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Lack of social understanding

“Jackson tells his teacher that he’s old and wrinkly.”

Points to note

- Social skill deficits are a core characteristic of autism and should not be overlooked when assessing reasons for inappropriate behaviour.
- Social skill deficits impact on the child's social acceptance.
- The child will have difficulty understanding the thoughts and feelings of other people. He may have difficulty understanding and monitoring his own emotions. He may also have difficulty adapting to the needs and personalities of other children.
- Impairments in social behaviour include limited ability to use gesture, limited or inappropriate facial expression, awkward body language and a peculiar gaze. The child may misinterpret what is implied by an affectionate touch, such as a touch on the arm or a pat on the back.
- The child may find it hard to understand the intentions and motivation of other people – that is, why people behave the way they do.
- Impairments in social interaction lead to difficulty with conversational turn-taking, maintaining a topic of conversation and maintaining eye contact.
- As a teacher, you may need to teach a child with autism social awareness skills that you didn't have to learn yourself – ie. social skills that you acquired naturally, like listening without interrupting, and pausing to allow others a turn in conversation.
- Many children with autism lack an ability to understand the consequences of their behaviour.

What you can do

- A child with autism needs to be specifically taught social skills; he will not acquire these naturally just by being in a social environment.
- Draw the child's attention to the use of facial expressions, gesture, voice inflection and proximity in social interaction and explain the attitudes and meanings these convey. This could be done through drama and role play.
- Develop social interaction skills such as turn taking, sitting quietly and waiting, through playing games like Snakes and Ladders and card games.
- Help the child become aware that other people have feelings, thoughts, attitudes and beliefs that may be different to his own.
- The child needs to be made aware that he is being addressed when the teacher speaks to 'everyone' to enable him to understand group instructions.