 S P E E C H I N C

Theory of Mind

By Katie Pengilly MA,CCC,CLP

Today’s political and social climate requires us to understand biases and misconceptions, and to consider how our experiences, vs others’ experiences, contribute to our beliefs. We are thinking about what unites vs divides us. We are examining beliefs based on misinformation. We are discussing diversity and inclusion. All of this requires what educators call Theory of Mind: the ability to understand another person’s thinking.

Theory of mind is the understanding the other people have their own thoughts and motivations and desires. Psychologists describe it as attributing mental states to others. Theory of mind is what allows us to understand that we do not all share the same point of view. Through Theory of Mind we can see how a person’s perspective affects how that person acts and feels, and we can adjust our behavior based on our knowledge of others’ perspectives.

As children we develop and integrate the important elements of Theory of Mind. First, one must understand wants/desires of oneself, vs others. Different people want different things, and to get what they want people act in different ways. This leads to the understanding of personal motivations and preferences.

An additional element is understanding that other people have thoughts, and that those thoughts may be different than yours. This understanding is the basis for the knowledge that different people can have different beliefs about the same thing. A common test of this is “the band aid test”. A child views a teacher emptying a band aid box of its contents, and filling it instead with chalk. When asked what the child’s mother, who is in the other room, will think is in the box, a child with Theory of Mind will answer “band aids” because she understands false beliefs based on lack of different knowledge. The child without Theory of Mind will answer “chalk”.

Another common example which many adults have experienced is speaking on the phone with a young child who does not have a fully developed Theory of Mind, and asking what the child is doing ? The child on the other end of the phone connection says “playing with this !” That is, if someone has not seen something they will need extra information to understand.

Developmentally, children begin to think more deeply about others’ thoughts and feelings at age 4-5, around the time when many children are entering the educational system. Prior to 4/5 years old, we as parents can introduce Theory of Mind through role play and pretend play, understanding character’s perspectives in storybooks, and creating imaginative narratives.

After the age of 5, during the early school years, Theory of Mind continues to develop as kids move through school learning how to predict, infer as well as understand abstract language that requires Theory of Mind such as empathy, lying, sarcasm and humor. Increasingly abstract layers of Theory of Mind, which can be difficult into adulthood, include tuning into thoughts and feelings when others try to hide them. For example, people are often are feeling emotions which are different from the ones they display. Skills in the area of Theory of Mind should be highlighted and sharpened throughout the lifespan.

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