


Using Social Thinking in the Mainstream Classroom

A Way for **ALL** Kids to Learn Social Concepts Together

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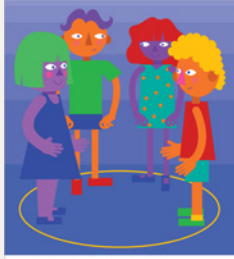
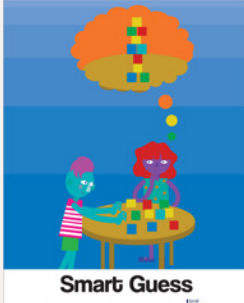
The Social Thinking Methodology originated in schools over 25 years ago in response to a lack of practical ways to explain different aspects of the social-emotional world to both neurotypical and neurodivergent students. Michelle Garcia Winner, founder of the Social Thinking Methodology, continues to update core strategies and tools in response to ongoing and valuable input from individuals with a range of social-emotional learning differences, disabilities and/or difficulties, as well as from mainstream teachers and learning specialists. Dr. Pamela Crooke joined forces with Michelle almost 17 years ago to further evolve components of the methodology. Michelle and Pam speak in communities across the United States and globally. Tools from the Social Thinking Methodology have found their way into inclusion-based or mainstream classrooms since ALL students can benefit from a common vocabulary and understanding of the social and emotional world together.

Teaching Tools for the Classroom

Over the years, many students and clients have shared their dislike of being rewarded or punished based on their social behaviors. As an alternative, we created a core set of *Social Thinking Vocabulary* (STV) phrases to explain “why” we use our social competencies. In general, we use them to meet our own social goals. These vocabulary terms are not about right or wrong but instead teach concrete ways of describing the many ways we participate socially to work and learn in the presence of others, as well as form relationships if we choose.

Social Thinking Vocabulary is made up of simple and clear phrases used to help teachers and students understand abstract aspects in the classroom. The key to using STV phrases in a classroom setting is to teach them proactively and not reactively to belittle or shame or correct. It is also important to teach with empathy, understanding that neurodivergent students often spend large amounts of cognitive and emotional energy trying to figure out how the social world works and how to use their tools or strategies within that world, when they choose to do so.

Table 1 features a few examples of how a teacher might use these terms for all students in the classroom. Please note, there are many other STV terms not included in this short article.

Situation or Classroom Event	Social Thinking Vocabulary Ideas
 <p>The Group Plan</p> <p>Announcing or talking about the “schedule” for the day. Transitioning to small groups or lining up to move as a group.</p>	<p>Use the term “group plan” instead of schedule. This helps students remember that they are part of a bigger whole and that there is a difference between following their own plan and a group plan. Try the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The group plan is to ____.” • “You can be part of the group plan by ____.” • “We are ____ together. Everyone is following the group plan.”
 <p>Thinking with Your Eyes</p> <p>Encouraging students to notice when you are holding something up in front of the classroom.</p> <p>Encouraging students to figure out, for themselves what is happening now or what will happen next.</p>	<p>Use “think with your eyes.” This helps teach that there is a purpose for looking around the classroom to gain information through observation.</p> <p><i>Instead of saying, “look at me” or “pay attention,” try:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Use your eyes and ears to think about what I’m showing. I have information to share.” • “Think with your eyes. Let’s notice what the group plan is right now.” • When writing on the whiteboard, say, “Wow, I know you all are thinking about what I’m teaching because you are thinking with your eyes!”
 <p>Body in the Group</p> <p>Bringing students together to sit in a group. Encouraging students to show they are part of a working or social group.</p> <p>Helping students transition to line up.</p>	<p>Rather than saying, “It’s circle time” or “line up,” use the term “body in the group.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Put your body in the group, it is time to line up.” • “When your body is in the group, we can walk to lunch.” • “When your body is in the group, it shows others you are interested/ready to learn.”
 <p>Smart Guess</p> <p>Encouraging students to figure out what is happening and infer meaning in a work of literature; predict what might happen next; and/or figure out what others mean by what they say and do in groups.</p>	<p>Many students see guesses as random and inaccurate. Instead, teach that guesses can have a process, like math, where we gather information using our eyes/ears/brain to make a Smart Guess.</p> <p>Rather than saying, “estimate or predict what will happen next,” try:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Let’s all gather clues to make a smart guess.” • “I wonder what the writer meant by that sentence. Let’s make a smart guess.” • “Make a smart guess about what we will do next. What clues can you find?” • “What materials do we need for science? Let’s make a smart guess based on what the experiment is about.”

Teaching ideas from Kari Zweber Palmer, Social Thinking Collaborative Trainer

The STV helps to teach, in a literal and meaningful way, the “thinking” underlying what we “do and say” in classrooms and groups. Make sure to notice when students are *thinking with their eyes*, following the *group plan*, or *making smart guesses*. If you find yourself simply redirecting behavior or the vocabulary terms are not a fit for your classroom or students, then please don’t use them.

The second tool is a visual teaching framework called the *Four Steps of Communication*. In this framework, we explore how face-to-face communication involves far more than just talking.



<https://www.socialthinking.com/Products/social-thinking-teaching-frameworks-set-2>

Sum it Up

What started as a way to teach a few concrete concepts has now evolved into hundreds of lessons to support social-emotional learning and organizational skills. We continue to evolve and share this process via workshops, online training, developmental books, posters, and games. Our work has also expanded to help teach how to make sense of our feelings, how our feelings shift throughout the day, and how our awareness of our feelings leads to a better understanding of our reality. With that understanding, we are better able to self-regulate to meet our own goals.

Ultimately, we hope our work will help people recognize that **to be social** is more than just talking or being polite or making friends. The social world is complex, and many of the social competencies we teach form the foundation for learning and participating across the academic day. We all desire to be included and appreciated for who we are, and helping all students access their own tools to meet their goals is a first step. We also feel strongly that learning should be accessible to all. That’s why we provide free webinars, articles, and downloadable materials on our website www.socialthinking.com.

What is the Social Thinking Methodology?

The Social Thinking Methodology was developed for social learners ages four to adulthood with solid language and learning abilities, in other words, those who are using their language to learn versus those who are learning to develop basic language skills. The curricula and materials may be helpful for any person whose social goals or desires are unmet due to a lag in social and/or emotional competencies, motivation, learning difference, or disability. They are also intended for those who are simply interested in how the social world works as they can help them navigate to regulate within it. The strategies and tools are not specific to one diagnosis.

Step 1: Thinking about who is around us in specific situations.

- What do we know about the people?
- Is this a good time to approach? If so, then....

Step 2: Showing our intention to communicate with our body.

- Our body can convey who we want to talk to, if we want to join a group or just listen, or our intentions.
- When working in peer groups, our body conveys that we are part of that group.

Step 3: Using our eyes to consider perspectives and what is happening with others.

- Avoid teaching simple “eye contact.” Instead, eyes help us gather clues about the people and the situation, as well as the emotions, interests, or possible lack of interest of others.
- The eyes of others can also help us figure out what they might be thinking based on where they are looking, such as at their cell phone, other people, a teacher or a peer.

Step 4: Using our language to relate to others.

- We ask questions to learn about thoughts, feelings and perspectives of others.
- We listen with our eyes and ears to determine what people mean by what they say.
- We add our own thoughts to connect our experiences and knowledge to the interests or comments of others.

Individuals who might benefit from tools within the methodology include neurodivergent students with documented diagnoses*, learning differences, or disabilities, as well as neurotypical individuals.

*Possible diagnoses: autistic spectrum (levels 1 and 2), ADHD, language or learning disabilities, twice exceptional (2E), gifted and talented, social anxiety, developmental language disorder, and traumatic brain injury. Others who may benefit include those with learning differences and/or difficulties with sensory regulation, executive functioning, or other behavioral and emotional disabilities.



Michelle Garcia Winner, MA, CCC-SLP, is the founder and CEO of Social Thinking and a globally recognized thought leader, author, speaker, and social-cognitive therapist. She is dedicated to helping people of all ages develop social-emotional learning, including those with social learning differences. Across her 30-year career she has created numerous evidence-based strategies, treatment frameworks, and curricula to help interventionists develop social competencies in those they support. Michelle's work also teaches how social competencies impact people's broader lives, including their ability to foster relationships and their academic and career performance. She and her team continually update the Social Thinking® Methodology based on the latest research and insights they learn from their clients.

Michelle maintains a private practice, The Center for Social Thinking, in Santa Clara, California, where she works with clients who continue to teach and inspire her. She travels globally presenting courses on the Social Thinking Methodology, an evidence-based approach she created that she continues to evolve and expand on. Michelle helps to develop educational programs, consults with and trains families and schools, and is a guiding presence with a wide range of professionals, politicians, and businesses on the topic of social-emotional competencies. She is a prolific writer and has written and/or co-authored more than 40 books and over 100 articles about the Social Thinking Methodology.

Michelle receives accolades for her energetic and educational conference presentations, as well as her down-to-earth approach to teaching social competencies. The strength of Michelle's work is her ability to break down abstract social concepts and teach them in practical, concrete ways to help people improve their social problem-solving abilities and social responses.



Pamela Crooke, PhD, CCC-SLP, is Chief Curriculum Officer and Director of Research, Content, Clinical Services, and the Social Thinking Training & Speakers' Collaborative at Think Social Publishing, Inc.

Prior to joining the Social Thinking team, she coordinated the Autism interdisciplinary clinical services at the Tucson Alliance for Autism, served as a clinical faculty member of three universities, and worked as a speech-language pathologist in the Arizona public schools for 15 years. She is on the board and/or is a member of a wide range of organizations related to autism and speech/language and has been the recipient of several foundation and community grants. In 2011, she received the Outstanding Achievement Award with Co-recipient Michelle Garcia Winner from the California Speech, Language and Hearing Association (CSHA).

Pam is a prolific speaker both in North America and abroad and has co-authored five award-winning books related to Social Thinking with Michelle Garcia Winner. Their book, *You Are a Social Detective!* was the Autism Society of America Literary Book of the Year in 2012. The recently released 2nd Edition (2020), won the 2021 Creative Child Magazine Preferred Choice Award, the 2021 Mom's Choice Gold Medal Award, the 2021 Best Book Awards Finalist, and the 2022 International Book Awards Finalist. They co-authored the companion *You Are a Social Detective! Teaching Curriculum and Support Guide*, (2022).

Pam and Michelle collaborate on writing articles and blogs that appear on the Social Thinking website and in a wide array of publications. Her most recent publications focus on using practice-based research to examine how educators, mental health specialists, and parents utilize strategies within the Social Thinking Methodology. Pam maintains an active clinical practice for both adolescents and adults.

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