



Theory of Mind

Theory of Mind (ToM) describes the ability to read other people's perspectives, intentions and thoughts. ToM continues to develop as we grow, starting at 4 years of age. It encompasses the ability to engage in pretend play, affecting role-taking abilities, and prompts us to imagine the world from another person's perspective. Forging a stable ToM helps us empathise with others, which is especially important when developing meaningful relationships and resolving conflicts.

Keywords: *perspective-taking, social skills, pretend play, cognition*

Theory of Mind (ToM) develops according to the following *hierarchy of abilities*, as stated by Welman, Fang & Peterson (2011):

1. The understanding that people desire or want different things.
2. The understanding that people can have different beliefs about the same event, situation or thing.
3. The understanding that people may not comprehend or know that something is true.
4. The understanding that people can hold false beliefs.
5. The understanding that people can hide their emotions by acting a different way.

What happens when these abilities are not fully developed?

Students with an underdeveloped ToM may demonstrate difficulty making emotional inferences, which impacts their social skills, ultimately making it hard to develop friendships and grasp new information (Baron-Cohen, 1985). This can also lead to difficulties explaining one's own behaviours and feeling fatigued from social interactions. Additionally, students can experience difficulty in understanding the impact of their behaviours on another's emotional state, further influencing their ability to emotionally regulate. Students who exhibit difficulties with their ToM can sometimes make literal interpretations in conversation, leading to challenges in understanding metaphors and similes. Research has found that ToM is a particularly difficult concept for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder to grasp (Slaughter, 2015).



Is it possible to teach Theory of Mind?

Premack and Woodruff (1978) stated that ToM cannot be explicitly taught like reading or writing. However, teachers, parents and caregivers can support students through interaction, such as pretend play or socialisation.

Strategies to support Theory of Mind skills in the classroom

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| Things in common | Have your students get into pairs and ask each other what they have in common. After this, have them share their answers with the class. Celebrate similarities and differences in their answers. |
| Problem solving | Provide a scenario to the group or student (e.g., “a friend hurt your feelings” or “you forgot to invite your friend to your birthday party – what do you do?”) and discuss as a class or reflect individually. Ask: “What happened and what is your solution?” Discuss as a class and ask: “What you would do differently?” |
| Pretend play | Trial playing games like charades or simple role-play as a doctor, teacher or construction worker to encourage students to take other people’s perspectives and experiences. |
| Guess what happens next | Integrate story time sessions where you sit with the student and read a story aloud. Stop at certain points to allow the student to guess what the character should do next in the scene/story. |
| Tune into their feelings, thoughts and wants | When speaking to the student, verbalise your and the student’s perspective into words. Include what the student needs, wants and feels. For example, “You want to play in the playground, don’t you?” or “I am disappointed because you shouted in the classroom,” or “Don’t worry, you thought that I wasn’t able to help you, but I’m here to talk you through that question.” |



Want to learn more?

To learn more about Language Disorder and how to support children and young people for whom language is their primary disorder, please **contact us**. Language Disorder Australia provides holistic, innovative and effective therapy, education and support services and has a transdisciplinary team of speech pathologists, occupational therapists, educators, psychologists and physiotherapists.

Contact: 1300 881 763 or hello@languagedisorder.org.au

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