeling words, making inferences, thinking critically about the relationships, collaboration, and teamwork, have a foundation of thinking socially. Here are a couple examples below where the words in bold are socially based concepts.

Sample Academic Standards:

- *Kinder*: Follow **agreed-upon rules for discussions** (e.g., listening to others and taking turns speaking about the topics and texts under discussion).
- *3rd Grade* Reading Comprehension: Describe characters in a story (**e.g., their traits, motivations, or feelings**) and explain how their **actions contribute** to the sequence of events.
- *7th Grade* Written Language: Engage and orient the reader by **establishing a context and point of view** and introducing a narrator and/or character; **organize an event sequence** that unfolds naturally and logically.

We often view social skills as behaving, playing, and interacting without realizing the need to interpret social information prior to producing any sort of social response.

The Social Thinking® Methodology takes complicated abstract social learning processes and breaks them down into smaller chunks to teach in a more concrete manner. Basic components of the Social Thinking Methodology were developed mid-1990s, but our work is dynamic and continues to be informed by research and theory. Through this process, we've taken the research on social information processing (Crick and Dodge, 1994; Beauchamp and Anderson, 2010) and combined it with research related to metacognition. We then used that information to think through the lens of the Social Thinking Methodology to develop a visual model to both inform and guide educators, therapists, and caregivers.

The Social Thinking–Social Competency Model (SCM)

Note: This model is NOT about social "competence." We don't believe anyone is truly socially competent. We all continue to learn over the course of our lives. This model IS about building a structured way to talk about supporting social learning to build competencies based on their goals. This is also NOT about imposing a neuro-normative model of molding people into a specific set of social behaviors. Yet it IS about meeting the person where they are, considering their strengths and struggles, and listing to their goals.

The best way to think about this model is to imagine an iceberg. The swoop on the graphic represents a waterline. What we see above the waterline can be thought of as the social behaviors we notice in one another. We refer to these as *social behaviors* or *social responses* rather than "social skills." The area below the waterline represents the building blocks of one's *social competencies*.

The ST-SCM has four distinct parts, three of which fall below the waterline: *Social Attention*, *Social Interpretation*, and *Problem Solving* as illustrated in Figure 1. Our social competencies continually evolve across our lifetime; they are described as "developmental."
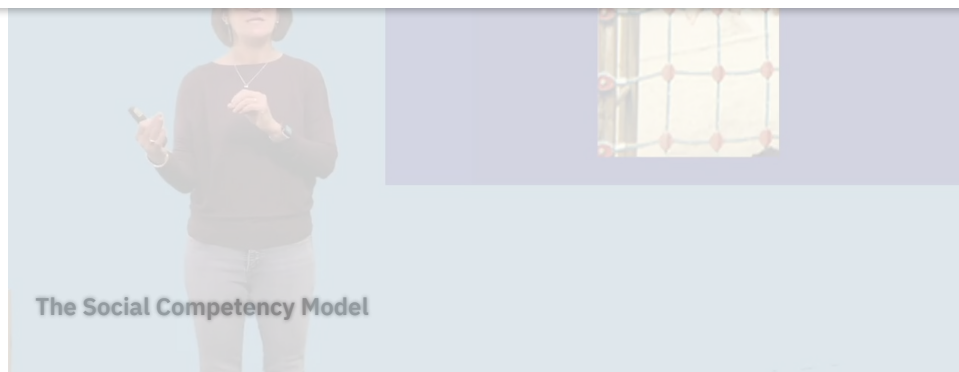
The Social Competency Model

Figure 1

Social Behaviors

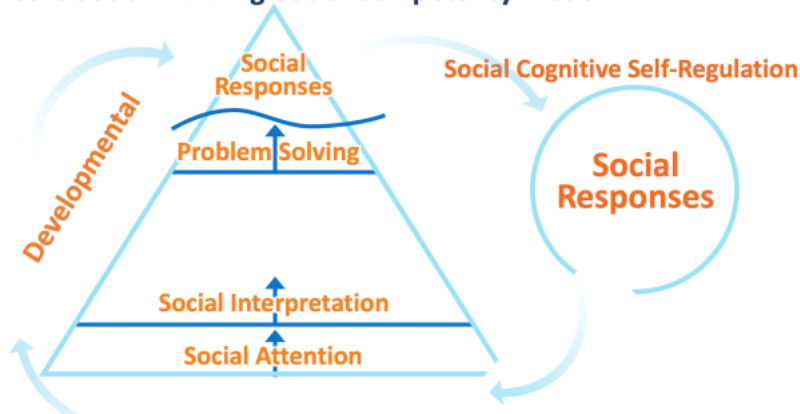Introducing Social Thinking's Social Competency Model

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BASE: Social Attention refers to how one gathers clues about people and what is happening in specific situations and contexts. Without social attention, we all struggle to figure out what's happening in that context. Because most children have spent years attending to and interpreting the social world prior to coming to school, their social minds are primed for reading comprehension within written text. To that end, from their early school years students are expected to describe "the setting" of a novel or story book as well as naturally infer how the setting connects to what may be happening with the characters in that setting.

Figure 2

Core Social Thinking-Social Competency Model

Social Responses

Social Cognitive Self-Regulation

Developmental

Problem Solving

Social Responses

Social Interpretation

Social Attention

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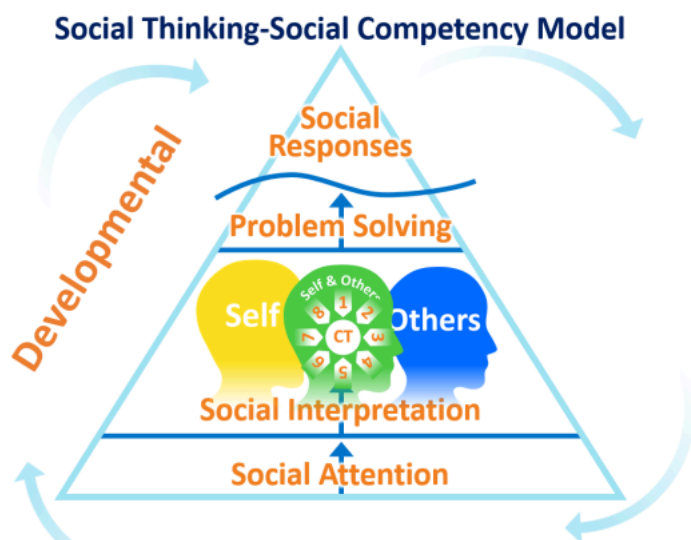
Figure 3

Social Thinking-Social Competency Model

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Social Interpretation is developmentally, socially, and neurologically miraculous. It occurs when an individual's brain *interprets* socially based information gathered from social attention. As mentioned previously, social interpretation is more than making inferences; it involves understanding self and others to make sense of people's information, plans, intentions, even humor! Social interpretation means we understand that we all have unique thoughts and feelings while we share information, plans and goals. Research in early child development teaches us that from a very young age, children are considering what others might be thinking and feeling as part of what *they* are thinking and feeling (Tomasello, 2009). This is referred to as "*self-otherness*", "*we thinking*" or "*we cooperation*." This helps us interpret self and others as well as our self with others throughout all aspects of the social world. It also helps us cooperate and learn in groups, our families, and communities—including the classroom and school!

Social interpretation involves many moving and shifting parts, all of which require simultaneous and synergistic interaction as illustrated in Figure 3. These parts include, but are not limited to:

Aspects of Social Interpretation:

1. World knowledge: incorporating information based on our learning from experiences.
2. What is the situation? What's going on at this particular moment?
3. Who are the people? What do I know each person's role? What is my social memory of that person?
4. What are their plans and intentions in this situation based on the people? What is my plan?
5. What about feeling based on the situation (basic emotions).
6. How do I feel in comparison to others? How might they feel (self-conscious emotions)?
7. What am I thinking? What might people be thinking? (basic perspective taking/theory of mind).
8. What do other people need to consider in the moment of a social interaction or when sharing space? (advanced perspective taking/spontaneous theory of mind)

Individuals who are actively developing their social interpretation skills are engaging in basic socially based critical thinking starting at about age three. Robust critical thinking is embedded in students' curricula (around the world) by the age of nine, if not sooner. Furthermore, we expect each person's critical thinking and interpretive abilities to continue to progress throughout the rest of their lives!

- Should I say hi to that person?
- Should I raise my hand to speak in class?
- Is my topic sentence clear?
- If I say _____ will I offend that person?
- What part of my story should I tell and, what part can I leave out because they already know?

Ultimately, the problem-solving process encourages us to make decisions about which social responses **will result in meeting our social goals**, whether the goal is to relate well with another person, share space effectively without intruding, figure out what other people may be thinking or feeling, or just get away from the situation or person. Problem solving can help us work through a small dilemma or a major crisis; it provides the information from which we can decide which actions to take to navigate and regulate toward our optimal social response.
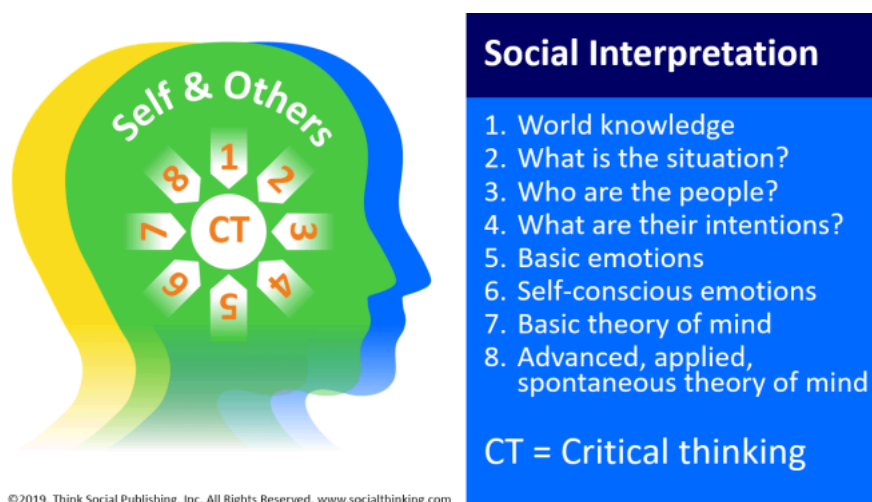
This leads us above the waterline to social cognitive self-regulation in Figure 4.

Social Responses do not just refer to a single behavior. Rather social responses are a culmination of several things working in tandem. Together this is called **social cognitive self-regulation**.

You will also notice, in figure 4, two other terms below the circle. *Social evaluation* refers to our constant awareness of the situation and the people. Social landscapes can change quickly and may require us to rapidly alter our social response. *Self-evaluation* refers to our self-awareness, problem solving, and social response management based on how we feel we are doing in a specific situation. *Social-evaluation* and *self-evaluation* are ongoing processes that are at the heart of developing and managing our social competencies.

Social cognitive self-regulation involves social responses that appear quite simple to most (e.g., walking around people as you pass them on a sidewalk, or greeting) as well as social responses that require layers of social competencies (e.g., engaging in a face-to-face group discussion; sharing your point of view that is different from that of your conversational partner, etc.). Social cognitive self-regulation is the process through which you figure out how to respond to another person (or not), whether that person is a friend or stranger. This also includes social behaviors, including nonverbal social behaviors (facial expressions, gestures, touch, body stance/orientation, silence, ignoring, etc.) and verbal responses (concrete and figurative language, tone of voice, pace of our speaking, etc.). We choose our social behavior(s) by considering how our words affect the possible way others might interpret our actions AND our social goals. Sometimes we want people to go away so we choose our words and actions to make that happen. We also use and/or modify our social responses differently in different contexts. (e.g., building a friendship, advocacy, working in peer groups, working on an office team, safety, working with people in our community/team/place of worship, etc.).

Figure 4

Social Interpretation

1. World knowledge
2. What is the situation?
3. Who are the people?
4. What are their intentions?
5. Basic emotions
6. Self-conscious emotions
7. Basic theory of mind
8. Advanced, applied, spontaneous theory of mind

CT = Critical thinking

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What is emotional self-regulation?

mutually distinct.

Group-based social cognitive self-regulation

Social cognitive self-regulation in a classroom involves many people attempting to self-regulate simultaneously. This can include conflicting opinions about what is important to each person at any one time. For this reason, classroom management can be difficult! It can be helpful for educators and therapists to work with students and engage in active conversations to explore their shared goals within the class. Remarkably, most of our social goals are not those we talk about, but instead are the goals we simply expect from each other.

Building social competencies is an ongoing process

The core of the ST-SCM is to illuminate the process through which we all form social responses tied to each situation's (often unstated) social norms. The ST-SCM represents a continuous and persistently cyclical process as we move from situation to situation throughout our day. Even when we are not actively engaging with our environment (think about a student waiting for her ride at the end of a school day), we are still going through this social processing to figure out what to do next in the situation. Most importantly, we want readers to understand that each part of the ST-SCM—attend, interpret, and problem solve to decide which social responses to produce—represent social competencies for all.

The ST-SCM is developmental

A five-year-old's social competencies are not as sophisticated as those of an eight-year-old, and a 21-year-old needs more sophisticated social competencies than a 14-year-old. The general expectation, across cultures, is that our social competencies will continue to evolve through our own personal, social emotional learning processes throughout our lives. This idea is demonstrated by the fact that as people become senior members within societies around the world, we refer to them as "wise." We attribute this evolved sense of social know-how to age and the assumption that, as we age, we go through many more experiences that build our social competencies. Note: Businesses and CEOs are now recognizing the importance of social competencies in the workforce and are recommending that high schools and universities incorporate courses that talk about and teach these skills.

Different social learning trajectories

Not everyone develops social competencies in the same manner, on the same timeframe, or to the same level over time. Social learning is based on the neurology we were born with and/or changes to our neurology from trauma, illness, addiction, etc. Just as people experience learning differences or disabilities in math, reading or science, some people also experience learning differences or disabilities in social learning. Unlike programs that "teach to mastery" or assume an "end" to a social skills program, we measure gains and outcomes as compared to an individual's unique baseline.

Managing our social mind requires a systematic approach

Our social learning pathway using social cognitive self-regulation can be hampered by factors that overwhelm our ability to stay present, focused, and able to process relevant social information. Using social competencies also involves at least three other major factors that are internal and external to our being:

1. Sensory
2. Anxiety, sadness, trauma, etc.
3. Screen Time Overload on Portable devices (STOP)

Each of these variables is represented Figure 5. Sensory processing is noted by the solid light blue line. The dotted blue line represents emotional experiences related to anxiety, sadness, trauma, etc. and the solid green line signifies the challenges we all have paying attention in face-to-face interactions when our attention is swallowed up by screen time.

Figure 5

Sensory processing and social competencies

A person whose sensory system is flooded by physical sensations (sights, sounds, smells, etc.) that overwhelm them will likely find it difficult to engage in social learning. Sensory impact can vary from individual to individual; what may be overwhelming to one may not even affect another. OTs are highly skilled in assessing and helping with strategies for sensory processing.

Stressors such as anxiety, sadness, depression, prior or current trauma, can also influence our how we attend, interpret, problem solve, and respond. For some, the stress of not fitting in and being excluded by peers may cause great anxiety or sadness. Some individuals may develop social anxiety for unknown reasons. Others find they are hypersensitive to how people treat them, because of a personal history of trauma, including bullying. Stressors dull one's ability to focus on social information; for some, especially tweens and teens, this may result in an "I don't care" statement about being with peers or cooperating with authority figures. The social world can also induce many stressors. Learning to manage stressors such as anxiety and depression associated with complex social experiences and confusing feelings is a key step in developing and utilizing social competencies and maintaining well-being.

Screen Time Overload on Portable devices (STOP)

Another compelling factor influencing social competencies is the emergence and popularity of portable digital devices, ask phones, tablets, and watches. In today's digital world, we are all surrounded by digital devices that are in constant competition for our social attention. These devices often become a replacement for the face-to-face social interactions we would otherwise be engaging in—such as hanging out with people, asking others for help or advice, or developing new relationships. As a result, more and more people find it difficult to figure out when to socially attend to the broader social landscapes in their world versus when to attend to what appears on their screens. To complicate this point, many school districts have adopted digital devices for all students. Students find their way to websites that are more fun, more interesting, more engaging than doing the assignment, or listening to the lesson, or engaging in group interactions. Yet, without practice in face-to-face interactions, with its twists and turns that require students to think quickly and flexibly, they are missing out on opportunities to engage in social information processing and practice core social competencies. Eyes focused on a screen are eyes missing social clues and cues from the environment. Brains focused on a screen are brains that are missing out on opportunities to engage in the constantly changing social world.

Summary

The amazing social mind allows us to process and respond to complex emotions and to consider and interpret the thoughts of self and others on a life-long journey toward problem solving and social cognitive self-regulation to reach our social goals—as individuals, as groups, as cultures and societies. The social world provides endless opportunities for interpreting and responding to social information through both face-to-face and digital experiences, through books, movies, television, and online.

frameworks, strategies, and materials we produce to help students learn explicitly how to engage in social information processing, how to attend, interpret, problem solve, and respond in any situation. Just as each of our social minds continues to expand over our lifetime, so too does the Social Thinking Methodology expand to meet your changing needs.

References

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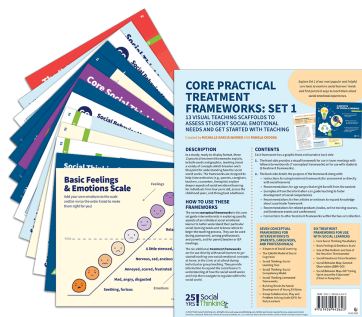## Related Resources to Support the Concepts in This Article

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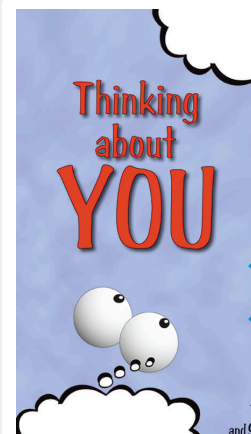

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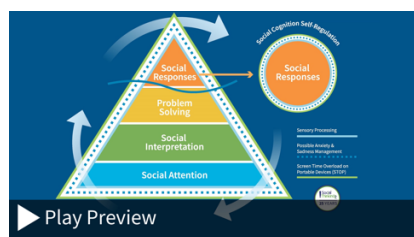
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