

Social communication skills in the classroom

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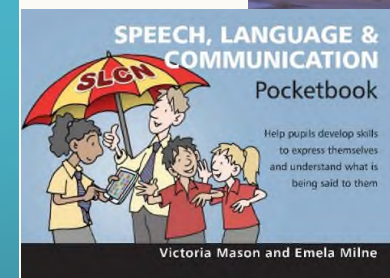
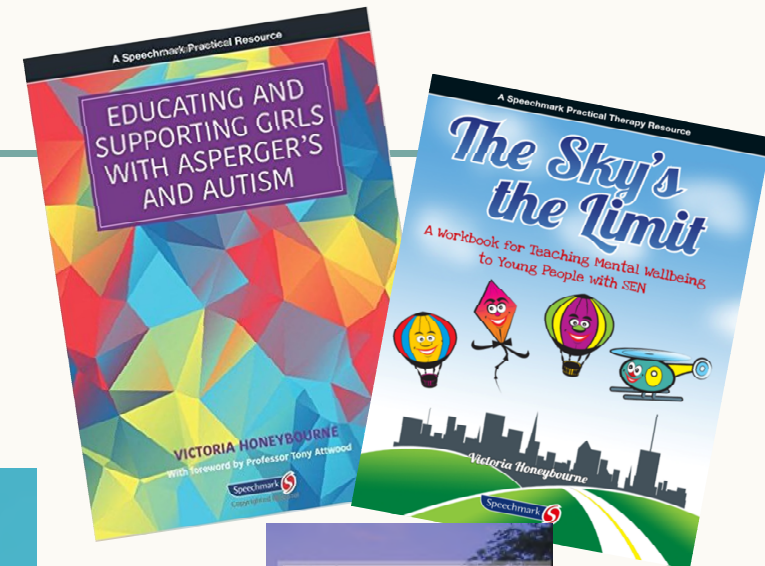
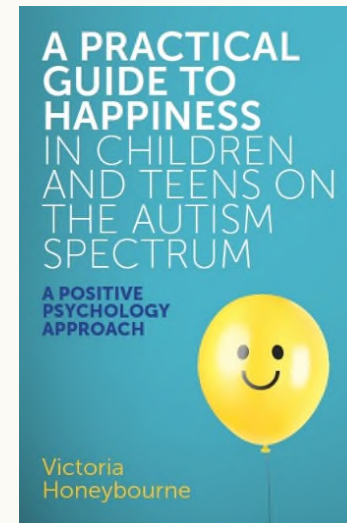


Aims of this workshop

- ❖ To understand what is meant by social communication skills.
- ❖ To identify some difficulties and differences in social communication skills for children and young people on the autism spectrum.
- ❖ To explore what can be done in the classroom and school setting to support children and young people on the autism spectrum with their social communication skills

About me

- ❖ Professional background
- ❖ Personal experiences –
Asperger's diagnosis
- ❖ Books





What do we mean by social communication skills?

- Social communication is complex and we are continually learning these skills through childhood, adolescence and into adulthood.
- Difficulties can occur for many different reasons.
- Individuals on the autism spectrum can have difficulty in several areas of social communication. Indeed, this difference in connecting socially is the essence of autism ('autism' comes from the Greek words 'autos' meaning 'self').

Social Communication – What is it?

facial
expression

posture

movement

‘body language’

touch

eye contact

gestures

proximity /
personal
space



Social Communication – What is it?

tone of voice

pace

how we use our
voice

intonation

stress

volume



Social Communication – What is it?

turn-taking

relevance

asking and
answering
questions



conversational
skills

changing and
maintaining
topics

Giving enough
information but
not too much

beginning and
ending
conversations

Social Communication – What is it?

politeness /
manners

cultural
awareness

following
the
'unwritten
rules'

'social skills'

level of
formality



appropriateness

adapting to the
context and
audience

Social Communication – What is it?

Shared interests / values
/ experiences

Conversational
and social skills

Making
friends

‘people skills’

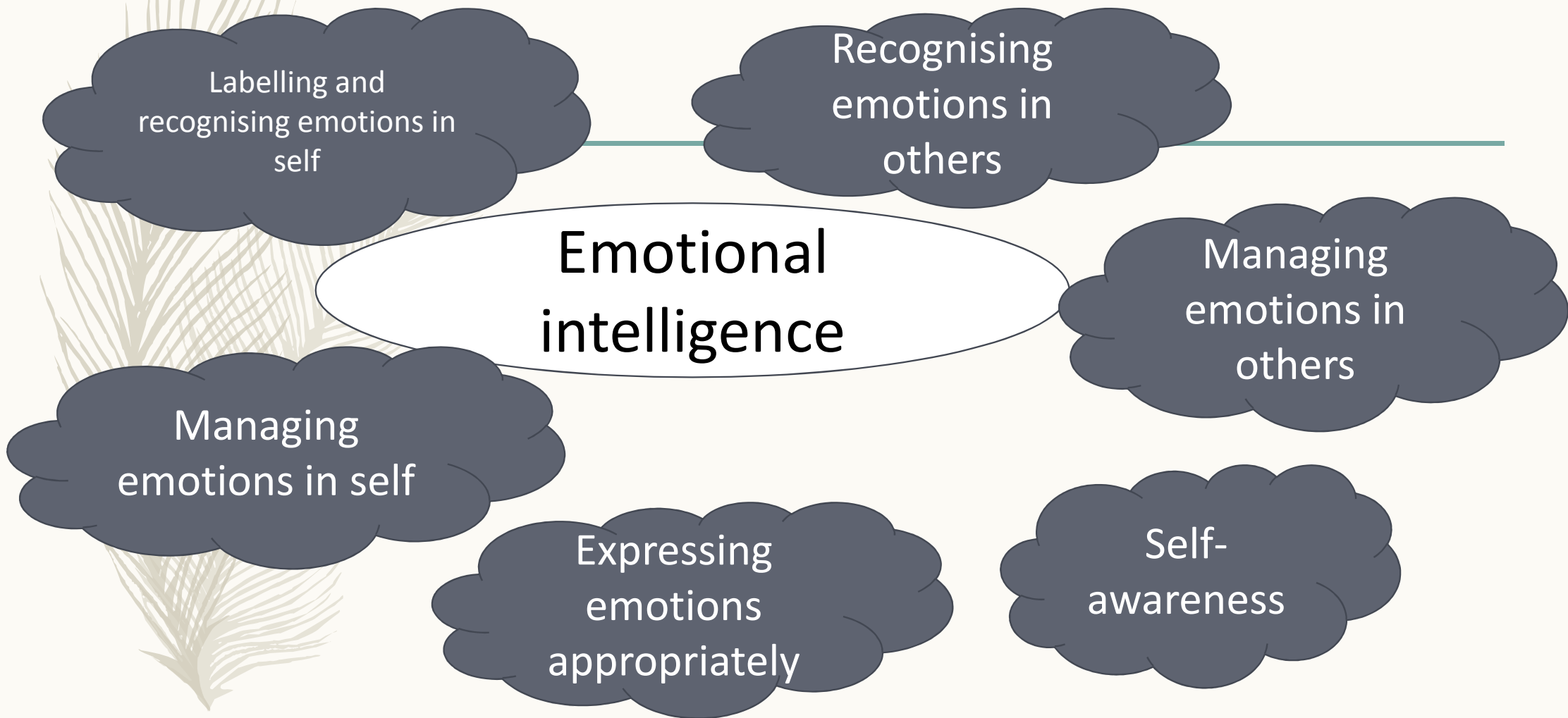
assertiveness

Maintaining
friendships

Sorting difficulties
/ negotiating



Social Communication – What is it?





Possible differences for individuals on the autism spectrum

- Eye contact
- Other non-verbal communication (hand flapping, gesture, facial expression, body language etc.)
- Sensory input may increase anxiety or be overwhelming (lighting, noise, smells, too many people)
- Can be difficult to eliminate background noise
- Understanding and using tone of voice, intonation, stress, pace
- Using and understanding language literally



Possible differences for individuals on the autism spectrum

- Honesty / directness (may appear abrupt or rude)
- Dynamics of group conversation (turn taking, interrupting etc)
- Relevance (e.g. speaking at length on a special interest)
- Alexithymia (recognising and understanding their own feelings)
- Theory of mind (seeing things from others' perspectives)
- Not connecting on a social level / not seeing the point
- Lack of confidence



What's important when considering teaching social communication?

- Aim is not to make individuals 'less autistic'
- Do not assume that good social communication skills means there is no autism, and do not assume poor skills means an individual is autistic
- Help individuals to understand what is expected and how people interact to reduce anxiety and increase their confidence to communicate with a wider range of people
- Help them to understand and accept their feelings, emotions and interpretations of situations as equally valid
- All will need something different; do not make assumptions or generalisations



Adult communication strategies

- Adults can make changes to their own communication and to the environment to support children and young people on the autism spectrum with their social communication
- Many of these strategies will help all pupils, not only those who are on the autism spectrum



Model what you want to see (e.g. don't use a loud voice in a quiet area)



Use a calm and neutral
tone of voice



Don't expect eye contact if
it is uncomfortable (ask
pupils to face the direction
of who they are listening
to instead)



Allow additional
processing time and don't
increase pressure to
respond



Explain the expectations
(and the unwritten ones!)



Reduce sensory
distractions in the
environment when
possible



Try not to talk too much
and try to use fewer
words. You don't always
have to fill silence with
words!



Sometimes talking 1:1 can
be easier than in a larger
group.



Use active listening
techniques (e.g. avoid
leading questions)



Try not to mislabel feelings



Accept all feelings and
thoughts as equally valid



Structured socialising can
be easier than
unstructured socialising



Provide quiet spaces, keep
them quiet, make it
normal to use these.



Don't always force
communication – some
individuals will need time
away from people.



Allow students to work
with supportive peers



Have clear and consistent
rules and routines. Rules
need to make sense!



It is hard to unteach a rule
– make it clear from the
beginning.



Use a 'time to talk' chart for children so they can see that they can come back to a special interest.



Avoid imposing
neurotypical values and
views of happiness.



Direct teaching and learning

- Other students can benefit from being taught some skills explicitly
- Again, some of these strategies will help all pupils, not only those who are on the autism spectrum

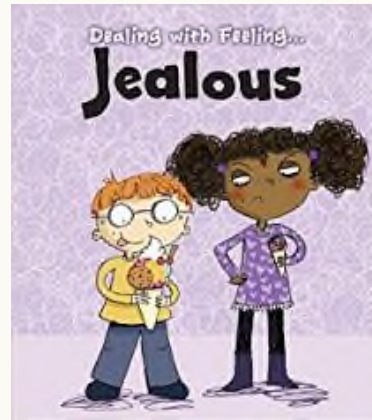
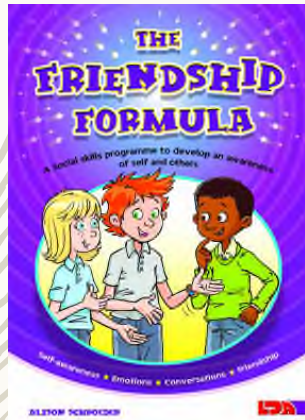


Group work

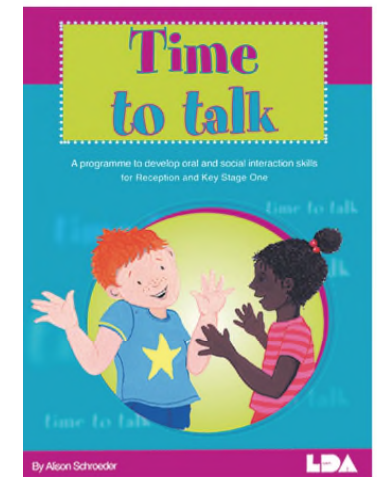
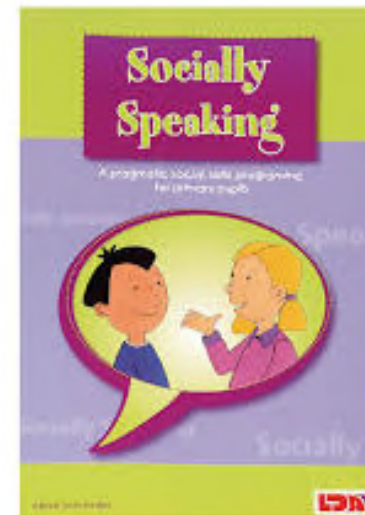
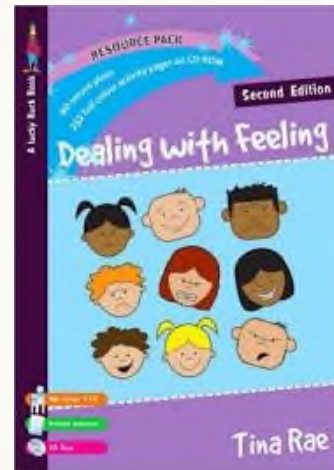
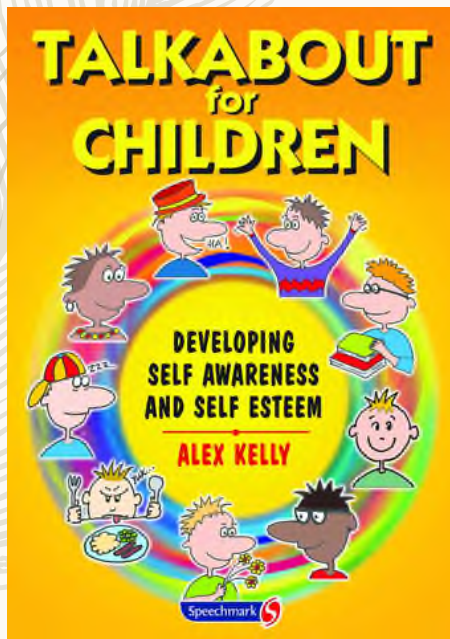
Clear expectations for group work.

A group agreement.

Reinforce regularly to all.



Social Communication Groups.



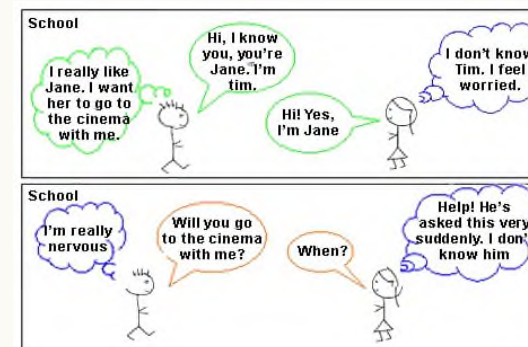


'Social Thinking'



Social Stories

Comic Strip Conversations





Use everyday opportunities

MFL

Drama

English

Role play

Video

Situations that occur in real life



Try other ways

Reading
Journaling
Lego Therapy
Arts, crafts and music therapies



Key points

- Adults can change their communication and the environment which can really help
- Some things can be taught and learned
- There are many opportunities in everyday classroom contexts
- As always, acceptance is key. See things as differences rather than ‘wrong’.

My books

A practical guide to happiness in children and teens on the autism spectrum: a positive psychology approach (JKP, 2018) 10% DISCOUNT CODE (Y17) – ORDER JKP.COM

Teach your digital native to read and write: a guide for parents (2017)

Educating and supporting girls with Asperger's and Autism (Speechmark, 2016)

Your Autism Journey: A self-exploration workbook for young women on the autism spectrum (2016)

The Sky's The Limit: A workbook for teaching mental wellbeing to young people with SEN (Speechmark, 2015)

The Speech, Language and Communication Pocketbook (Teachers' Pocketbooks, 2014)

