

# Why Teach Social Thinking?

Questioning Our Assumptions About  
What It Means to Learn Social Skills  
By Michelle Garcia Winner

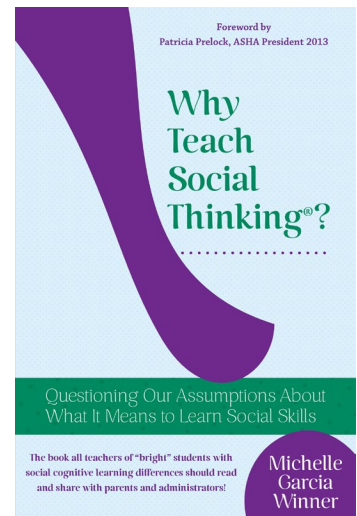
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## Study Guide

*Why Teach Social Thinking?* attempts to raise awareness of the many complex and interrelated issues that are at the heart of teaching today’s students social emotional information. Author Michelle Garcia Winner presents a provocative discussion about what it really means to teach social skills to students who struggle to understand our complex and highly context-driven social world, whether or not they have a disability label or an IEP.

Through 12 questions that challenge us to think more deeply about how we view social intelligence, she illuminates the difference between teaching social *skills* (e.g., behaviors) and teaching social competencies—a *pathway of thinking about self and others as a means to problem solve whatever social situation they may experience*. Topics range from the need for a common definition for “social skills” to understanding different “levels of the social mind”, from evidence-based practices and how they apply to teaching social awareness and social skills, to best practice guidelines for teaching her Social Thinking® Methodology.

These Study Guide questions can be used by individuals, or study groups, to crack open their thinking and assumptions about what our students know about the social world. The book and study guide questions are targeted to educators, therapists, clinicians, school administrators, family members, state and federal policy makers, and health-care professionals. Individuals who work with or design educational and/or support programs for individuals of all ages, as well as academic professionals who prepare educators and clinicians to work with students with social learning differences, will find these probing questions especially useful in appreciating the complex process involved in assessing students’ social learning needs and designing relevant, and effective, programs to help students in any setting.

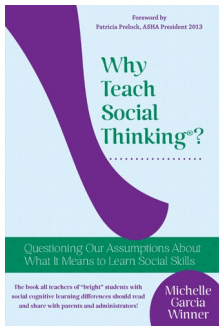
Discussion concepts apply to all people, children through adults, who struggle with social learning, whether or not they have a diagnosed disorder such as ASD, NVLD, Social Communication (Pragmatics) Disorder, ADHD, or other related disorders.

## Study Guide Contents

- Self-Assessment Form to be completed before reading the book, by an individual, or as a group discussion, to explore existing knowledge, thoughts, and assumptions related to social emotional learning, social skills, and social awareness.
- Study Guide Questions for each chapter.
- Post study Self-Assessment Form to be completed after reading/discussing the entire book.

## Suggestions for Using the Book and Study Guide Questions

- *School educators* interested in promoting the concepts, vocabulary, and materials that make up the Social Thinking® Methodology can use this book and the study questions to reinforce the idea that social learning helps everyone; it's not just reserved for students with social learning differences. The questions can be used to spearhead discussions among teachers and administrators about the importance of including social emotional learning instruction within the teaching day and illuminate the roadblocks in doing so.
- *Parents* of children with social learning needs can use many of the questions and descriptive text to educate themselves about the broader concepts involved in the social learning process, and in making a case for Social Thinking® and/or other social teaching programs to be incorporated into a child's IEP.
- At the *college/university* level, the 12 questions in the book and the Study Guide can be a springboard for graduate and post-graduate level classroom discussions related to social learning, social intelligence, and/or social emotional skills program design and instruction.
- *Policy makers/program planners* can use the 12 questions and Study Guide for round-table discussions about best practice strategies for teaching social emotional curriculum within an education and/or support setting.



# Why Teach Social Thinking?

## Getting Started: Self Assessment Form

People have many different ideas about what it means to “be social” and the role social intelligence plays in later success in life. The following questions probe your own (or a group’s) existing knowledge and ideas related to social emotional learning and social skills.

**How do you define “social skills”?**

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**What factors determine whether an individual exhibits “good social skills” vs. “bad social skills”?**

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**Is there currently a common definition of “social skills” within Federal education legislation (IDEA, NCLB/ESSA, etc.)?**  Yes  No

**List three social skills that you think are weak and/or lacking in today’s students entering kindergarten?**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

**True or false: Social expectations change with age?**  True  False

**Using the rating scale that follows, to what extent do you believe that:**

- \_\_\_\_\_ social emotional skills can be effectively taught using behavior-based methods
- \_\_\_\_\_ academic intelligence is more important than social intelligence in a student’s later success in life
- \_\_\_\_\_ all children can learn good social emotional skills by watching others who exhibit these skills
- \_\_\_\_\_ all children arrive to school with the same innate social abilities
- \_\_\_\_\_ children know what they’re doing when they exhibit inappropriate social behaviors

### **Rating Scale:**

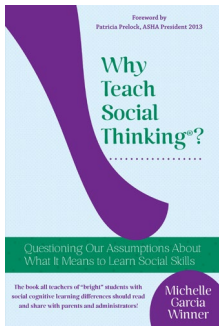
**5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Mildly agree; 3 = No opinion;  
2 = Mildly disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree**

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- \_\_\_\_\_ teachers should not be responsible for teaching social emotional skills to students beyond the preschool level
- \_\_\_\_\_ social scripting is an effective strategy for teaching social skills
- \_\_\_\_\_ social intelligence is directly linked to IQ
- \_\_\_\_\_ social emotional skills are mainly used outside the classroom/academic instruction, such as in making friends, playing with others, etc.
- \_\_\_\_\_ children with the same diagnosis will benefit equally from the same social learning support plan
- \_\_\_\_\_ social emotional skills can be taught to mastery
- \_\_\_\_\_ students can still get a “good education” without teachers attending to their social learning needs
- \_\_\_\_\_ social behavior is culturally driven

***Rating Scale:***

**5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Mildly agree; 3 = No opinion;  
2 = Mildly disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree**



# Why Teach Social Thinking?

## Post Study: Self Assessment Form

Provide responses below that reflect your own (or the group's) understanding, changed perceptions, and/or new ideas related to teaching the Social Thinking® Methodology and social emotional learning as a result of reading this book. Discuss or reflect on the ways your ideas and opinions have/have not changed and why.

**Has your definition of “social skills” changed? If so, how?**

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**Prior to reading this book, what beliefs or assumptions did you hold about how social learning occurs? Did anything in this book change those assumptions? How?**

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**Using the rating scale that follows, to what extent do you now believe that:**

- \_\_\_\_\_ social emotional skills can be effectively taught using behavior-based methods
- \_\_\_\_\_ academic intelligence is more important than social intelligence in a student's later success in life
- \_\_\_\_\_ all children can learn good social emotional skills by watching others who exhibit these skills
- \_\_\_\_\_ all children arrive to school with the same innate social abilities
- \_\_\_\_\_ children know what they're doing when they exhibit inappropriate social behaviors
- \_\_\_\_\_ teachers should not be responsible for teaching social emotional skills to students beyond the preschool level
- \_\_\_\_\_ social scripting is an effective strategy for teaching social skills
- \_\_\_\_\_ social intelligence is directly linked to IQ
- \_\_\_\_\_ social emotional skills are mainly used outside direct classroom instruction, such as in making friends, playing with others, etc.
- \_\_\_\_\_ children with the same diagnosis will benefit equally from the same social learning support plan
- \_\_\_\_\_ social emotional skills can be taught to mastery
- \_\_\_\_\_ a student can still get a “good education” without teachers attending to his/her social learning needs
- \_\_\_\_\_ social behavior is culturally driven

***Rating Scale:***

**5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Mildly agree; 3 = No opinion;  
2 = Mildly disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree**

**To what extent in your own thinking, or that of your school/district, did you, or do you still believe that a behavior-based method of instruction is “more important/valuable” than one based on social cognitive concepts? Has your opinion changed as a result of reading this book? If so, how?**

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**Do you agree or disagree with the author’s notion that teaching social skills without teaching the thinking process that contributes to social understanding is insufficient in meeting our students’ needs?**

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**To what extent have you assumed that your students’ inappropriate social behaviors are willful or intentional? Has that opinion changed as a result of reading this book? If so, how and why?**

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**How important is it to model the social cognitive processes you hope to teach your student(s)? Why?**

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**The author suggests that by becoming more cognitively aware of our social processing and the social strategies we choose in situations, we are better able to teach social emotional concepts. To what extent do you agree/disagree with this idea?**

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**What factors (budgetary, time, teaching emphasis) affect your ability as an educator to place more emphasis on teaching Social Thinking® to your students?**

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**Describe two key ways in which your own perceptions toward teaching social emotional skills have changed as a result of reading this book. How will that affect your teaching approach?**

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**If you passed this book along to another educator, what main point(s) would you be sure to mention in describing the book?**

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## Introduction to Social Thinking and Social Skills

1. How does familiarizing ourselves with the literature related to cultural anthropology, sociology and linguistics help educators and counselors develop support plans for students with social learning needs?
2. When encouraging a student to use better social skills, explain why this author thinks it is important to teach social learning/thinking as a mandatory part of this process.
3. Identify a social skill that might be taught to encourage students to greet another person.
  - a. Prior to answering the following sub-questions, observe people in your community greeting each other.
    - i. Explain at least three different types of behaviors you observed that were interpreted to be greetings.
    - ii. Explain why people do not use one uniform type of greeting.
    - iii. Consider and explain what would be meant by a person “over-greeting” another person.
    - iv. Explain why the answers to the above questions can shape how you develop a support plan.
  - b. Describe how you would concretely teach a student to perform this skill.
  - c. Explain how the use of that social skill affects the thinking of others who observe the greeting.
  - d. Explain the expected social mindset of the person who is producing the social skill, which helps to motivate that person to use the skill.
  - e. Use information from your answers to a, b and c to create a plan for teaching a student how to greet another person.
  - f. Describe how this support plan may be different from those developed simply to teach the social skill of producing a response that is interpreted by others to be a “greeting.”
4. When you teach a social skill, to what extent do you include a discussion of why this skill is important and how it may generalize outside the classroom setting? Can you think of ways to incorporate this type of teaching more actively into your overall curriculum?

## What Are Social Skills?

1. One approach to teaching social skills, commonly used with persons with social learning differences, is the “social skills script.” When “scripting” the social skills teacher will teach a social skill such as greetings and then have students follow the exact same script each time they see a person they are told to greet, at times greeting the same person multiple times in a day. Describe why this approach can create new social dilemmas for our students when faced with using the same script in different contexts.
2. How does the authors’ statement that, “Social expectations evolve in nuance and sophistication with age” affect the development of support plans to encourage students to use better social skills?
3. When sitting in an IEP meeting, the special education teacher was not sure how to respond to her principal’s statement that the student should only need two years of social skills goals and related lessons and that any social skills teachings should only be done during social time, which he defined as “recess time.” Assume the voice of the special education teacher and explain to those in attendance at the IEP meeting why the principal’s logic is not supported by the evidence and state it in a manner which does not embarrass the principal.
4. List three assumptions you hold about innate social processing and social learning. How do those assumptions affect the way you relate to and teach your students?
5. Create a list of 5–10 examples of how you define “good social skills”? Review your list: how many examples are behavior based and how many reflect the thinking skills that precede the behavior? What does that tell you about your approach to teaching social skills?



## What Are the Origins of Social Development? Is There an Age When Our Social Development Stops?

1. Around one year of age children follow others' eyes to notice what they are looking at and they also point to show others what they are interested in. This author thinks parents should throw a party to celebrate this developmental accomplishment.
  - a. What is the name of this developmental accomplishment?
  - b. How does this basic developmental milestone lend itself to language development in that same child?
2. This author talks about the development of social, emotional and behavior regulation skills as necessary pre-cursors to the child being able to develop cooperative play skills.
  - a. How are social, emotional and behavior regulation skills related to cooperative play?
  - b. If a child has not learned to play cooperatively by age five, do you think we can teach the child to cooperate by writing a goal that states the child will learn to cooperate 80% of the time by the end of the year? Yes or No?
    - i. Support your answer with an overview of a teaching plan you might develop.
3. Give an example of your own use of narrative language when you were recently talking to someone.
  - a. What type of thinking did your mind engage in to decide what information to share and what information not to share with the person you were talking to?
  - b. Describe what you considered about the other person's knowledge to decide what to say/not say.
  - c. What if you told the person every possible detail you could picture in your mind as you told the story; how would that affect the communicative process?
  - d. Why is narrative language considered a critical part of social skills?
4. Do you teach current/up-to-date social/emotional/language skills that will help students blend in with their peers? For instance, does your social pragmatics program address everyday peer slang, common peer body language, etc.? If not, why?
5. Discuss at least three ways in which your school's social skills/social emotional programs can be made more flexible to adapt to changing social conventions within society, peer groups, etc.

## In What Areas of Social Thinking Do Students with Social Cognitive Differences Struggle? The ILAUGH Model Remodeled

1. Recall a time you had to give a presentation in front of an audience or class. Describe how each of these processes assisted you in the development and presentation of that talk.
  - a. Central coherence theory
  - b. Joint attention/Theory of mind
  - c. Executive functioning
  - d. Emotional process and emotional regulation
  - e. Sensory integration
2. Why don't most teachers directly teach the information conveyed through the ILAUGH Model of Social Cognition?
3. Many students who score extremely well on academic testing and IQ tests still struggle to demonstrate competencies outlined in the ILAUGH Model. Why?
4. The process of "listening to the teacher" while seated with students in the classroom requires more than simply hearing the words. Describe how each of these concepts helps a child to "listen":
  - a. Listening with Eyes and Brain
  - b. Abstracting and Inferencing
  - c. Understanding Perspective
  - d. Gestalt Processing
5. Discuss the commonly held idea that IQ and social processing abilities go hand in hand. As a result of reading this chapter has your perception changed?
6. Discuss how weak or strong perspective taking skills affect academic learning. Discuss how they affect test scores.

## What Impact Do Weaknesses in Social Conceptual Information Have on Learning the Common Core State Standards?

1. Describe how reading comprehension relates to social learning.
2. Describe how written expression relates to social learning.
3. Describe how working in a science lab relates to social learning.
4. An administrator in a school district has been told that IEP goals are to be written based on the Common Core State Educational Standards. She has interpreted that to mean that she is to write the Common Core Standards which the child does not appear to be on track to meet as the IEP goal itself.
  - a. Explain why her reasoning is faulty.
  - b. Explain how to encourage the IEP team to write goals that are more basic than the expectations implied in the Common Core State Standards.
5. To what extent do you believe that our educational curriculum is predicated on the idea that all children arrive at school with fully functional social brains?
6. To what extent in your own thinking, or that of your school/district, is the assumption made that students with ASD, Social Communication (Pragmatics) Disorder, or other disorders involving social processing can learn better social skills by 1) being in the presence of and watching others with good social skills, and/or 2) through social skills modeling? How has this assumption helped or hindered your community's understanding of social skills program development for students who struggle with social learning?

## When Do We Use Social Thinking and Related Social Skills? How Do We Approach Teaching These Skills?

1. What does the author mean when she suggests that observing others is the “glue that ties together actions and environment”?
2. Why should classroom behavior regulation problems not necessarily be thought of by educators as simply problem behaviors?
3. How is a behaviorally-based intervention which rewards the student for doing an appropriate behavior different from a Social Thinking® intervention?
4. Discuss how social emotional thinking is involved in learning subjects such as math or chemistry, and how it affects a student’s ability to engage in extracurricular activities such as individual/team sports, choir, drama, etc.
5. Discuss the differences between “social skills performance” and “social competence.” Why is teaching social competence more effective overall in helping our students?
6. As a whole, do you/does your school advocate a behavioral approach or a social cognitive approach to teaching social skills? Discuss the pros and cons of each.
7. Select a social skill you teach. Describe three ways in which a social cognitive approach could be integrated into a behavior-based program for teaching this skill.

## How Can Cognitive Behavior Therapy Address Teaching Social Thinking and Related Social Skills?

1. Think of a situation in your own life where you struggled to make yourself do something you did not want to do, but in the end you were able to get yourself to do the dreaded behavior. Explain:
  - a. How your cognitive activity (thinking) affected your behavior.
  - b. How your cognitive activity (thinking) was monitored and altered.
  - c. How your desired behavior change was affected through cognitive change (changing your thoughts).
2. Think of a situation in your own life where you have not succeeded in altering your behavior (e.g., you may drive too fast or not exercise enough, etc.). Describe how your current mindset discourages you from changing your behavior.
  - a. How is your cognitive activity maintaining the current behavior, even if it is a behavior you wish you did not have?
  - b. How can you try and change the way you think about the behavior to motivate yourself to change it?
3. Does your classroom/school curriculum include cognitive behavior teaching strategies? If not, should it? Discuss possible perceived roadblocks that exist in incorporating CBT into your program.

## Do All Those with ASD/SCD Benefit from the Same Teachings? The Social Thinking<sup>®</sup>-Social Communication Characteristics Summary (ST-SCCS)

1. Describe why this author thinks that diagnostic labels do not provide adequate information for creating support plans.
2. Why do the authors of the ST-SCCS discourage discussion of a prognosis before third grade? Once a prognosis is given from third grade on, how can this help with planning?
3. Why do the authors of the ST-SCP feel there is a need to categorize students' social learning abilities? How do these categories assist in teaching and support planning?
4. Why are students we perceive as being more "awkward and odd" more apt to be mentored by their neurotypical peers than our students who have nuanced social differences?
5. How do you think a person's natural "social radar abilities" relate directly to his or her ability to abstract and infer information?
6. Describe possible perceived challenges that could prevent a school from assessing and grouping children according to the ST-SCCS when designing teaching and support programs.

## Who Is Responsible for Creating and Teaching Social Thinking and Related Social Skills? Is the Same Set of Teaching Techniques Relevant for All Persons with ASD and Related Social Learning Differences?

1. Why should people who provide social cognitive teaching not be limited to one field of practice?
2. Why is it important for any persons involved with teaching social emotional learning to acquire knowledge about the social developmental learning process?
3. Why is it important for any person involved in teaching social emotional learning to acquire knowledge of basic principles related to behaviorism?
4. How is multidisciplinary teaching different from interdisciplinary teaching? Why does this author recommend interdisciplinary teaching for staff involved with teaching social emotional thinking?
5. The author believes all professionals can assume some responsibility for learning and teaching social processing and related social skills in any situation. State your opinion about this.
6. What perceptual, educational, or financial conditions exist that may preclude a school from adopting this viewpoint and putting this idea into practice?

## What Is a Framework for Teaching Social Thinking and Related Social Skills?

1. How do the Four Steps of Communication and the 5 Steps of Being with Others guide teachers in support planning? How do they guide students in learning concepts involved in social engagement?
2. How does Social Thinking® Methodology Vocabulary help teachers guide students differently than using more common vocabulary such as “cooperate”, “pay attention” and “show respect”?
3. How does use of the terms “expected behaviors” and “unexpected behaviors”:
  - a. Differ from teaching students to be “appropriate” rather than “inappropriate”?
  - b. Encourage students to observe the social situation?
  - c. Encourage students to seek the hidden rules/expectations?
4. The Four Steps of Communication was developed because it was noticed teachers spent the bulk of their time teaching social language rather than social communication. In the Four Steps of Communication, language between conversational partners occurs only at the last step. Compare/contrast this way of teaching social communication to teaching methods that you/your school currently uses.



## What Are Some Guidelines for Teaching Social Thinking and Related Skills to Groups of Students? Best-Practice Teaching Guidelines for Social Thinking

1. Why is it considered a “best practice” to evaluate a student’s social learning level on the ST- SCCS prior to selecting other students who will be part of the group?
2. How can teaching neurotypical students the Social Thinking® Methodology Vocabulary help them be stronger social mentors?
3. Why is it important for a student to be accountable for his or her social learning despite having been diagnosed as having a social learning need? Should the diagnosis allow the student to be excused from our social expectations?
4. Why does this author describe friendship as requiring “work” on the part of each person in the friendship?
5. The author lists 14 “best practice” guidelines to use when teaching students. Are there any you disagree with? Are there any others you would add?

## How Does Social Teaching Fit Into What We Typically Call “Education”?

1. Why does this author state “it is our students’ ability to adapt to a variety of social contexts that best prepares them for independence and adulthood and increases their chances for success in our society at large?”
2. Why does this author feel there is a need for an educational team to define what is meant by the term “education” prior to their development of the IEP or support plan?
3. A teacher insisted that a student was receiving a good education because the student passed all the tests given by the teacher with a B or above, even though she allowed the student to work independently since he seemed to cause problems when he worked with his peers in a group. Was he getting a “good education”?
4. Debate this statement: High test scores indicate greater success in adult life.
5. Explore a mission statement from a public school. Discuss the disparity between what the mission statement implies it is teaching students and what the classroom teachers are told they should teach students. Discuss public policy and the focus on test taking as the hallmark of success rather than the school’s mission statement.

## What Are Evidence-Based Practices? How Do They Apply to Teaching Social Thinking and Related Social Skills?

1. Why is the research on teaching social skills, to date, somewhat inconclusive?
2. How does today's media interfere with the public's interpretation of research?
3. Why is it difficult to generate Scientifically Based Research to study the efficacy of support plans that encourage social emotional learning and social skills development?
4. Why, in this author's opinion, is it difficult to do research on social skills programs if we do not know the student's social functioning level?
5. How do you/does your school define "evidence based practices"?
6. What criteria do you use/does your school use when assessing program efficacy? As a result of reading this chapter, have you expanded your framework to include anything different?
7. Given that social learning is subjective, fluid and changes from one context to the next, discuss how feasible it is to gather research evidence on social skills performance.
8. How do you resolve the mandate for using evidence-based methods in a classroom with the difficulty in generating research on social skills and social learning, which because of its complex nature and varied conditions, does not lend itself to be studied through conventional research methods?
9. To what extent does your school take into consideration the values, beliefs or ideas of your students and their immediate family when formulating support goals? List three ways in which you could implement this more in your everyday operations.