Theory of Mind in Autism

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Definitions

Social Cognition is one form of intelligence that allows us to interpret and respond to social information through interpersonal communication, written expression, sharing space or interpreting thoughts and actions of fictional characters.

Theory of Mind (ToM) is a person’s ability to ‘attribute mental states (such as beliefs, desires, intentions, etc.) to [oneself] and other people, as a way of making sense of and predict behavior.’

Perspective Taking is a person’s understanding of another’s point of view; the ability to consider the contents of other people’s minds.

Mindblindness is a deficit in ToM in that one is unable to perceive that others have thoughts and feelings.

Mental State Terms Examples

Think, Know, Guess, Idea, Want
Tell, Forgot, Intend, Mean
Show, Agree, Worry, Indicate
Plan, Aware, Recognize, Try
Understand, Hesitate
Effort, Frustrated, Like
**Typical Development of Mindreading (Westby, 2012)**

<table>
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<th>Age</th>
<th>Development</th>
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| By 12 mos| • Understands that they and someone else are attending to the same thing (joint attention)  
          • Read people’s actions as directed at goals and as driven by desires |
| 2-3 yrs. | • Pretend and understand pretense  
          • Begin to understand they are different from others |
| 4+ yrs   | • Development of ToM - realize that people’s minds contain different sets of information based on their different experiences  
          • Learn how to manipulate other’s minds through own actions and aware of how others might try to manipulate them  
          • Become more empathetic and responsive to needs of others and anticipate, respond and encode, decode our own and other’s intentions |

**ToM Skills (Baron-Cohen, 1999)**

- Inability to understand one’s and other people’s feelings
- Inability to take into account what other people know
- Inability to negotiate friendships by reading and responding to intentions
- Inability to read listener’s level of interest in one’s speech
- Inability to detect a speaker’s intended meaning (intentions)
- Inability to anticipate what other’s might think of one’s actions
- Inability to understand misunderstandings
- Inability to deceive or understand deception
- Inability to understand the reasons behind people’s actions
- Inability to understand “unwritten rules” or conventions