

The “Clueless Child” as An Adult

The Clueless Child refers to a child who often acts in intelligent ways but at times is incredibly clueless. Sometimes this "cluelessness" is due to an undiagnosed Theory of Mind deficit (ToMd). In simplest terms, Theory of Mind is perspective taking, taking your own perspective and that of other people. A deficit in Theory of Mind means that you frequently do not understand what is best for you. You also do not understand why the other person is acting the way they are. Growing up can be lonely and confusing because family, socialization, school, and later employment are impacted by a deficit in Theory of Mind.

Theory of Mind deficits are not related to IQ. This means that the “clueless child” can be gifted, which may be very confusing for people who interact with them. The contrast between intelligence and the clueless behavior can be stunning, making it hard to believe that this person cannot read other people and cannot figure out what is in their own interest or the interest of others. Theory of Mind is close to empathy but the person with this problem can be empathetic if they understand the situation or have personally experienced what the other person is going through.

This lack of perspective can lead to incorrect thinking and conclusions creating a very large deficit in the ability to get needs met and to have a successful family and other positive social interactions. This is important because the family is your first social skills group. Once employment occurs then this is another “family” to negotiate.

For years, Theory of Mind deficits were believed to only be found in people with an Autism Spectrum Disorder diagnosis. New research is proving that ToMd is found in people with many additional diagnoses.

Groups with Difficulty Developing Theory of Mind

It is becoming increasingly clear through research and in clinical practice that other neurological disorders also may have this deficit. The following are examples of some disorders found to also have deficits in Theory of Mind.

- Acquired Brain Injury ¹³
- Anorexia Nervosa ⁷
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) ¹³
- Bipolar Disorder ⁶
- Down’s Syndrome ¹⁵
- Fetal Alcohol Syndrome ¹⁰
- Major Depressive Disorder ⁸
- Migraines ¹⁸
- Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) ¹¹
- Psychosis ¹⁴
- Schizophrenia ⁶
- Social Anxiety ⁹
- Social Communication Disorder ¹¹

- Stroke ⁵
- Tourette Syndrome ³

Medical Education

Talk to your doctor or therapist about getting medical education for yourself and the whole family. Make sure as many family members as possible can be there so that everyone understands what is causing the behaviors they observe. Ask your therapist any questions you have or clarify things that you do not understand. Having an accurate understanding of the neurological underpinnings of the disorders that are often seen with Theory of Mind deficits is important for the whole family and anyone interacting with you on a regular basis.

Development

Skill Development in Children ¹¹

- Knows that people act according to the things they want.
- Understands the causes and consequences of emotions. (“If I throw my toy, mom will be mad.”)
- Pretends to be someone else (like a doctor or a superhero) when playing.

Three-Year Olds

- Can identify basic emotional expressions. ¹
- Knows that certain situations elicit certain emotions. ²
- Understands that others may experience a different emotion than the one they have. ^{1,2}
- Comprehends that two individuals can hold different beliefs. ²⁵

Four and Five-Year Olds ¹¹

- Understanding “wanting” - different people want different things, and that to get what they want, people act in different ways.
- Understanding “thinking” - different people have different, but potentially true, beliefs about the same thing. People’s actions are based on what they think is going to happen.
- Understanding that “seeing leads to knowing” - if you haven’t seen something, you don’t necessarily know about it. If someone hasn’t seen something, they will need extra information to understand it.
- Understanding “false beliefs” - sometimes people believe things that are not true - and they act according to their beliefs, not according to what is demonstrably true.
- Understanding “hidden feelings” - people can feel an emotion that is different from the one they display.

Throughout Life

For the next several years they learn to predict what one person thinks or feels about what another person is thinking or feeling. They also begin to understand complex language that relies

on theory of mind. Some examples would be lies, sarcasm, and figurative language. Some experts argue that Theory of Mind development continues over a lifetime as one has more opportunities to experience people and their behavior. ¹¹

Clinical experience has shown that this is true but is increased with direct instruction. This instruction is best done in a group setting that has a Theory of Mind curriculum.

Screening for Problems with Theory of Mind ¹¹

It may be difficult to:

- Understand why people do and say the things they do.
- Have a conversation.
- Tell a story.
- Understand characters' perspectives in storybooks.
- Make friends.
- Engage in pretend play.

Utilize the Theory of Mind Checklist.

Other Issues That Can Detract from Theory of Mind Development

- Check to see if electronic addictions are interfering with the person's social life.
- Check to see if friends are only online, in which case there is no real in-person practice for socializing to improve Theory of Mind deficits.

Strategies for Developing Theory of Mind

Viewing Theory of Mind as a Perspective-Taking Learning Disability ²⁶

- Difficulty determining the needs, intelligence, and motives of others.
- Difficulty recognizing and accounting for other person's expectations of how one should participate or behave.
- Difficulty completing obligatory tasks not of their own choosing.
- Limited knowledge of what it means to participate successfully in a relationship (formal or informal).

Note: Theory of Mind problems can occur even when taking one's own perspective.

Learn Theory of Mind as if You Are Taking a Course

Use learning disability instructional strategies, deficits in Theory of Mind are like having a learning disability in perspective taking. This can occur no matter how smart the adult may be.

- Find the last place developmentally where you have mastered the material and teach yourself the next step until mastered.
- Teach the skill until mastery is achieved, 9/10 successful occurrences over several months.

- Use cognitive modification strategies to increase the meaning and the ability to understand and retain the material, e.g., FEVER – Face the person, Eye contact (which can be achieved by looking at the bridge of the other person’s Nose, if direct eye contact is a sensory overload), Voice pleasant, Expression on a pleasant face, Right posture.²¹
- Join a curriculum-based social skills group if can find one. Social skills need to be directly taught like any other subject and are best taught in a group setting.

Some Tricks Needed to Learn Theory of Mind (The Curriculum)

Curiosity Not Judgment

Learn to use curiosity rather than judgment. There can be a moral policeman in your mind that makes sure that you know what just happened even when you are wrong. Curiosity can be a tool of great kindness and an invitation to have a discussion rather than a fight over being right.

Clean Mirror

Use words to reflect what is happening without judgment including to yourself. Be a clean mirror.

Overcoming Adversity

Identify how big the bump in the road is. Making common mistakes is not a life-threatening event. Make sure that you utilize perspective taking.

Find Another Gear

Reach down and find another gear when you feel out of energy and need to be able to continue. Try to extend your ability to persist a little more each time you need to push further. Having the experience of playing sports is a good example of learning how to have another gear when needed.

Team Player

Utilize sports analogies as a good tool. Learn the importance of working as a team. Make sure that you know how to be a team player as well as a captain.

Feelings vs Thoughts

Learn feelings vs. thoughts. Start with four feelings: mad, sad, glad, and scared. Teach yourself facial expressions that go with each feeling and what facial features would be expressed when having those feelings. A mirror can be helpful.

Activity - The Gingerbread Man

Draw an outline of a gingerbread man. To express how you feel, choose a colored pen or magic marker with each color representing a different feeling. Assign a color to each feeling and color how much of each feeling you have.²² This can give you an understanding of what feelings you

have. Sometimes if there is too much sadness and despair going to a psychiatrist or therapist could be helpful.

The Basket

Teach that taking the basket that someone is offering you is a choice...is the basket filled with good stuff or garbage? Use of this "Hurts You?" story is a good example of how not to take the basket. While sitting in my dentist's office I saw a little five-year-old sucking his thumb. An elderly lady said, "Aren't you too old to be sucking your thumb?" The boy said in a kind way, "Hurts you lady?" This is an example of not taking the basket while having a clear and clean response to a negative basket.

Compartmentalizing

Being able to defer something to deal with later can be used as an old avoidance defense mechanism or a present useful tool. Get rid of the negative way of compartmentalizing but save the useful way to do it by allowing someone to put something aside when they need to deal with it later.

Premeditated Resentments

Learn that expectations are premeditated resentments and judgments. Don't assume!

Repairing Damage

Learn that reparations as taking responsibility for one's actions. You break it, you bought it!" is a wise saying. This works well for learning responsibility. "If you break it, you fix it!" Even if your neurological disorder caused the problem, it is still your responsibility to clean things up.

This teaches responsibility and allows one to regain one's self-respect by cleaning up the mistakes that they have made. Reparation also needs to be thought of when verbal mistakes are made. No matter what, it is not okay to make a mess and expect someone else to clean it up. Apologizing is not sufficient! Doing something for someone needs to follow the apology.

Locus of Control¹⁹

As a person matures, they hopefully learn how to take control and responsibility for their actions, attitudes, and decisions. This is called internalizing your "locus of control." The goal is to take responsibility for one's actions and not blame others. If a person does not understand this and blames others for everything that occurs, that individual is delayed in maturing and developing a positive self-concept.

The ability to take control and be successful is an important confidence builder; success in this arena gives one the sense that they are in charge of their destiny. Without this, it is easy to blame others for all the difficulties one has. Taking responsibility is supposed to be well established by the time a person leaves home and goes out in the world. This is frequently not the case but can be learned later.

Instant Replay ²³

We have all heard sportscasters say “Let’s look at the replay” so what happened can be reviewed. The “Instant Replay” technique is similar in meaning and usage to this sports check to see what happened. It is used to determine what worked, what needs to be learned, or what needs to change in the future. An Instant Replay does not have to be immediate but is most effective closest to the event. Finding people you trust to help give you the Instant Replay can be very helpful as long as they do this in a kind way.

This technique is most successfully used without strong emotion and is informative in tone. An Instant Replay might occur after you make a mistake in your relationship with someone and they are kind enough to help you understand what happened and what to do next time. Together you decide to think of ways to make it up to the person you hurt.

An Instant Replay can also be used to immediately address and correct social blunders. It can be used to follow up on a cooperative problem-solving intervention. As an example, if the therapist has been working with someone to develop a P.L.A.N. to handle a particular situation with someone in their life, the person may identify the problem (P), lay out the options (L), act on one (A), now evaluate (N), and then go back to the therapist at the next session to review how the PLAN worked out. ¹⁶

Dining out can be a golden opportunity to do an Instant Replay. If you see a person in the restaurant do something wrong, you can observe and guess the predicted outcome of the behavior and see what happens. Then see how you might have handled it in a better way if the outcome was not good.

Instant Replay is not confined to reviewing negative behaviors or outcomes. Adults can use it effectively to positively reinforce spontaneous positive behaviors. You can observe as if you are a scientist and learn from others’ examples of their behavior.

Graceful Exit

Practice storm (rage) drills to promote “graceful exits.” You need to give yourself permission to exit a conversation at any time (even if someone is in mid-sentence). Then go to your room to use an angry pillow or time yourself out.

When you have an “angry pillow,” a sturdy pillow that you can beat with your fists, a tennis racket, or plastic baseball bat to calm your anger. Picture the face of the person you are angry at and beat the pillow to vent your anger, but you can never put your own face on the pillow. Take the bat or racket and hold it over your head while bending your knees and hit the pillow ten times. Sometimes after hitting the pillow, you may cry because hurt is frequently masked by anger. Crying is not a problem.

Coke Machine

The Coke Machine is a great analogy when a person is trying to get something from someone and when they cannot get it, they take it personally. When you put your money in the coke machine you expect a coke to come out. You may get mad when it does not come out and kick the coke machine. You may think it is your fault, that you are doing something wrong and that is

why the machine does not give you a coke. You may think the coke machine does not like you. What does not occur to you is that the machine is either out of coke or is broken.

The Pot

You may think the thought inside your brain is what is going to comfort you when something goes wrong. Negative thoughts and beliefs are like landing on barbed wire. Positive thoughts and beliefs are like landing on pillows. Humans seem to have an automatic opener to make sure negative thoughts are taken into the brain. Many times, you must consciously train yourself to take in positive thoughts and beliefs. Do not forget to open your lid when something positive is said, *let it in* and say, "Thank you." Learn and be aware of the Haim Ginott quote, "Praise consists of two parts: What we say to the child and what he in turn says to himself."

No, No, No Syndrome

Sometimes an anxious or depressed person's automatic response is NO. Make sure that is the response you really want to give.

Conversational Starters

It is important to teach several topics that are good when nervous about starting a social conversation (e.g., sports events, movies, hobbies, a job).

The NO! NO! List

Is a list of topics that are "NOT" good to bring up in a social setting, e.g., religion and politics.

The Moral Policeman

The Moral Policeman makes friends with the Vengeful Angel, (a match made in Hell!). Learn about the Moral Policeman and the Vengeful Angel that make Theory of Mind deficits have a more negative outcome in social relationships.

The Moral Policeman can live in the brain of the person with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD). It can make the person negatively judge themselves and negatively judge others when they make a mistake, no matter how small or how large.

Sometimes if someone has a really bad case of the Moral Policeman, they may also have a Vengeful Angel that encourages them to tell the person who made the mistake or tell an authority figure who could seek a consequence for the perpetrator. This is a very destructive behavior in a workplace, social setting, or primary relationship.

Both the Moral Policeman and the Vengeful Angel can be changed by recognizing this being a symptom of OCD and by using a specific cognitive behavioral strategy (Exposure Response Prevention Therapy) to change and break this habit.

The Eye-Contact Trick

When looking into someone's eyes is too overwhelming from a sensory or anxiety point of view, look at the person's nose between their eyes and not directly into the person's eye. This allows you to appear that you are respecting them while looking at them.

Personal Space

Use an arm's length as a measure for how close to get to people during a social interaction. This is as close as you should be to someone without entering their personal space.

“Oops” vs. “Blame” Strategy

There is no need to blame yourself or others when something negative happens. It does not help anyone to be told it is their fault. Learn that mistakes are an opportunity to learn something and correct any negative impact the “oops” caused.

Truth vs. Kindness

Aristotle vs the Sophists...Truth vs. Kindness. In ancient Greece there were two political parties at one time, the Aristotelians, and the Sophists. The Aristotelian's believed truth was the highest good. The Sophist's believed kindness was the highest good.

The Sophists lost and western civilization has held truth as the higher good. Nowhere does this address the importance of kindness. Luckily, most people found it too unkind to always tell the truth when it was going to hurt someone, and they invented the kinder “white lies” to modify this. For example, if Mary is asking at church if someone likes her new dress, that person can be kind rather than tell the truth if they do not like the dress by saying, “What a dress, Mary!”

Boundaries

Boundaries are the safe “fences that make good neighbors ⁴.” Do I know where my boundaries are? Is this interaction coming on to my land? Where does my land end and theirs begin? Is it an arm's length away from me or is it up at my throat? Is my personal space being respected? Are my personal values being respected? Am I treated well? Is my opinion being honored?

The Dating Test

The Dating Test is for people who may not be able to judge if this is a good relationship. It goes like this:

1. Do I feel better about myself after being with this person?
2. Would I be okay if my child were to marry someone just like this person with no changes?
3. Does this person make my life feel happier, healthier, and more successful?
4. Do my healthy family members and close friends think this is a good relationship for me?
5. Is this person my best friend?

6. Are my family or friends happy about how I am treated by this person?

Selling Yourself

Use the idea that if you think of social interactions as selling a product what would be your commercial about yourself? Make sure it is something that someone would want to buy.

Being Present

Anxiety disorders and OCD like to worry about the future and regret the past. Mood disorders like to live in the past. Living in the present is the healthy way to keep automatic negative thoughts out of your brain. Only think about what you can do at the present and only think about other things when you can do something about it or process it in a healthy way.

The Brightest Spirits

“The brightest spirits live in the densest pots,” *Hindu Proverb*. Sometimes people with ToM deficits have trouble being open to new information. This concept is very helpful when talking to someone who is either living with or is a “clueless child.”

Supportive Statements ¹⁷

We use this to help learn how to stay positive when people are setting limits. This also helps us learn how to use constructive sentences when having hard conversations with other people such as friends and family.

1. *Acknowledge the Emotion*

Start with simple emotions, e.g., mad, sad, glad, and scared.

Example: “I know you are mad, and that is okay.”

2. *Reflect the Reality of the Situation*

This is the statement of the limit or the rule that triggered the emotion. You can think of this as the part that you will not want to hear but need to understand.

Example: “When we talked about our budget, we agreed we could not afford the vacation that you wanted.”

3. *Statement of Confidence*

This is the part that bolsters your confidence because you are being reminded that someone has faith in your abilities. This has the benefit of always being true.

Example: “I know that you are disappointed, but I also know you will be able to get over this.”

It is important to have people in your life that can be there to encourage you.

Discomfort as a Learning Opportunity

When you experience pain and discomfort, consider this an opportunity for you to learn something and create a positive change. It is common that when something is hard or uncomfortable the experience is avoided. When we look back, the best learning experiences in our life frequently began as the most uncomfortable ones.

Facing a deficit such as a lack of Theory of Mind can be such an experience. It is one that a therapist can help a person go through to get the skills they need. It is worth the trouble to learn how not to have ToM deficits interfere with the importance of positive human relationships such as having a mate, friends, and a job.

Screen for Associated Disorders

Executive Dysfunction	Anxiety Disorders
Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder	Tic Disorders
Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder	Mood Disorders
Autism Spectrum Disorder	Sensory-Visual-Perceptual Deficits
Nonverbal Learning Disability	Language Disorders
Social Communication Disorder (pragmatics)	

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