Increasing Social Awareness in Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Heather Conroy, LCSW
Western Region ASERT
University of Pittsburgh Medical Center UPMC
Center for Autism and Developmental Disorders
Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic
Program Overview

- Justifications for social difficulty
- Assessment of skills and developing goals
- Translation and instruction of nonverbal behaviors
- Providing Feedback
Why a Social Gap?

• Neurological differences
  • Qualitative impairments in Social Interaction
  • Stereotyped/Repetitive Interests and Behavior/Passions/Unique Interests

• In the past, children were taught table manners, how to dress, and social “appropriateness” in their homes and school rooms. Now, our children are expected to pick up on these skills naturally.

• Some individuals with autism, young and old, do not naturally adopt “expected” nonverbal communication and social skills. They need to be taught.
Assess Baseline Skills

Seek information that is geared towards the quantitative in nature

- Self Report (direct from client): I spoke to my roommate once this week.
- Observation: Professional observes client in a community setting
- Parent input: Sarah has
- Baseline information will allow you and the client to gauge progress as you work together
Goal Development

• Treat the individual as capable, intelligent, and in control

• Allow the client to develop **his/her own goals**
  ✷ Assist in making them attainable and measurable

• Help the client to identify possible hurdles
Creating Social Goals

- Create goals that are measurable and attainable

Example: Sarah has no acquaintances on her campus
“I will find ONE person (measurable) before the end of this semester that I can talk to in class or at lunch, at least once per week (attainable), about homework or a shared interest.

Objectives:

- I will sit near other students in each class
- I will respond with “hello” or another appropriate response each time someone greets me
- I will practice what others do in social situations (e.g., talking to professors, talking to other students, sharing information)
Creating Social Goals

- What if the young adult is not interested in making social goals?
- Perhaps the young adult does want to
  - Get a job
  - Go on a date
  - Go to college
  - Be more physically fit
- Work with these goals and incorporate social skills and awareness in your work towards accomplishing them without focusing on the social piece.
- Still not convinced? Find any way to use data to convince your clients. Remember that thinking is often black and white. Try something like
  - “Did you know that 75% of the focus during an interview is not on your ability, but your social skills and ‘fit’?”
Break Down Nuances in Nonverbal Communication

- **Upward** Nonverbal Communication
  - Manager, elderly person, customers at work
    - Large amount of personal space
    - Handshakes

- **Lateral** Communication
  - Colleagues, coworkers, friends
    - Moderate to small amount of personal space
    - Handshakes initially, then wave/other gestures, hugs sometimes appropriate

- **Downward** Communication
  - Children you are responsible for
  - Children you do not know well
    - Personal space ranges from very large (child on a playground you’ve never met) to very small (family members, neighbor you know well)
Break Down Nuances in Nonverbal Communication

- Use **clear**, literal examples (video/documented info) when possible
- Points of focus:
  - Tone and volume of voice
  - Eye gaze
  - Body movements and positions
Practice: What is the message?

- Example 1: Professor is referencing a note on a PowerPoint presentation and says:
  - “Hmm... boy wouldn’t it be surprising if THIS showed up as a question on the quiz next week?”
  - “Next week’s quiz will include five items from the PowerPoint shown today, so be sure to study those that were highlighted today.”
For adults with ASD…

- THIS is the best example of Clear and Literal communication.
  - “Next week’s quiz will include five items from the PowerPoint shown today, so be sure to study those that were highlighted today.”
Practice: Round Two...Which statement communicates most effectively?

- Example 2: One of your clients typically stands too close to you when you are in the community together, but you do not want to hurt his feelings by telling him that it makes you uncomfortable.
  - “Remember to use your manners and don’t get too close to people.”
  - “I’ve noticed you stand close to me in public. I understand why you do, but I would prefer if you kept more space between us because it makes me uncomfortable. When we are together, can you please leave about two feet between us?”
• THIS is the best example of Clear and Literal communication.

  • “I’ve noticed you stand close to me in public. I understand why you do, but I would prefer if you kept more space between us because it makes me uncomfortable. When we are together, can you please leave about two feet between us?”
# Private vs. Public Events/Thoughts

## Public

### Responses to: *How are you today?*

- I’m great!
- I’m fine
- I’m okay

*How are you?*

### Opinions about others:

- Sally is personable.
- The people here are very nice.

## Private

- I am sick with diarrhea; I can’t stop thinking about last night’s episode of...
- I am really tired of this place.

- I cannot sit near Sally because she talks too much.
Assist in Perspective-Taking

- **Theory of Mind**: the ability to understand that others have beliefs, desires, and intentions that are different from one’s own/putting oneself in another’s shoes.

- **Watch video clips or people in action and ponder**:
  - How is _____ feeling right now?
  - What will _____ do next?
  - What does the person’s nonverbal behavior indicate?
Emotions Affect Social Skills

Teach strategies to manage emotions in public

- You are at a restaurant and another group of patrons who ordered five minutes after you are served their food before you. What would you do?
  - Snap your fingers/yell at the server to bring your food now.
  - Think about potential reasons for the others to receive their food before you.
  - Talk about this situation calmly with the others at your table.
Find ways to relate!

Not everyone will understand why it is appropriate to talk at length about one’s favorite topic. When that happens, ask clients to think of conversation in a different way.

Think about your “Conversation pie”

Do my friends get to talk just as often as I do? Do they get an equal slice of the pie?
Provide **Practice** in the Community

Allow for *physical practice* when learning
- To order food
- To interview
- To drive
- To talk on the phone
- Mirroring others’ behaviors

Discuss and plan prior to outings
- Who will meet and who will we talk to?
- What type of communication should be used at
  - The pizza place?
  - The movie theater?
  - A friend’s house?
  - A coworker gathering?
Facilitate Opportunities for Interaction

- Experience the community in groups
  - Restaurants
    - Practice managing separate and combined checks with a group (a rule might be – always bring cash if having dinner with friends), talking while eating, using table manners, tipping the server
  - Movie theaters
  - Parks
  - Gyms
  - Libraries
Measure Ability and Progress

Allow the client to make the discoveries!

- Inquire, and encourage thought and self assessment as opposed to *telling* the client what the social rules are – and remember that rules change from one situation to the next
  - “What do you plan to do when we arrive at the restaurant?”
  - “What did you do well today at lunch?”
  - “What, if anything, would you like to change about your approach next time?”
Providing Feedback

- Be sensitive, but **clear** and **direct** when critiquing. Indirectness often leads to confusion or the assumption that things are fine.
- First ask the client if he/she can recognize what went well and what needs improvement.
- Remember that if you do not explain the social rules, it is possible no one will!
Use Positive Language to Critique Social Behaviors

Terms to AVOID
- Bad
- Inappropriate
- Silly
- Good

Positive Examples
- Surprising
- Unexpected
- Unique
- Expected
Providing Feedback

- Use patience!
- Increasing social awareness and altering social behavior can be difficult for adults who have missed out on years of practice.
- Normalize the adult’s emotions whenever possible.
Take-Home Points

- Adults with autism can be, and are motivated, but they may require more creative techniques.
- Provide real-life practice
- Find ways to measure one’s progress
- Be sensitive, yet direct, when providing suggestions and feedback.
Resources

Michelle Garcia Winner
www.socialthinking.com

Simon Baron-Cohen
Autism Services, Education, Resources, and Training (ASERT)

- ASERT is a statewide initiative funded by the Bureau of Autism Services, Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare.