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Improving social understanding

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 may 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 also be unable or have limited ability to interpret gesture, facial expression and body language. The child may misinterpret what is implied by an affectionate touch, such as a touch on the arm or pat on the back.
- The child might 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 student 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.
- Children with autism generally lack an ability to understand the consequences of their behaviour.

What you can do

- The student needs to be specifically taught social skills; he will not acquire them naturally 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 meaning they convey. This could be done through drama and role play.
- Improving social understanding will help all students become more aware of direct and indirect means of communication, improving relationships with peers and teaching staff.
- Some suggested topics to improve social understanding:
 - developing self-awareness,
 - developing social interaction skills such as turn taking and waiting,
 - recognising that other people have feelings, thoughts, attitudes and beliefs that may be different to their own,
 - using and interpreting body language, facial expression, gestures,
 - understanding metaphors and idioms,

- understanding inference and implied meaning,
- understanding words and phrases that have more than one meaning. The student may have difficulty putting himself in 'another person's shoes'. He may also have a limited ability to take an introspective view of his own behaviour. The above topics are a good starting point for students with autism to develop better social understanding.
- The student needs to be made aware that he is being addressed when the teacher speaks to 'everyone' to enable him to respond to group instructions.
- Encourage the student to join in any groups or clubs at the school that relate to an area of interest. This will provide him with an opportunity to interact with his peers and be included.
- Point out students in the class who are good role models so that the student with autism can see how he *should* be behaving. This is important as children with autism are easily led astray by others who are a bad influence.