

What is Social Cognition?



Children's National®

Social cognition refers to the many things that our brains do that help us understand social and emotional information about others and ourselves. It includes components such as being able to:

- Interpret facial expressions and nonverbal cues
- Understand and express emotion with: voice intonation, facial expression, body language, gesture, verbal nuance
- Recognize one's own emotional state (e.g. know when you are feeling anxious)
- Label emotions in self and others
- Describe other people meaningfully (e.g. she is a shy person, he is funny)
- Discern social rules (e.g. know that you shouldn't pick your nose in public)
- Understand human relationships (e.g. what is a friend)
- Understand the meaning of different social contexts (e.g. acceptable behavior in a party is different from acceptable behavior in church)
- Engage in imaginative play (e.g. act out unique stories with characters and spontaneously respond to the play of others)
- Have a *theory of mind* (understanding that others have different ideas and experiences that drive their behaviors).

Social cognition drives many pragmatic language or conversational skills, such as being able to:

- Initiate, maintain, and end topics (e.g. sticking with a topic in conversation)
- Know when and how to shift topics (e.g. recognizing when someone is bored with a topic)
- Recognize misunderstandings and know how to correct them (e.g. recognizing that you have hurt someone's feelings)
- Take the perspective of others in conversation (e.g. partner doesn't know as much about a topic as you do and needs some background)
- Show sensitivity to conversational partner (e.g. recognizing that your conversational partner is bored)

We socialize differently.

Some of us might not understand or follow social rules that non-autistic people made up. We might be more direct than other people. Eye contact might make us uncomfortable. We might have a hard time controlling our body language or facial expressions, which can confuse non-autistic people or make it hard to socialize. Some of us might not be able to guess how people feel. This doesn't mean we don't care how people feel! We just need people to tell us how they feel so we don't have to guess. Some autistic people are extra sensitive to other people's feelings.

- Autistic Self Advocacy Network
[About Autism - Autistic Self Advocacy Network \(autisticadvocacy.org\)](https://autisticadvocacy.org)