Learning to Think Socially:
The ILAUGH Model of Social Thinking

By Mark Katz, PhD

PEOPLE WHO RELATE WELL SOCIALLY also have the ability to think socially. They can take into account the perspective of others, understand the emotions of others, empathize with others, and appreciate how the things they say and do affect others—and utilize other interpersonal skills—all in a matter of milliseconds. What's more, they execute these skills naturally, without even thinking about them.

For some people, however, thinking socially is anything but natural, according to Michelle Garcia Winner, MA, CCC-SLP. To the contrary, it can be very difficult. It can also be confusing to their loved ones when you consider the impressive strengths and talents they may enjoy in other areas. "It's as though they have a learning disability in social thinking," says Winner. Those unable to think socially can have great difficulty relating socially. The key to helping them make friends and socially connect with others, says Winner, is to teach them how to think socially. Her ILAUGH Model of Social Thinking® is designed to do just that.

Through an array of creative strategies and supports, many with cognitive behavioral underpinnings, the model provides learners with a deeper understanding of important social thinking skills, as well as many opportunities to successfully practice them in group and other social situations. Winner finds that her ILAUGH model also applies to teaching organizational skills. She observes that at least ninety percent of the students and adults she sees with social cognitive challenges also experience serious organizational problems, and these organizational problems significantly impact the quality of their lives.

ILAUGH is an acronym representing six empirically supported social cognitive skills, each representing an important part of the model's assessment and intervention process.

I=Initiation of Communication, or the ability to use language skills to establish a social connection and to seek help or information from others. Those with social thinking delays may not know how to join a conversation or ask questions when speaking with others, which are critical skills for maintaining a meaningful dialog.

L=Listening with Eyes and Brain. From a social cognitive perspective, it takes many different skills working in harmony to fully appreciate what others really mean when speaking to us. We need to listen not only with our ears, but also with our eyes.

A=Abstract and Inferential Language/Communication. We sometimes say things to others via inferences, metaphors, sarcasm and other means not intended for literal interpretation. For the listener, being able to know the difference is critical to understanding our intended message.

U=Understanding Perspective. Social thinking challenges represent a social executive function problem, according to Winner. A number of skills are called into play simultaneously, including the ability to appreciate the perspective of the person or persons on the other end of the social exchange. Perspective taking is something most of us do during the course of everyday social interactions. For others, it's a critically important social thinking skill needing to be mastered. Winner's practices address the different sub-skills that underlie effective perspective taking, among them being the ability to monitor and modify our behavior to keep others thinking about us the way we want them to think about us.

G=Gestalt Processing/Getting the Big Picture. Whether following along in a conversation or comprehending the main points



JBRYSON / ISTOCK, BONOTOM STUDIO

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in a book, we need to be able to interpret specific statements or written sentences within a larger, more meaningful context, not as isolated or unrelated bits of information.

H=Humor and Human Relatedness. Those who experience social cognitive delays may never have learned how to use humor effectively, or may have grown anxious about using it at all based on their previous experiences. Human relatedness, or our ability to bond emotionally with others, is at the core of our social relationships. Those who enjoy good social cognitive skills can derive the enjoyment that comes from mutual sharing with others. Those experiencing social cognitive delays, on the other hand, may need to improve these skills to derive similar benefits.

"WHILE OUR STUDENTS BENEFIT from learning these concepts," says Winner, "adult professional caregivers and parents need to learn how we think socially to encourage the explicit teachings of social thinking across all contexts. The ILAUGH model is written as a guide to professionals and parents; helping to illuminate different areas we should address with students who have social learning challenges.

According to Winner, social thinking problems can exist in association with a number of different diagnostic classifications. While often associated with characteristics on the autistic spectrum, particularly Asperger syndrome, social cognitive delays can accompany other conditions as well, ADHD among them. She reminds us that social thinking problems can also occur in the absence of a formal diagnosis. And there are benefits to be derived from improving our social thinking skills in the absence of problems or delays. Winner's practices are currently being used in work settings to help both employees and employers better understand social dynamics as they occur throughout the workday.

A speech pathologist by profession, Winner began developing social thinking and related social skills in the mid 1990s at a public high school and then eventually at her clinic in San Jose, California. Since that time, her unique approach continues to evolve and has been adopted by speech pathologists, educators, healthcare providers and other professionals throughout the United States and in several countries abroad.

Interested readers can learn about Winner's model and find a schedule of upcoming trainings on her website, socialthinking.com. Site visitors can download articles she and colleagues have written on the topic of social thinking, and also learn more about her several books, including *Thinking About You, Thinking About Me*, second edition (recommended as a starter book on social thinking) and *Think Social! A Social Thinking Curriculum for School-Age Students.*

For those who struggle to make friends and connect socially with others, the feelings of loneliness and isolation can be overwhelming. Thanks to the work of Michelle Garcia Winner, many now enjoy much improved lives, for which they and their loved ones are very grateful.