Understanding the Hidden Curriculum:
An Essential Social Skill for Children and Youth with Asperger Syndrome

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Children and youth with Asperger Syndrome (AS) manifest social skills problems that can negatively impact their functioning across school, home, and community. One social skills area, the “hidden curriculum,” is particularly problematic for these individuals. The hidden curriculum includes the skills that we are not taught directly yet are assumed to know. This article discusses the hidden curriculum and its impact on social functioning. In addition, practical suggestions for helping children and youth with AS learn the hidden curriculum are provided.

The first criterion listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders—Fourth Edition (DSM-IV; American Psychiatric Association, 1994) for a diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome (AS) is a qualitative impairment in social interaction. In fact, many believe that this characteristic is the one that is most distinctive of individuals with AS (Church, Alisanki, & Amanullah, 2000; Joliffe & Baron-Cohen, 1999; McLaughlin-Cheng, 1998; Myles & Southwick, 1999). Researchers and practitioners have discussed the negative impact of not having appropriate social skills, ranging from not being able to develop and keep friendships to being ridiculed by peers to not being able to keep a job due to a lack of understanding of workplace culture and relationships among subordinates and supervisors (Baron-Cohen, O’Riordan, Stone, Jones, & Plaisted, 1999; Joliffe & Baron-Cohen, 1999; MacLeod, 1999; Mawhood & Howlin, 1999; Myles & Simpson, 1998).

Social skills represents a complex area within human behavior. Although somewhat rule-governed, these rules vary across location, situations, people, age, and culture, making it difficult to acquire and subsequently generalize these skills. A greeting, for example, is a social skill that
is thought to be simple. However, further analysis shows this skill, which must take for granted, to be extremely complex. How a child greets a friend in the classroom differs from the type of greeting that would be used if the two met at the local mall. The greeting used the first time the child sees a friend differs from the greeting exchanged when they see each other 30 minutes later. Further, words and actions for greetings differ, depending on whether the child is greeting a teacher or a peer. Thus, greetings are complex, as are most social skills.

Many programs have been developed to provide students with basic information on the social skills identified as important by practitioners, parents, and researchers (Duke, Nowicki, & Martin, 1996; Freeman & Bake, 1996; Howlin, Baron-Cohen, & Hadwin, 1999; Shure, 1992). They provide opportunities for instruction, modeling, guided practice, self-evaluation, and evaluation by others. Students who receive instruction using these types of programs often learn “the basics.”

The Hidden Curriculum

One important social skill that has long been neglected is the hidden curriculum—the do’s and don’ts are not spelled out for everyday behavior, but somehow everyone knows about them (Bieber, 1994), except children and youth with AS. The hidden curriculum includes skills, actions, modes of dress, and so on, that most people know and take for granted. Every school and every society has a hidden curriculum. This unspoken curriculum is the one that causes challenges and, indeed, grief for those with AS.

In the halls at school, the hidden curriculum is in operation:

Before school, Mark saunters up to Sam, a third-grade student with AS, and says, “How’s it hangin’, dog?” Sam gets extremely upset and yells, “I am not a dog!” Mark, who was merely using the latter “in” greeting, shrugs his shoulders and comments to a friend walking with him, “Man, he’s weird. Just gonna stay out of his way.” Sam, on the other hand, remains unsettled until he has an opportunity to meet with his resource teacher, Mrs. Miller, at 10:30. During a 15-minute discussion, his teacher interprets the situation for him and helps him understand that Mark was just saying a friendly hello. When Sam asks Mrs. Miller how she and the other kids have learned that greeting, Mrs. Miller shrugs her shoulders, unable to come up with a response.

Ramona, who has always had difficulty with social situations, noticed that many students at her middle school cursed. Noticing that the colorful words appeared to cause laughter, she concluded that cursing could help her make friends. Consequently, during the passing period between second and third hour, she walked up to a girl she knew and began to talk to her, infusing into her conversation some curse words. The girl stared at Ramona in amazement but said nothing. Ramona was startled when the principal interrupted her conversation and told her to come to the office NOW! Ramona did not know the hidden curriculum about cursing in middle school. Before you curse, look around and make sure no adults are around.

Consider the hidden curriculum associated with a library visit. When a teenage boy goes to the library with his father, he is usually there to check out a book. He talks quietly to his father, selects a book, checks it out, and leaves. This is one kind of hidden curriculum for the library. However, there is another hidden curriculum for the library. When a teenage boy goes to the library with his friends, the curriculum is different. Chances are he is not there to check out a book and will not talk quietly, unless prompted to do so. The hidden curriculum of going to the library with friends is to socialize, have fun, and try not to be locked out of the library.

In yet another example, everyone knows that Mrs. Robbins allows students to whisper in class as long as they get their work done, whereas Mrs. Cook does not tolerate any level of noise in her class. Similarly, everyone knows that Mr. Johnson, the assistant principal, is a stickler for following the rules, so no one curses or even slouches in his presence. Everyone also knows that the really tough guys (the ones who like to beat up unsuspecting kids) hang out behind the slide, just out of teacher view. Everyone knows these things, that is, except the student with AS.

Outside of school, the hidden curriculum is an even bigger issue. What is the hidden curriculum for talking to and/or taking rides from strangers? The bus driver is a stranger, but it is permissible to accept a ride from her. It is not okay to ride with the stranger who pulls up to the curb and stops. The cashier at the grocery store is a stranger, but it is acceptable to make small talk with him. But it is not okay to divulge personal information to someone who is standing in the produce section. It is okay to accept candy from the distributor who is giving free samples at Toys R Us, yet it is not prudent to take candy from a stranger standing on the street corner.

Individuals with AS need to know they should never argue with a police officer. They also need to know (a) teacher expectations, (b) teacher-pleasing behaviors, (c) students to interact with and those to stay away from, and (d) behaviors that attract both positive and negative attention. Understanding the hidden curriculum can make all of the difference to students with AS—it can keep them out of detention, or worse, and it can help them make friends (Myles & Simpson, 1998). Temple Grandin, an adult with AS, developed her own set of rules, many of which are from the hidden curriculum, to guide her social interactions and behavior in society (see Figure 1).

The hidden curriculum covers a multitude of areas. For some, a generous investment of time is required to
Temple Grandin developed this rule system
to guide her social interactions and behavior

1. **Really Bad Things**—examples: murder, arson, stealing, lying in court under oath, injuring or hitting other people. All cultures have prohibitions against really bad things because an orderly, civilized society cannot function if people are robbing and killing each other.

2. **Courtesy Rules**—Do not cut in on a line at the movie theater or airport, observe table manners, say thank you, and keep yourself clean. These things are important because they make the other people around you more comfortable. I don't like it when somebody else has sloppy table manners, so I try to have decent table manners. It annoys me if somebody cuts in front of me in a line, so I do not do this to other people.

3. **Illegal But Not Bad**—example: slight speeding on the freeway and illegal parking. However, parking in a handicapped zone would be worse because it would violate the courtesy rules.

4. **Sins of the System (SOS)**—examples: smoking pot (and being thrown in jail for ten years) and sexual misbehavior. SOS's are things where the penalty is so severe that it defies all logic. Sometimes, the penalty for sexual misbehavior is worse than killing somebody. Rules for governing sexual behavior are so emotionally based that I do not dare discuss the subject for fear of committing an SOS. An SOS in one society may be acceptable behavior in another, whereas rules 1, 2, 3 tend to be more uniform between different cultures.

   I have never done a sin of the system. . . . People with autism have to learn that certain behavior will not be tolerated—period. You will be fired no matter how good your work is if you commit an SOS at work. People with autism and Asperger's need to learn that if they want to keep a job, they must not commit an SOS. . . . The social knowledge required is just too complex.


Ensure that the student understands; other "rules" can be learned in a matter of minutes. As previously stated, the hidden curriculum varies across locations, situations, people, ages, and cultures. Therefore, it is impossible to generate a comprehensive list that applies to all students with AS in all situations. Figure 2 provides some examples of hidden curriculum items that can serve as a starting point or basis for helping individuals with this exceptionality to understand this very complex topic.

### Systematic Approach to Teaching the Hidden Curriculum

The hidden curriculum needs to be approached systematically by individuals who teach children and youth with AS. It is best addressed through a process of instruction and interpretation.

#### Instruction

Instruction includes providing direct assistance in skill provision, such as using a scope and sequence chart to identify skill areas in which the child may be deficient and providing direct instruction to teach those skills. Instructional components include (a) scope and sequence, (b) direct instruction, (c) social stories, (d) acting lessons, and (e) self-esteem building.

**Scope and Sequence.** Because children and youth with AS evidence an uneven profile of social, behavioral, and communication skills, it is important to understand the sequence in which these skills develop. Without an understanding of scope and sequence, it is possible to overlook that a child may be missing an important prerequisite skill, which might make a more advanced skill becomerote-based instead of a usable asset. For example, if a student does not understand that tone of voice communicates a message, then teaching the more advanced skill of using a respectful tone of voice to teachers may have little or no meaning. That is, if the student learns by rote to use that tone of voice, it most likely will not be generalized.

Several scope and sequences exist that outline skills that specifically support self-awareness, self-calming, and self-management. For example, Howlin and colleagues (1999) provided a sequence of development and instructional strategies to promote emotional understanding.

**Direct Instruction.** Following identification of specific skills that the child has and the skills that he or she should learn next based on a scope and sequence analysis, a direct instructional model can be put in place. Because children with AS do not instantly develop the social and behavioral skills necessary to function successfully in school, home, and community, teachers must provide an
Don't tell the principal that she listened better if more kids would like her.

You should not have to pay students to be your friends.

Don't talk to other kids in the classroom when the teacher is giving a lesson.

When the teacher is scolding another student, it is not an appropriate time to ask the teacher a question.

When you are with classmates you don't know very well and you are the center of attention, do not pass gas, pick your nose, or scratch a private body part.

During a fire drill go with your class to the nearest exit. This is not the time to go to the bathroom or to ask to go to the bathroom.

Don't tell classmates about all of the "skeletons in your parents' closets."

Don't draw violent scenes in school.

During a conversation, face the speaker and position your body in that direction.

Speak to teachers in a pleasant tone of voice because they will respond to you in a more positive manner.

When your teacher gives you a warning about behavior and you continue the behavior, you are probably going to get in trouble. If you stop the behavior immediately after the first warning, you will probably not get in trouble.

If one of your classmates tells you to do something you think might get you in trouble, you should always stop and think before acting. Friends do not ask other friends to do things that will get them in trouble.

Not all teachers have the same rules for their class. Some teachers do not allow any talking unless you raise your hand. Others may allow talking if you are not disruptive or annoying other students. It is important to know the rules different teachers have for their classes.

Figure 2. Examples of hidden curriculum items.

effective instructional sequence that facilitates student skill acquisition, including the following:

1. Rationale—Students with AS often need to understand how or why concepts required for mastery are relevant. Thus, teachers must relate to the student (a) why the information is useful, (b) how the student can use the information, and (c) where it fits in with the knowledge the student already possesses.

2. Presentation—The teacher tells and shows the student the goals for the presented content and spells out exactly what the student needs to learn. Then, by using a direct instructional format, the content is taught using visual and auditory stimuli. Information is broken down into small increments and presented.

3. Modeling—During the model phase, the teacher obtains the student’s attention and shows the student what he or she is supposed to do. It is important to demonstrate how to complete the task or assignment correctly, instead of telling the student what not to do.

4. Verification—Throughout the lesson, the teacher must closely monitor the student’s emotional state. Because students with AS often have a flat, even seemingly negative affect, it is difficult to tell when they are stressed as a result of not comprehending specific content.

5. Evaluation—Following instruction, skill acquisition requires evaluation from both the teacher and the student. The teacher should employ a variety of methods to assess student understanding and use of the skill, ensuring that the student assists in this process.

6. Generalization—Programming for generalization should be a part of every lesson by providing opportunities for students to use newly acquired skills throughout the school day and in a variety of different settings (e.g., physical education class, music).

Most social skills curricula can be delivered using a direct instruction model. For example, Duke et al. (1996) offered a school-based curriculum to teach nonverbal language in the areas of (a) paralanguage, (b) facial expression, (c) space and touch, (d) gestures and postures, (e) rhythm and time, and (f) personal hygiene.

Social Stories. Social stories are an effective method of providing both guidance and direction to promote self-awareness, self-calming, and self-management in responding to social situations. A social story describes social situations specific to individuals and circumstances. These individual stories contain four sentence types: (a) descriptive—information about the setting, subjects, and actions; (b) directive—statements about the appropriate behavioral response; (c) perspective—sentences describing the feelings and reactions of others in the targeted situations; and (d) control—analogies of similar actions.
and responses using nonhuman subjects (Gray, 1995; Gray & Gerard, 1993).

**Acting Lessons.** Many adults with AS suggest, based on personal experience, that acting lessons are an appropriate means of teaching children and youth about social and emotional issues to aid in self-awareness, self-calming, and self-management. During acting lessons, children learn to express emotions verbally and nonverbally in specific situations. They also learn to interpret others’ emotions, feelings, and voices. Perhaps more importantly, acting class participants engage in simulations and receive feedback from an instructor and peers regarding their performance.

**Self-Esteem Building.** The child or youth with AS may look different, act different, feel different, and, in some ways, be different from other people. The child often knows this, and loss of self-esteem often comes with the product. Especially as adults, there is a high price to pay for a negative self-esteem. It has been documented that adults with AS have higher levels of depression, suicide, and other affective disorders than the general population, which can partially be related to self-concept problems (Williams, 1995).

Educators and parents need to work together to help the child understand that she is more than the exceptionality. She is not Asperger Syndrome. She is a child who has this exceptionality, but this is only one part of her. She has many other characteristics, which need to be pointed out and celebrated (Bieber, 1994) to prevent the exceptionality from receiving so much attention and focus that it becomes the major facet of the child’s identity.

The child needs assistance in developing a positive self-image. This is built, in part, by successful experiences. LaVoie (cited in Bieber, 1994) poignantly challenged teachers and parents to find the “island of competence” in the child, to stress it, and to celebrate it. Presenting multiple opportunities for a child to demonstrate his or her island of competence builds self-esteem.

Strategies to build self-esteem include the following:

1. Place the child with AS in the role as helper or tutor.
2. Tell the child what he is doing right. Reframe negative language to positive language.
3. Find what the child does well and help her do more of it.
4. Compliment the child, and teach him to compliment himself.

**Interpretation**

Even when the person with AS receives effective instruction in the social and behavioral realms, situations will occur that require interpretation. A number of interpretative strategies can help turn seemingly random actions into meaningful interactions for individuals with AS. These include (a) cartooning; (b) social autopsies; and (c) the Situation, Options, Consequences, Choices, Strategies, Simulation (SOCCSS) strategy.

**Cartooning.** Visual symbols have been found to enhance the processing abilities of persons in the autism spectrum and to enhance their understanding of the environment (Hagiwara & Myles, 1999; Kuttler, Myles, & Carlson, 1998). One type of visual support is cartooning. The technique, used as a generic term, has been implemented by speech/language pathologists for many years to enhance understanding in their clients. Cartoon figures play an integral role in a number of intervention techniques: pragmatism (Arwood, 1991), mind-reading (Howlin et al., 1999), and comic strip conversations (Gray, 1995).

Comic strip conversations were introduced by Gray (1995) to illustrate and interpret social situations and provide support for “students who struggle to comprehend the quick exchange of information which occurs in a conversation” (p. 2). Comic strip conversations promote social understanding by incorporating simple figures and other symbols in a comic strip format. Speech, thought-bubble symbols, and color are used to help the individual with AS see and analyze a conversation. According to Attwood (1998), comic strip conversations “allow the child to analyze and understand the range of messages and meanings that are a natural part of conversation and play. Many children with Asperger’s Syndrome are confused and upset by teasing or sarcasm. The speech and thought bubble as well as choice of colors can illustrate the hidden messages” (p. 72). Educators can draw a social situation to facilitate understanding or assist students in doing their own illustrations.

**Social Autopsies.** Social autopsies are particularly well suited to interpret social and behavioral situations. Developed by LaVoie (cited in Bieber, 1994) to help students with severe learning and social problems under-
Figure 3. SOCCSS worksheet. Adapted from *Men on the Move: Competence and Cooperation “Conflict Resolution and Beyond,”* by J. B. Roosa, 1995, Kansas City, MO: Author. This figure may be copied for noncommercial use only. © 2001 by PRO-ED, inc.
stand social mistakes, a social skills autopsy is used to dissect social incidents so that individuals learn from their mistakes. When a social mistake occurs, the individual with AS meets with a teacher, counselor, or parent. Together, in a nonpunitive fashion, they identify the mistake and determine who was harmed by it. Then the student develops a plan to ensure that the error does not reoccur. Because of the visual strengths, problem-solving deficits, and language-processing problems of the student with AS, social skills autopsies may be enhanced by using written words or phrases or pictorial representations to illustrate each of the stages.

**Situation, Options, Consequences, Choices, Strategies, Simulation.** The SOCCSS strategy was developed to help students with social interaction problems put social and behavioral issues into a sequential form (J. B. Roos, personal communication, 1995). The strategy helps students understand problem situations and lets them see that they have to make choices about a given situation and that each choice has a given consequence. The SOCCSS strategy works as follows:

**Situation:** When a social problem arises, the teacher works with the student to identify the situation. Together they define the problem and state a goal to repair the problem or prevent it from occurring again. The strategy occurs through discussion, writing, and drawings.

**Options:** After identifying the situation, the student and teacher brainstorm options for behavior. At this point, the teacher accepts all student responses and does not evaluate them. Typically, the options are listed in written or pictorial format.

**Consequences:** The student and teacher work together to determine the consequences of each option generated. This serves to help the student gain a better understanding of cause and effect. Further, it helps persons with AS to understand that each decision they make or action they engage in will have a result or impact.

**Choices:** The student then prioritizes the options and consequences and selects a solution from the list of generated options. The student-selected option is the one that has the most desirable consequences.

**Strategies:** The student and adult work together to develop a plan of action around the selected choice. Although the adult may provide guidance by asking leading questions or making suggestions, the student should ultimately develop the plan so that he or she has ownership.

**Simulation:** The student is given an opportunity to turn the abstract strategy into something more concrete, through role-play, imagery, talking with a peer about the plan, or writing or typing the plan.

Figure 3 provides a worksheet that can be used to facilitate the SOCCSS process.

**Summary**

Students with AS are at a disadvantage because they do not understand the hidden curriculum. As a result, they inadvertently break the rules associated with the hidden curriculum and either get in trouble with adults or are further ostracized or hurt by peers. Instruction and interpretation of hidden curriculum items should be an integral part of the education of children and youth with AS. It is through these types of activities that individuals with this exceptionality can learn to understand and function in the world around them.

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**References**


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