



# Language and Theory of Mind: You Can't Think of One Without the Other

Students with language impairment are frequently on the fringe of social interaction because they may be unable to take the perspective of another person. In other words, they may have a social-cognitive disorder or Theory of Mind (ToM) difficulty. ToM is the ability to attribute mental states (beliefs, desires, emotions, and intentions) to self and others in order to predict behavior (Lantz, 2002; Berndsen, 2005). The term "perspective taking" (PT) is another way to describe Theory of Mind.

Current research shows the interdependence of language and ToM:

- Children with language impairments may have trouble taking the perspective of others since language is extricably linked to ToM. Language reflects the "activity in the mind." Research is showing that language competence can predict ToM ability (Berndsen, 2005).
- ToM can influence pragmatic language skills and social interactions (Berndsen, 2005). It might also impact a child's ability to make inferences and understand social language, including understanding lies, surprises, secrets, mistakes, and tricks.
- Students with deficits in PT often demonstrate difficulty with interpreting abstract meanings and understanding what is being discussed or read. Children with severe deficits in PT may not be able to develop skills beyond the ability to focus on their own thoughts (Winner, 2004).
- PT is a social executive function task that requires processing and responding to multiple levels of information simultaneously within a limited time frame (1-2 seconds). PT requires a child to consider his own thoughts as well as the person he is communicating with (Winner, 2004).
- It is through the experience of communication within close relationships that children gain entry into the "community of mind" (Astington & Baird, 2005).
- The relationship quality between the child and his communicative partner is systematically related to the frequency with which they interact in context-rich discourse about mental states (Astington & Baird, 2005).

LinguSystems' Social Language Development Test Elementary (see page 6) measures those language skills that might be an outward sign of a ToM problem. The four subtests require students to take the perspective of another person: Making Inferences, Multiple Interpretations, Interpersonal Negotiations, and Supporting Peers.

The more research that's done on the link between language development and ToM, the better we will be able to document how language affects thinking socially. To this end, we will improve our treatment of children with social deficits so they will be better integrated into our culture and become healthy, happy, contributing citizens.

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