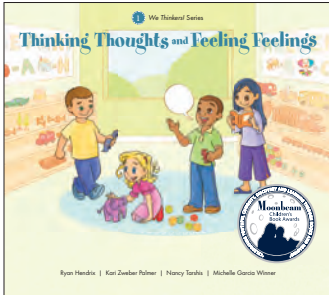


# Family Letter

## We Thinkers! Series Social Thinking Curriculum



Dear Families,

Welcome to *We Thinkers! Volume 1 Social Explorers*, a Social Thinking® Curriculum for the Preschool and Early Elementary Years! Your child is beginning an exciting adventure in learning more about the social world. This letter is designed to introduce you to the curriculum and provide information about supporting your child's learning at home.

The aim of *We Thinkers!* series is to help young verbal learners develop the skills they need to be flexible social thinkers and social problem solvers. Through the experiences of four characters in the storybooks and the accompanying curriculum units and music CD, children will learn about the social mind and social expectations. They will also learn about their own thinking (and that of others) to help them make better decisions when in the midst of social play and interaction.

The curriculum is based on Social Thinking, a treatment methodology developed by Michelle Garcia Winner that teaches the “why” behind our social behavior. Winner created the Social Thinking Vocabulary and concepts as a way to break down, explain, and put into concrete terms the abstract concepts that make up our social world.

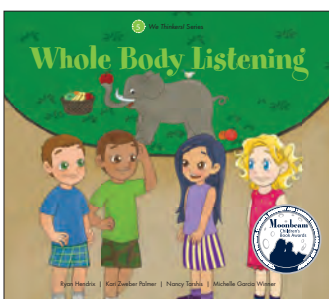
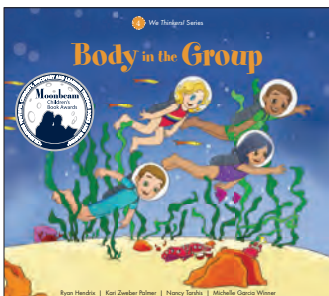
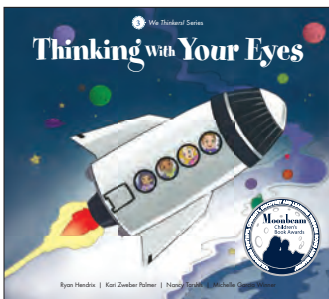
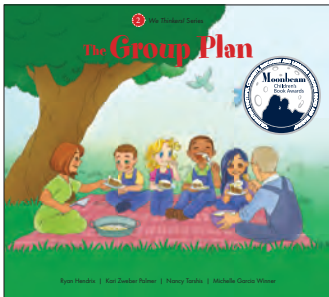
The *We Thinkers!* curriculum is divided into ten units that align with the ten storybooks in this teaching series. Each unit is designed to teach a specific Social Thinking concept via one of the vocabulary terms. You will be receiving family letters that explain the concept as it is introduced in the curriculum and how to support your child's learning at home.

As you embark on this social learning adventure together, please keep in mind the following points:

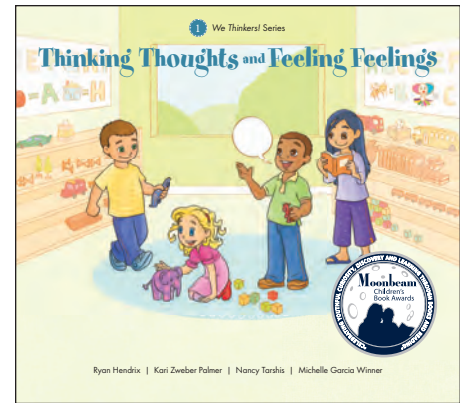
- Social learning is slow and deep! We do not expect children to master concepts quickly.
- Learn about the concepts your child is being exposed to and start to use the same vocabulary at home. Talk about the concepts when you are at home, at the store, in the car – anywhere and everywhere! The more you can make the vocabulary part of your everyday language, the better.
- Complete the “At Home Activities” included in each family letter.
- Be sure to enjoy the stories and songs that accompany the units. They're designed for the entire family.
- Don't forget to notice and mention when your child is being a good social thinker (positive reinforcement!) and keeping other people feeling good about being around him/her!

Please note that the curriculum is designed for children with listening and language skills strong enough to understand and discuss the concepts presented in the storybooks. While all children will benefit from exploring these concepts, students with special learning needs may need much more time to do so.

We hope you and your family will have fun while learning and practicing these all-important concepts.



# Thinking Thoughts and Feeling Feelings



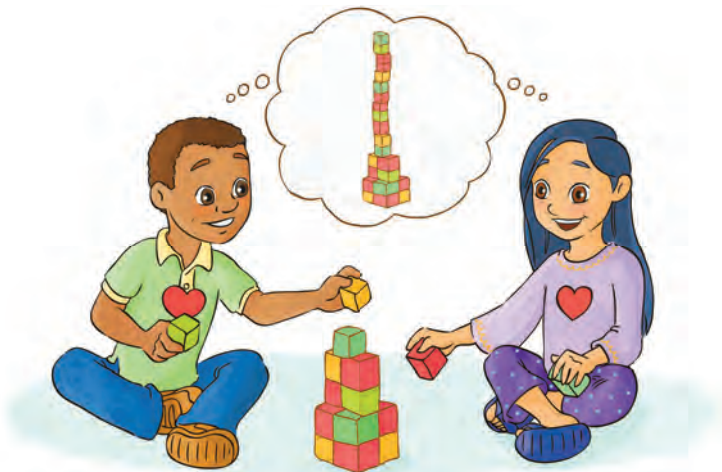
## Family Letter and At Home Activities



Social learning is all about **thoughts** and **feelings**. The ability to think about others, play collaboratively and establish friendships is all about thoughts; knowing our own, sharing them with others and taking others' thoughts into account as we act and react. We introduce these concepts first because all subsequent concepts and vocabulary units are tied back to thoughts. (What are you thinking? What am I thinking? What is the group thinking about?) We make the connection to feelings because what we think and what we feel are inseparable.

In exploring thoughts and feelings, we begin by establishing a connection to body parts. Children are familiar with their

bodies and we are able to use what they know: that we all have many body parts and each part has a job to do. In most cases, we can see these parts and watch them do their jobs. For example, we can see hands clap, hold, and touch, and feet tap, jump and run. We then connect that information to the more abstract concepts of thoughts and emotions. That is, there are other parts inside our bodies that have important jobs too. Our brain and heart are two of those parts we use when we are around people. Our brain is our thought maker. We define a thought as an idea, picture, or words you have in your brain. To help us talk about thoughts we use words like *think* and *know*. Our heart is our feelings keeper. A feeling is something we feel in our body. To help us talk about our feelings we use words like *happy*, *sad*, *mad*, and *scared*.



In the first storybook in the *We Thinkers!* series, we meet the main characters, Evan, Ellie, Jesse and Molly. These four children go on many adventures to introduce and explore Social Thinking Vocabulary and concepts. In their first adventure, they learn all about two important concepts: thoughts and feelings.

At home, it is important to raise your child's awareness that s/he is having thoughts. We practiced this by drawing attention to examples that were big and exaggerated. When children saw us do something unexpected (out of the ordinary, silly,

etc.) we labeled the process by saying, “You are having a thought! I’m putting shoes on my hands, that’s silly! You’re having a thought about me.”

You can continue to reinforce this at home by doing anything that’s out of the ordinary or breaks the normal routine and labeling that process by saying “You’re having a thought.” Some suggestions include:

While getting dressed:

- Put socks on your hands. “You’re having a thought. I put socks on my hands. That’s silly. You’re having a thought about me.”
- Put pants on your head.
- Put a shirt on inside out or backwards.
- When leaving the house:
  - Carry something out of the ordinary to the door with you, such as the toaster. “You’re having a thought. I’m taking the toaster to work with me. That’s silly. The toaster stays in the kitchen. You’re having a thought about me.”
  - Put on a robe instead of a jacket, or slippers instead of shoes.

While the above activity exaggerates times your child would have a thought, it’s important to remember we’re always having thoughts, about things big and small. Contrast these over-exaggerated examples with times we’re having thoughts during the day that are not as obvious and more routine.

Some examples of day-to-day thoughts we might have are:

- “I like bananas. I’m thinking about eating my banana.”
- “It’s time for dinner. I’m thinking about cooking.”
- “I’m thinking about putting on my shoes.”
- “I’m thinking about reading you a book.”

## Activity 1

### Things I Like to Think About...

The following activity is included so your child can relate to this concept on a personal level and explore his/her own thoughts.

**Instructions:** Use the thought bubble handout at the end of the letter. Have your child draw a picture of himself or herself (or use a photo) and place it under the thought bubble. Then fill the bubble with pictures or drawings of things your child likes to do, play with, eat, etc.

## Activity 2

### Feelings Book

Begin by stapling four pieces of paper together on the left side, into book form. At the top of each paper, write a feeling word. Start with these feelings: happy, mad, sad, and scared. Either draw a picture or take a photo of your child making that facial expression. Together, talk about times the child has felt and experienced that emotion. Draw a picture, use photos from magazines, or personal photos of these times and add them to the page. Do not expect your child to be able to come up with examples independently. You may decide to make the book and then fill in the examples across time. For example, after a birthday party you might add a picture on the “happy” page.

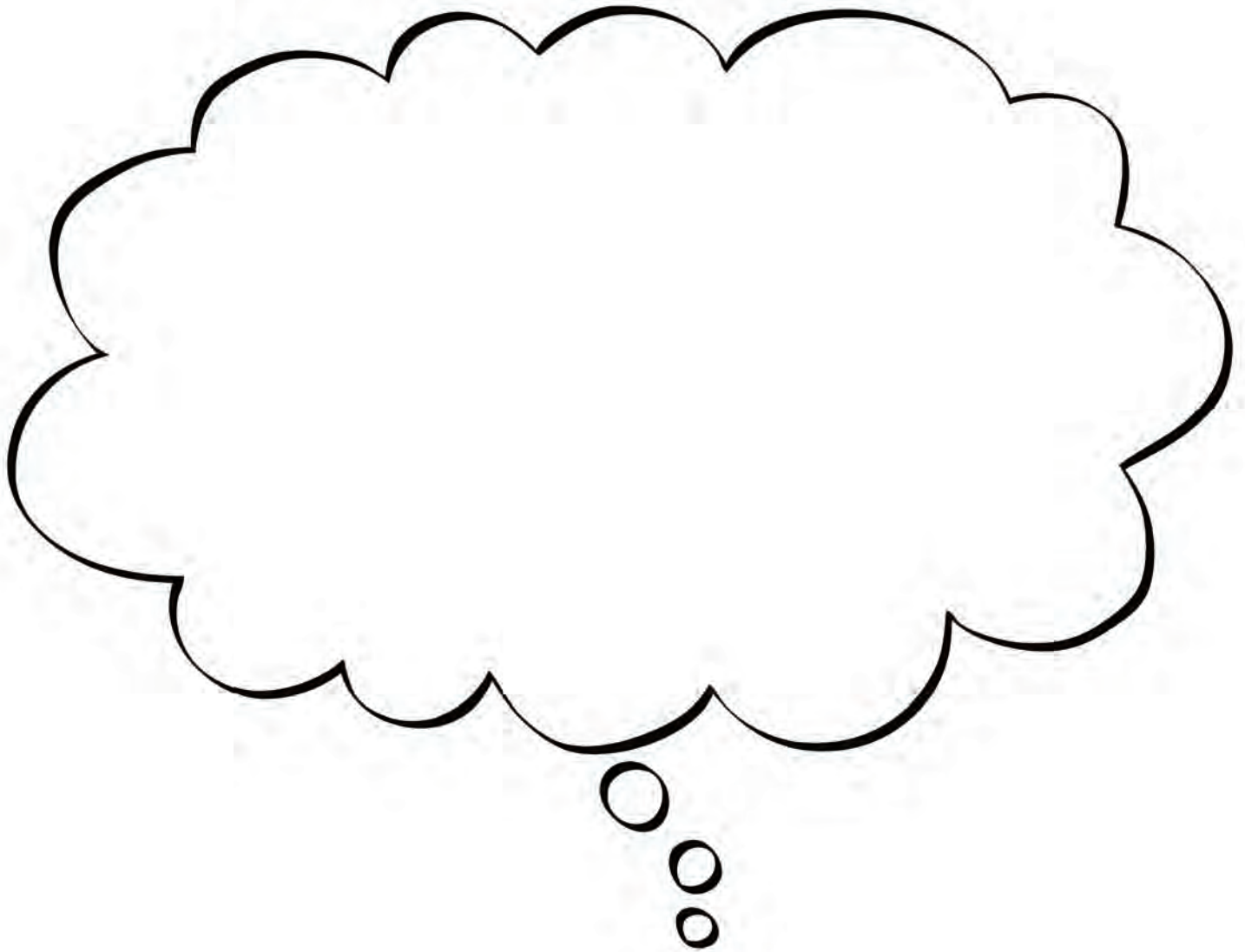
As your child begins to learn and identify more emotions, add pages to increase the child’s emotional vocabulary. Examples may include:

Proud  
Disappointed  
Frustrated  
Excited  
Worried

Comfortable  
Uncomfortable  
Curious  
Confused  
Calm

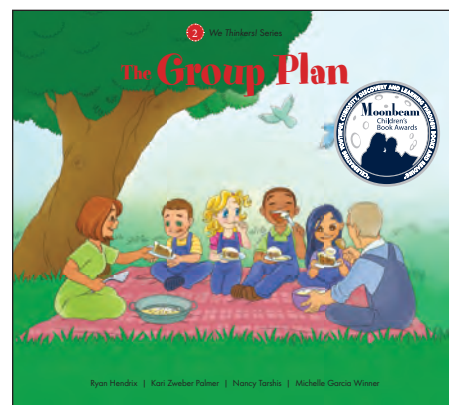
Jealous  
Tense  
Surprised  
Grumpy  
Silly

# Things I Like to Think About...

A large, empty rectangular box for writing. It is positioned below the thought bubble and is intended for the user to write down the things they like to think about.



# The Group Plan



## Family Letter and At Home Activities

In our Social Thinking group today we talked about the **group plan**. In our story, Evan, Ellie, Jesse and Molly take a trip to the farm to make an apple pie and ice cream. They learn the difference between following their *own plan* versus the *group plan*. When one person followed his/her own plan, the group could not accomplish their goal. When they worked together and followed the group plan everyone felt good and they ended up with delicious treats to share.

In our group we use illustrations to show everyone thinking about the group plan together versus a person who is thinking about his/her own plan. (See the illustration below.) We talk about “the plan” as a way to help children know what they are expected to think about and do when they are working in a group. When everyone is following the plan, we are all thinking about each other. When we all think about each other, everyone feels good.

Suggested ways to extend learning about the Group Plan at home:

- Talk about “the plan” and what you are thinking. For example, “My plan is to make a snack.” “The plan is to go to the grocery store.” “The plan is to get ready for bed! Time to brush our teeth; follow the plan.”
- Talk about what each person can say and do so all share the same idea/plan. Consider the following examples: “I’m thinking of the plan to go to the grocery store. I’m getting my coat.” “Sayida is thinking about the group plan. She is helping to set the table for dinner.”
- Point out the times when you are all sharing one plan. Talk about how that makes you feel. For example, “We are following the plan to get ready to go to school. I put on my shoes. You put on your shoes too! That makes me feel happy. Now we’re ready to go.” Or use pictures and words.



Group plan/own plan illustration.

In the story, the group plan was to pick apples. Evan followed his own plan and pretended to drive a tractor.

### Activity 1

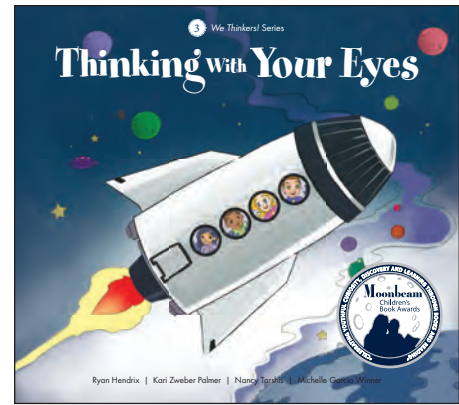
#### At Home Activity: Following the Plan!

Anytime we do something together we are following a group plan. Reinforce the idea that children follow a plan when they are at home too, not just at school. At home a group plan might include cooking and eating dinner, folding laundry, raking leaves in the yard, going on a bicycle ride, or going to the grocery store. There is a connection between our behaviors and other people’s emotions. When we follow a group plan, it makes other people feel happy and makes us feel good too!

Draw a picture or take a photograph of a time when you did something together during the week. Some ideas include: playing a game, making a snack, eating dinner, going to the grocery store, or even sorting laundry! Draw a thought bubble and adhere the photograph or drawing into the bubble. Then draw yourselves in the boxes below the thought bubble to show you are thinking about the plan and activity. See the example below.



# Thinking With Your Eyes



## Family Letter and At Home Activities

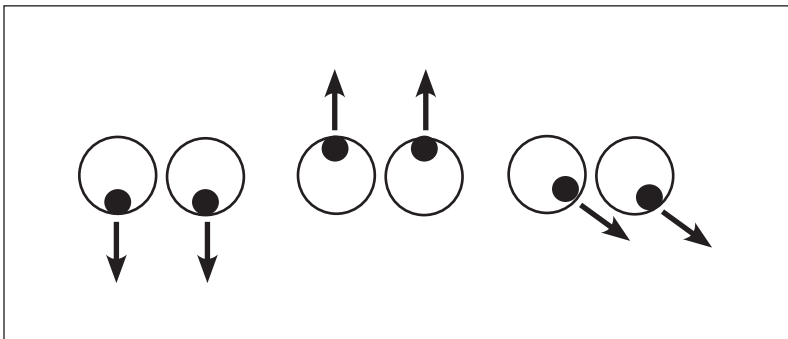
In our Social Thinking group today we talked about **thinking with your eyes**. Expressively we use our eyes to show others what we are thinking about. We look at people to let them know we are thinking about *them*, listening to *them*, talking to *them*, and/or sharing an experience with *them*. Receptively we use our eyes to gather information about what other people are thinking about, what is happening around us and what might be someone else's plan.

In the story we read, Evan, Ellie, Jesse and Molly take a trip in a rocket ship to outer space. They meet curious aliens. As the story unfolds, the aliens and children try to communicate but don't speak the same language. The children have to learn to think with their eyes to figure out what the aliens are looking at, how that connects to what they are thinking about and therefore, what they are planning to do next.

We will be using the term thinking with your eyes instead of behavioral directives such as "look at me" or "use eye contact." When children are taught to think with their eyes they begin to understand that there is a purpose for observing others and the environment. When you think with your eyes you are engaging in an active process that helps you determine what others are thinking, how they are feeling, and subsequently how to respond. It is more than just "looking" at something. Thinking is involved!

What a person is looking at is often what he or she is thinking about. We can use what others are looking at to make a smart guess about what or whom they are thinking about. For example, if you are talking with a friend and he is looking at you this means he is thinking about you and what you are saying to him. If we are looking at something other than the person talking to us, like a picture on the wall, we are sending the message that we are thinking about the picture and not the person who is talking, since looking equals thinking.

Eyes are like arrows, they point to what someone is looking at and most likely thinking about!





## Activities to try at home

**Activity 1** Cook something together and only use your eyes to think about the items you want or the ingredients you want to add. Make a cake, for example, and place all the ingredients out on the counter. Tell your child, “I am going to look and think about the ingredient I need.” When it is time to add the eggs, look at your child and then look at the eggs. Verbally prompt your child, “Think with your eyes: what am I looking at, what am I thinking about?” If you’ve got more than one helper in the kitchen you can use your eyes to think about whose turn it is to add the ingredient.

**Activity 2** Use everyday opportunities to ask for something around the room using only your eyes. For example, you might be getting ready to leave home and notice your car keys on a table. Tell your child “I need help before I leave! Think with your eyes. Can you figure out what I’m looking at and thinking about?” Maintain your gaze on the keys rather than shifting it back and forth between the child and the object so as not to confuse them.

**Activity 3** Play a turn-taking game and indicate whose turn it is, based on who you are looking at (to show who you are thinking about).

**Activity 4** When giving your child choices, ask him or her to look at the desired object. For example, at the dinner table hold the milk carton in one hand and juice in the other. Ask your child to think with his or her eyes, “Show me the one you want by looking at it.” Then switch roles and have your child guess the drink you would like. Practice with everyone at the dinner table!

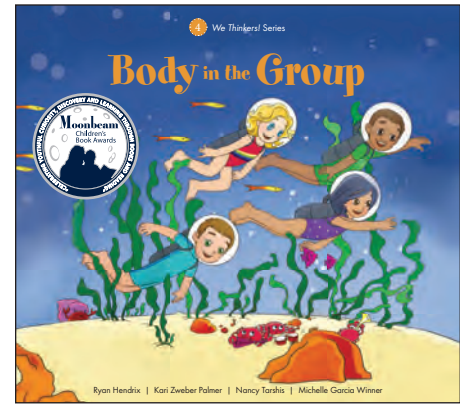
**Activity 5** When you are reading books with your children, find opportunities to trace eye gaze and talk about what the character is looking at and thinking about. See the attached illustration from the book as an example.



Here, the kids are looking at space rocks and thinking about space rocks!



# Body in the Group



## Family Letter and At Home Activities

In the *Body in the Group* story, Evan, Ellie, Jesse and Molly take a trip to the ocean. The group plan is to find a shark tooth and they quickly realize they need to think about each other and keep their bodies in a group to find it. When they keep their bodies in the group they finally find the shark tooth ... and something they weren't expecting!

In our social thinking group we learned about the concept of **body in the group**. Keeping your body in the group means maintaining a comfortable physical presence around others – not too close, yet not too far away. When your body is in the group, it sends the nonverbal message that you are interested in others and that you are following the same plan. The opposite is also true. If your body is out of the group (too far away), it sends the message you are not thinking about the group. While we often realize the importance of language and what to say in a conversation, it is important to understand that physical proximity is also a key ingredient to successful social interactions.



Body in the group.



Body out of the group.

### Activities to try at home

#### Activity 1

Use the body in the group vocabulary throughout your daily routines. Keep in mind that any time two people are sharing space, they are considered a group. Therefore, you can use the vocabulary when you and your child are alone, or when the family is together as a whole. Consider the following examples:

- “We can start our movie when all family members have their bodies in the group.”
- “It’s time for dinner. Everyone in the family has their body in the group, sitting at the table. We can start our meal together!”
- “When you leave the table, your body is out of the group. It makes me think you are finished with your meal.”
- “Remember to keep your body in the group when we shop together at the grocery store.”

Activity  
2

Look through photo albums with your child. In the pictures, identify when people have their bodies in or out of a group.

Activity  
3

Watch for opportunities outside the home to observe others with their bodies in or out of groups. At a restaurant, for example, many people have their body in the group. Don't restrict yourself to groups of people either! One preschooler, for example, took a trip to the aquarium with her family. As they watched the schools of fish, she said "Look mom, that fish has its body out of the group."

Activity  
4

## Music Activities

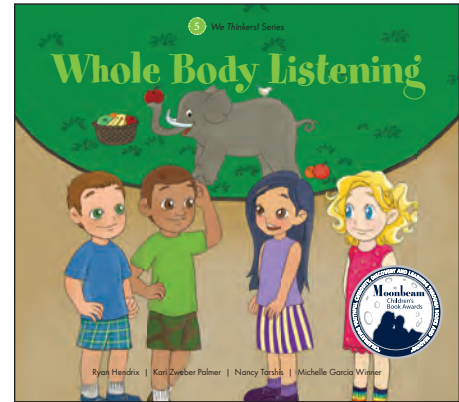
### The Freeze

- Turn on some music and dance around. At random moments, pause the music and "FREEZE." Get the whole family involved.
- While "frozen" observe and discuss the physical presence of the people. Are you a group (about one arm's length away from each other) or is everyone all over the room? Whose body is still in the group? Who danced out? The object of the activity is not necessarily to stay in the group, but to observe and discuss what happened.

### Hokey Pokey

Sing or listen to the "Hokey Pokey" together. In the song, each body part is placed in and out of the group! Sing and dance together while using the body in the group vocabulary.

# Whole Body Listening



## Family Letter and At Home Activities

In our Social Thinking group today we learned about the concept of **whole body listening** (Truesdale, 1990).

Whole body listening is when your eyes, ears, mouth, hands, arms, legs, and feet are calm and quiet. When you listen with your whole body it helps you pay attention to what people are doing around you and it shows others you are thinking about them.

Exploring this concept helps increase our awareness of how we listen when we are part of a group as well as the nonverbal messages we are sending when others are talking with and to us. Listening with our whole bodies, and subsequently focusing on and thinking about the group, sets the stage for successful communication and interaction.

In this adventure, Evan, Ellie, Jesse and Molly take a trip to the zoo. They learn that when all of their body parts are calm and quiet, it shows others they are thinking about them. When they listen with their whole bodies, they get to visit and learn about lots of animals, and everyone feels good about being together.



In this example, Ellie and Molly are not listening with their whole bodies.



Everyone is doing whole body listening. Even the Cheetah is happy now!

## Activities to try at home

### Activity 1

Help your child get ready to listen with his/her whole body! Before you begin activities together, such as reading, use language to remind the child to turn on his/her listening body, one body part at a time (ears, eyes, arms, hands, belly, seat, legs, and feet). “It’s time to listen with our eyes; that means you turn your eyes toward me.” “It’s time to listen with your hands; that means they are quiet in your lap.”

### Activity 2

Point out times your child is doing whole body listening. “I can see you’re listening with your whole body. Your hands are listening, your feet are listening, your eyes are listening...” etc.

### Activity 3

Help your child notice when s/he is not using whole body listening. “Oops, your eyes aren’t listening! I can see you’re looking at your toy when I expect you to think about me with your eyes!” Offer suggestions of what to do to use whole body listening. “Show me you’re thinking about me and listening with your eyes. Now your eyes are looking at me, your hands are still and you are facing me. Now I know you’re using whole body listening.”

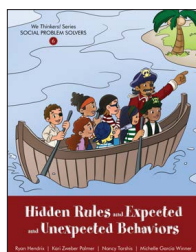
### Activity 4

Play a game or put together a puzzle that involves body parts. Mr. Potato Head is a great example. Place the body parts into a bag or hide them in a bucket filled with dry rice or beans. Have fun finding the parts and placing them into the body. Talk about how Mr. Potato Head can show he is using whole body listening. Make a point of how hard this is for Mr. Potato Head to do since his body keeps falling apart!



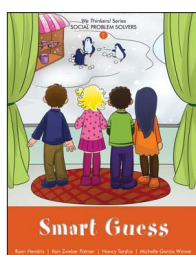
## Family Letter

### We Thinkers! A Social Thinking Curriculum for the Preschool and Early Elementary Years

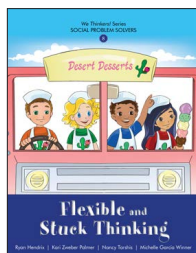


Dear Families,

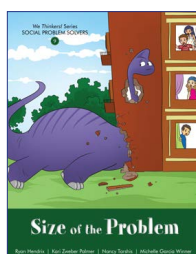
Welcome to the *We Thinkers!* series! We're delighted to be using Volume 2, *Social Problem Solvers*, with your child and continuing this exciting adventure in learning more about the social world. You may have received similar family letters as we worked on Volume 1 with your child (formerly titled *The Incredible Flexible You*). In this letter we want to introduce you to Volume 2 and provide information about supporting your child's learning at home.



The aim of the *We Thinkers!* series is to help young verbal learners develop the skills they need to be flexible social thinkers and social problem solvers. Through the experiences of four characters in the storybooks and the accompanying teaching units and music CD, children are learning about the social mind, social expectations, their own thinking and that of others to help them make better decisions when in the midst of social play and interaction.



The curriculum is based on Social Thinking, a treatment framework developed by Michelle Garcia Winner that teaches the “why” behind our social behavior. Winner created the Social Thinking Vocabulary and concepts as a way to break down, explain, and put into concrete terms the abstract concepts that make up our social world.



Similar to the format of Volume 1, this new volume introduces five more social concepts that take children deeper into exploring their social thinking and social behaviors. Each concept is explained to children via a storybook and the accompanying curriculum book provides a teaching unit with additional materials and activities to give children the practice they need with the social concept. You will be receiving family letters that explain each concept as it is introduced in the curriculum and how to support your child's learning at home.



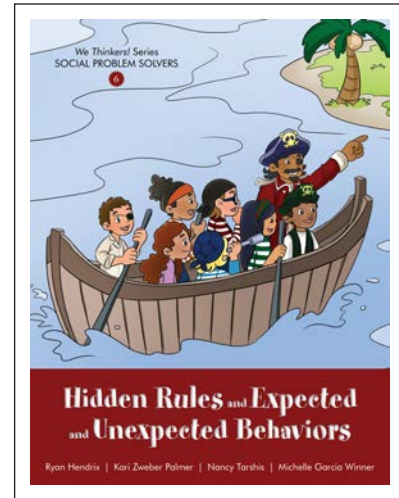
As you delve into this social learning adventure together, please keep in mind the following:

- Social learning is slow and deep! We do not expect children to master concepts quickly. While all children will benefit from exploring these concepts, students with special learning needs may need much more time to do so.
- Use the vocabulary at home. Incorporate it into your everyday language so your child hears it often.
- Be sure to enjoy the stories and songs that accompany the units. They're designed for the entire family.
- Don't forget to notice and mention when your child is being a good social thinker (positive reinforcement!).

We hope you and your family have fun while learning and practicing these new and important social concepts.

## Unit 6

# Hidden Rules and Expected and Unexpected Behaviors



## Family Letter and At Home Activities

Every social situation has “hidden rules” or a range of social behavioral expectations that are implied while at the same time being understood by the majority of people. Hidden rules are not usually stated or explicitly taught, yet most of us recognize when someone is or isn’t following them.

Doing what is **expected** means understanding or figuring out those hidden rules and aligning our behavior (what we say and do) with the expectations of the situation. For instance, a hidden rule at a birthday party is that the birthday boy or girl opens the gifts. We understand that when we’re around other people, we adapt our behavior to keep others feeling comfortable and having good thoughts about sharing space with us, which ultimately keeps us feeling comfortable too.

It’s important to note that doing what is expected isn’t always fun. We all have to do things that we don’t enjoy, but that are expected of us to be part of a classroom, family, or community. Things like waiting to take a turn, putting away clothes, clearing the table, or cleaning up toys might not be fun,



but they’re all expected to move forward with the plan for the day or to get to the fun activities. Putting away clothes might not feel good, but being done with the task, having a clean space, getting positive praise from others, and having more time to play *does* feel good.

Doing what is **unexpected** means not figuring out and/or following the hidden rules for the given situation. When what we say or do is unexpected, people feel uncomfortable and don’t have good thoughts about sharing space with us. Ultimately this makes us feel uncomfortable too.

When we're involved in social situations we don't always get our own behavior right. It's expected that we'll make mistakes; that's being human. At times we all do, or say things that are unexpected, and make others feel uncomfortable. What's important is what we do about all those "oops" moments. When we figure out that we've done something unexpected and created an uncomfortable thought and feeling in someone else, it's expected we make the effort to try to fix or change those thoughts.

As you engage with your child in different settings, talk about the hidden rules of the situation. Kids with social learning challenges don't have the social radar to figure these out on their own, even hidden rules that to you might seem obvious. And even some kids without social learning challenges (adults too!) need help understanding them. Help your child observe expected and unexpected behaviors they notice in others! The more we can help our children become better observers of social information the better equipped they will be to develop social awareness and social self-awareness!

### **Social Thinking® Concepts Introduced\***

In the storybook *Hidden Rules and Expected and Unexpected Behaviors: Pirate Adventure*, Evan, Ellie, Jesse and Molly take an adventure on the high seas. They board a pirate ship and learn about the hidden rules of being part of a pirate crew. They explore what is expected and unexpected when sailing on the ship and looking for buried treasure. When the kids are following the hidden rules, everyone on the ship feels comfortable and has good thoughts, including the kids!



### **Ways to practice these concepts at home**

- In the teaching unit associated with the story, a green thought bubble is paired with good/comfortable thoughts, while a red thought bubble is paired with uncomfortable thoughts. Images to create these props are included at the end of this letter. Simply cut them out (one for your child and one for you) and glue or tape both to a ruler so you end up with one prop that's two-sided: one side green and the other side red. Have fun using them!
- Look at characters in books, comics, TV shows, movies, etc. and figure out how they are feeling. Talk about how the expected/unexpected actions of one character impact another character, the thoughts they might have, the way they



feel, etc. Work with your child to problem solve ways the characters could have “fixed” things they did that made others feel uncomfortable. Talk about how the characters would feel once the unexpected behaviors had been changed. Use your red and green thought bubbles while you watch a TV program to visually reinforce that you’re having a comfortable/uncomfortable thought about what a character is doing.

- Do anything out of the ordinary or unexpected in your family routines. Have fun and be silly! You’re giving your child lots of practice in noticing expected/unexpected behaviors in others and building social observation skills. For example: get in the bath with your clothes on, put shoes in the kitchen sink, or put a plant on a plate and serve it for dinner. Label the actions as “unexpected” and talk with your child about why they’re unexpected. Remember, something is unexpected because it is breaking a hidden rule for the situation and/or the people around you.
- Keep context in mind! Hidden rules are context specific, meaning a rule may not be a rule across all settings, so avoid being too general in talking about hidden rules with your child. For instance, it’s a hidden rule that kids don’t remove their shoes and socks and walk barefoot at a grocery store. But that may be perfectly expected behavior at home. How about at a friend’s house, or Grandma’s house, or at a picnic? What’s the hidden rule for shoes and socks there? Always think about the situation when you’re talking about hidden rules and expected/unexpected behavior.
- Doing what is expected isn’t always fun. To be part of a group it’s expected that we all think about others and that often translates into doing things we might not think are fun. Model this thinking for your child by talking out loud about the things you have to do that you don’t love but that you *are* happy to do and/or get done.
- Encourage your child to talk about what others are doing in their environment and label those behaviors as expected/unexpected. Provide praise when their observations are accurate. Remember that part of learning good social skills is having greater self-awareness of what is happening to people around you! It’s often easier for kids to notice the behaviors of others rather than turn inward to look at their own behaviors. Self-reflection is a higher-level social thinking skill. So at first, focus on others’ behaviors.
- After a while, build self-awareness in your child of his/her behaviors. Point out times when your child is doing things that are expected and making others feel good. Describe how the child’s behaviors made you or others feel. Label your emotions and connect them to your specific thoughts. You can also talk about times children are doing something unexpected and the feelings others may be having in response. Don’t stop there, though. Help them figure out how they can change what they are doing by brainstorming some alternate choices. It’s important that children learn it’s possible to change others’ thoughts and feelings!

**A word of caution!** When talking to your child about his/her behavior, point out **lots** more positive than negative examples to keep your child feeling good about using the vocabulary and learning these concepts!



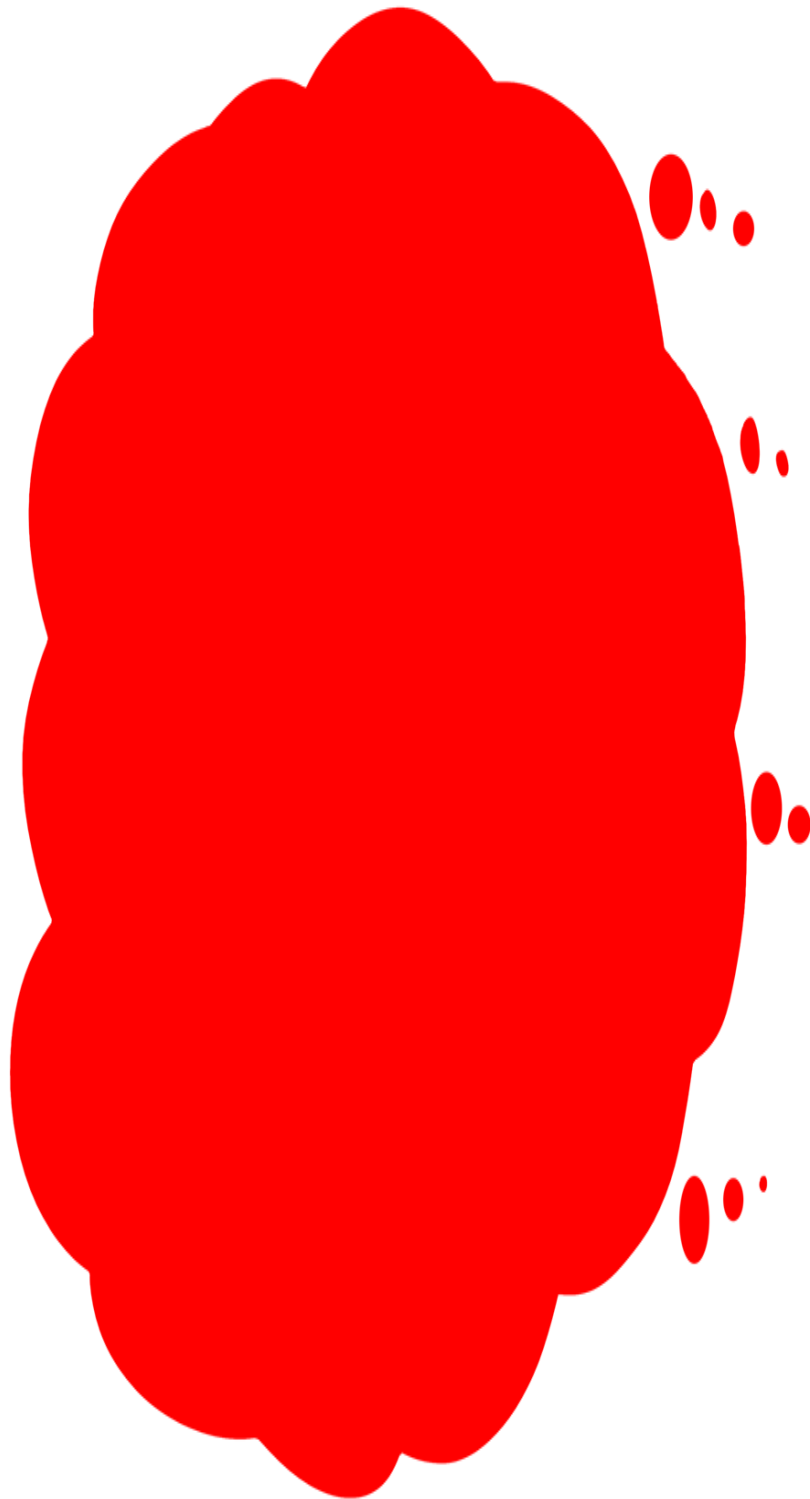
- Use the vocabulary regularly and often! Catch those everyday moments when people are doing things that are making others feel good about being together and playing/working with them. Talk about other family members, friends, neighbors, etc. to help your child understand that we are all having thoughts about each other all of the time!
- You can also talk about times you have done things that were unexpected and how you changed (or didn't!) your behavior and the consequences that followed. We all make mistakes, we all try to repair them, we all keep thinking about each other!
- One final word: don't get caught up in unexpected! Behavior change is typically on the mind of any parent or educator faced with an individual who is continually demonstrating unexpected behaviors. It can also be fun to spot unexpected behaviors in others and it's often a lot more obvious, so examples can be easier to find. Just keep your observations and conversations balanced and give equal attention to noticing situations where people are doing a great job following the hidden rules and showing expected behavior in a situation. After all, isn't that what we're all striving for – to help our children learn to be part of a group in a way (expected) that everyone feels good about being together?

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# Unit 8

## Flexible and Stuck Thinking



### Family Letter and At Home Activities

In our Social Thinking group we are learning about the concept of **flexible thinking versus stuck thinking**.

**Flexible thinking** is being able to adapt our own behaviors in the moment depending on the situation and the people in it. This means we can change our plan, try a different solution to a problem, change what we are thinking or give up what we want based on the group plan. A flexible thinker can also understand what other people say and do based on different points of view or contexts. Flexible thinking is important for learning how to problem solve!

**Stuck thinking** is being unable to change what we are doing or thinking based on what is happening around us. If we are stuck in our thinking we might have only one way of seeing a problem or situation, or we might follow one rule all the time, no matter where we are or what is happening around us. Stuck thinking makes it difficult for us to think about what people need us to do and how that is different from what we are doing. Stuck thinking also makes it hard to understand or interpret subtle or different meanings in language, and other people's motives, intentions, etc.

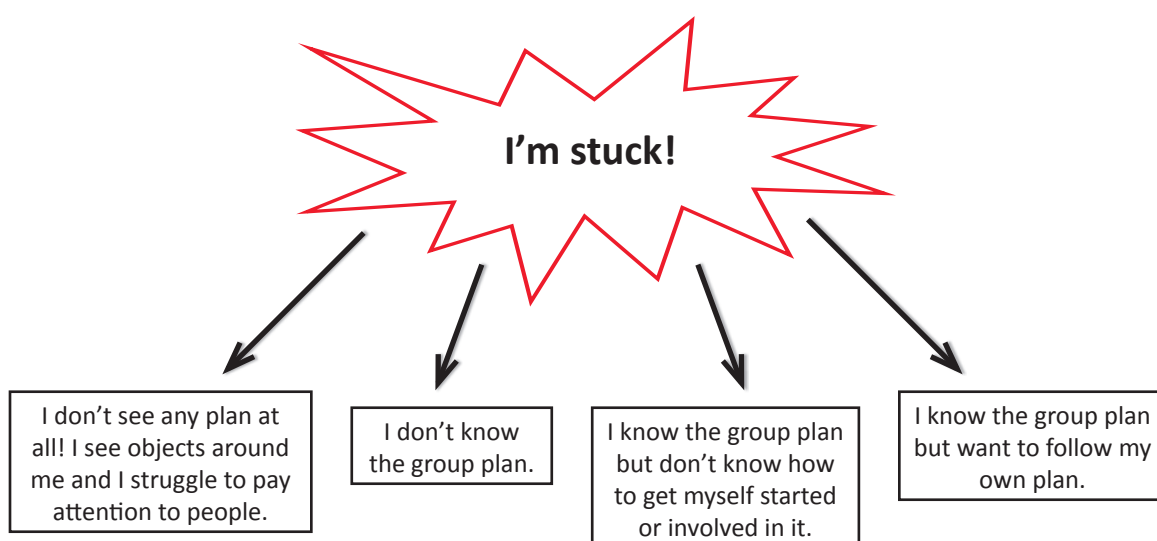
### Why do we teach this concept?

The social world is complex; it shifts and changes constantly. Therefore the expectation is that we shift and change with it. We are constantly learning how to be flexible, even throughout our adult lives. A high level of flexibility is needed to consider and adapt to each interaction. In any given situation, we are expected to consider where we are, who is there, what is happening, what people are saying



and doing around us, how they are feeling, what they might be thinking, and adjust our plan and behavior accordingly. A challenge in any of the above listed area can lead to getting “stuck” or having stuck thinking.

When a child gets “stuck” or rigid in his or her thinking, it can be helpful to pause and examine the possible roots of the problem, based on the child and situation. While it could be that a child is stuck thinking about his or her own plan (because the child doesn’t want to stop a preferred activity to follow the group plan), there are also alternative explanations. Sometimes a child has a hard time figuring out the group plan to begin with. Other times, he or she may observe and understand what the group plan is but doesn’t know what to do or how to be part of that plan. The visual below illustrates this concept:



How you might support your child in these rigid thinking moments may depend upon why he or she is stuck in the first place! Do not assume that your child is simply being oppositional or stuck on what he or she wants to do. It is often times the case that the child doesn't know what to do instead!

## Where do we start?

Teaching flexibility first starts with understanding there are choices, options and different ways to look at a situation. You can only be flexible when you see you have choices. This helps with problem solving as well. When children are able to generate and then make choices, they learn they have some control over their environment. This helps them learn to feel more comfortable in situations which require change. This can, at times, calm their frustrations, reduce challenging behaviors, and motivate them to participate more in activities or routines.

In the story we read, *Flexible and Stuck Thinking: Ice Cream Shop Adventure*, the four characters Evan, Ellie, Jesse and Molly play ice cream shop. Their adventure begins when Mr. Roadrunner calls in an order for a five scoop ice cream cone delivery. Initially the children get stuck on following their own plans, wanting to go first, etc. and all of the ice cream melts before they can get it to Mr. Roadrunner. The children learn that they have to use flexible thinking to work together and deliver the cone before all the ice cream melts. Using flexible thinking makes everyone feel good and helps everybody be part of the group plan.

## Activities to try at home

1. Teaching flexibility first starts with understanding that there are choices. Play a game together where the goal is to think of as many ideas and options as possible. Here are some suggestions to get you started:

- Things to eat for breakfast/lunch/dinner/snack/dessert
- Colors of shirt/pants/shoes/jackets/etc. to wear
- Toppings on a pizza (cheese, mushrooms, pepperoni, olives, pineapple, sausage, etc.)
- Animals to visit at the zoo (elephants, lions, giraffes, monkeys, zebras, bears, tigers, hippos, rhinos, flamingos, etc.)
- Animals we could see on a farm (cows, chickens, pigs, sheep, ducks, horses, dogs, etc.)
- Pets a person could have (dog, cat, fish, hamster, turtle, lizard, etc.)
- Books we could read at bed time (fill in with ideas from your own library)
- Ways to move across a room (run, jump, crawl, hop, skip, tiptoe, etc.)
- Ways to travel (car, plane, train, boat, helicopter)
- Ways to get dressed (socks first, last, in the middle; shirt then pants, pants then shirt; jacket first? No, then we can't put on a shirt! We can be flexible with some parts of getting dressed. With others we have to follow the plan (undies before pants; shirt before jacket/sweater; socks before shoes)

The goal of this activity is to provide positive feedback and send the message that your child CAN be flexible. ("Wow, you were so flexible thinking of all of those ideas!") Model the vocabulary and reinforce your child's efforts to be flexible as much as possible. ("I know you like to go first in the game and I noticed you let your sister go first instead. Good job being flexible!") The more children hear this, the more they can start to understand and think of themselves as flexible thinkers.

2. Use the vocabulary “flexible thinking” and “stuck thinking” throughout your daily activities and routines. Keep in mind that any time two people are sharing space, they are considered a group. And when people are in a group, flexible thinking is expected! You can use the vocabulary when you and your child are alone, or when the family is together as a whole.
3. Highlight naturally occurring times when you (as the caregiver) are using flexible or stuck thinking. It’s important for your child to understand that you are constantly being challenged to use flexible thinking too. Consider the following examples and how you might talk out loud through the situation:
  - “My plan today was to take a walk outside. Then, I remembered I had to go to a meeting at school. I had to be flexible and change my plan.”
  - “My brain is stuck thinking about wanting to read a good book. But it’s time to wash dishes. I have to be flexible because the kitchen needs to be cleaned first.”
4. Reinforce times when you observe your child using **flexible thinking**. While it’s much easier to catch your child in a stuck moment, it’s important to set a positive tone with this vocabulary. In our experience, when children hear they are using stuck thinking over and over they start to attach negative feelings to the terms. By contrast, if the flexible moments are highlighted, they feel initial success and will be more open to learning about the stuck moments later on. Consider the following examples:
  - “Wow, you changed your plan! That was so flexible!”
  - “I am so proud of your flexible thinking! I could tell you wanted to ride your bike, but you were flexible and ate lunch first.”
  - “I know you wanted the blue game piece but there is only green left. Let’s use our flexible thinking!”
  - “You were so flexible giving your brother a choice of what movie to watch. That makes me feel happy! Now we can start movie time.”

## **Flexible Brain Challenge**

### **A flexible learning activity you can do with your child**

1. First tell your child, “We are going to practice being flexible. Get ready to follow my plan!” For example: instruct your child to jump 10 times. As the child begins to jump, say “Never mind, I changed the plan. Sit down instead!”
2. Give positive reinforcement when your child is flexible and changes his/her actions. For example: “You were so flexible, Silvia. You sat down right away when the plan changed. Great flexible thinking!”

3. Follow the same process describe above for two or three more activities. Some suggestions include:
  - “Put your hands on your head. Now put them on your hips.”
  - “Clap your hands 50 times. Never mind, only 10!”
  - “Do jumping jacks with me. Never mind, let’s do arm circles instead.”
4. If possible, use video! As you do this activity, videotape your child. Play the video back to watch so your child can see how well he or she is doing being flexible! Heap on the praise when your child is using flexible thinking!

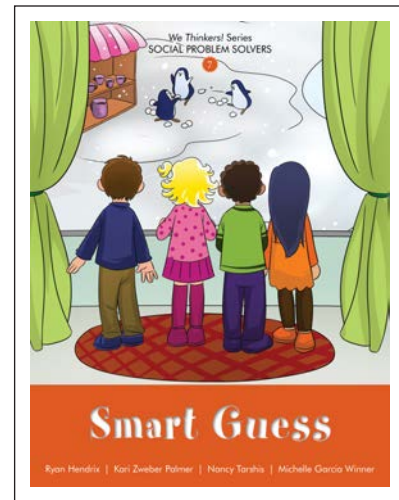
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# Unit 7 Smart Guess

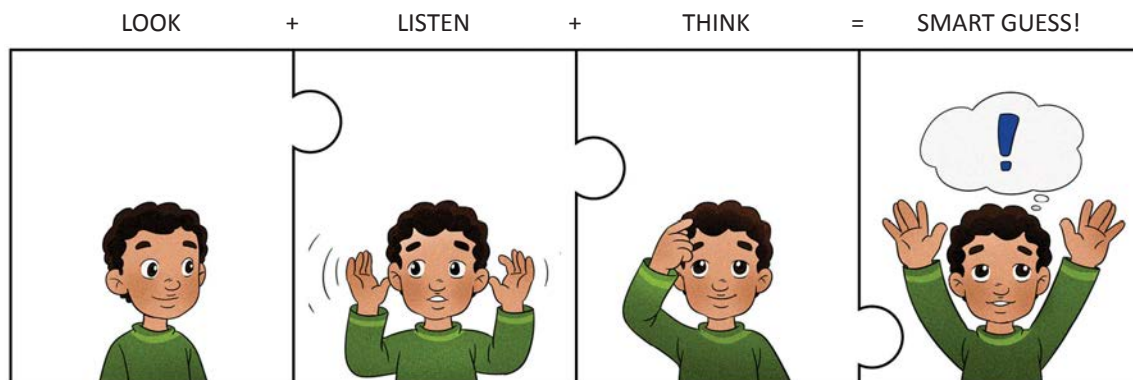


## Family Letter and At Home Activities

In our Social Thinking group we are learning about the concept of making a **smart guess**. A smart guess is when we take what we observe and combine that with what we know to make a guess.

A smart guess means the same thing as an “educated guess” but the term is more kid-friendly and one that younger kids can more easily learn to understand.

When we’re sharing space with others, we have to make smart guesses to interpret and respond to the situation and the people in it. We can make smart guesses about the *hidden rules*, about people’s *thoughts and feelings*, and about the *group plan*. (These three concepts and a few others mentioned below in italics were introduced to children in earlier storybooks in this series.) To make a smart guess we have to **look, listen and think**. When we look we are *thinking with our eyes*, we use *whole body listening* to interpret what people are saying and we think about what we already know. We call this the **Smart Guess Formula**.



We also make smart guesses about what people mean by what they say. For example, when you tell your children “it’s dinner time” you expect them to know they should stop what they’re doing and come to the dinner table. In some families children are also expected to know they should wash their hands before eating.

We make **wacky guesses** when we have no information (or clues) or experience to help us figure out what’s going on. If our guess is wrong it’s okay (and even expected!) because we didn’t have clues to help us! If we don’t think with our eyes, listen to what is happening around us or use what we already know, we might make a wacky guess, even when clues are there.

In our group we’re reading the storybook, *Smart Guess: Mystery Adventure*.<sup>\*</sup> In the story the main characters Evan, Ellie, Jesse and Molly have a mystery adventure. Only one of the children, Ellie, knows the plan for the day. She has the information in her brain, but doesn’t share it with the other kids. Before the other kids have any clues, they think they could be doing anything—maybe cooking or doing an art project. Only Ellie knows! She wants them to guess. As the story moves along the kids uncover clues to help them figure out the plan. To make a smart guess they have to use what they see and what they hear, and combine that with what they already know to come up with a smart guess. Ellie’s plan is for them all to play outside in the snow. The mystery involves the kids figuring that out!

Wacky Guess



## Activities to try at home

1. Look for and help your child notice everyday clues that help us make smart guesses about what people are thinking and planning and what will happen next. Point out clues like:
  - The supplies or materials for an activity
    - “I see you have crayons and paper out. My smart guess is that you’re going to draw a picture.”
    - “We have a bucket of water, dish soap, and bubble wands. Can you guess what we’re going to do?”
  - Items out on the counter before cooking
    - “I see there are eggs, chocolate chips, sugar and butter here. I’m making a smart guess someone is going to make cookies!”
    - “We have peanut butter, jelly and bread out. Make a smart guess. What do you think we’re going to make?”

- What others are going to do next
    - “Your brother is sitting down at the table with his backpack and papers. I think he’s going to do his homework.”
    - “I just put on my jacket and now I’m picking up my keys and bag. What do you think I’m going to do now?”
    - “You’ve got your pajamas on, you’ve brushed your teeth and I’m holding a book. Can you make a smart guess about what we’re doing next?”
  - What we mean by what we say
    - “When I say ‘it’s bedtime’ I am thinking about you putting on your pajamas, brushing your teeth, and... what else? Make a smart guess!”
    - “When I say ‘dinner time’ it’s expected that you stop what you are doing, go wash your hands, and come sit at the table.”
    - “I said ‘it’s time for school.’ I see you are still reading. I am making a smart guess you didn’t know what I was thinking. When I say ‘it’s time for school’ I mean put your book away and get your sweater and book bag.”
2. Play the game, *I Spy*. Find an object around the room and give your child clues about it: what you see (physical attributes), hear (a sound it might make), and know/remember about the object (from past experience). For example: “I spy something red with wheels. It makes a “vroom” sound. I remember we drove this toy on the floor this morning!”

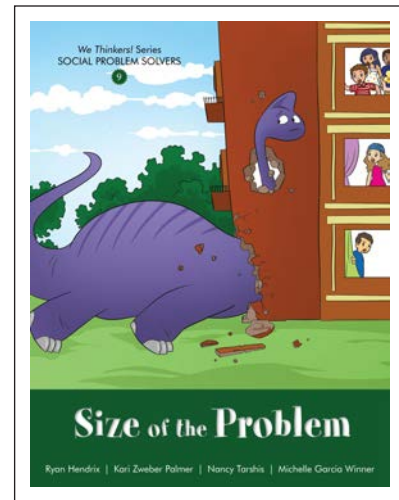
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## Unit 9

# Size of the Problem



## Family Letter and At Home Activities

In our Social Thinking group we are learning about the concept **size of the problem**. Whenever we're around other people, we're involved in problem solving as a means to figure out how to act, what to say, and how to keep ourselves and others feeling comfortable together. Social problem solving is complex and requires us to consider many different aspects of a situation and the people in it.

Before you think about teaching problem solving to your child, we encourage you to first think about your own adult experiences with in-the-moment problem solving. Have you ever overacted to a problem? Most of us have experienced times when our reaction didn't match the actual size of the problem! And, we may have noticed the response in others or the consequences that followed. While we all want our children to become more successful with problem solving, we need to keep in mind that if we, as adults who have had years of practice, still struggle with this in our own lives, it's unrealistic to expect to teach kids to fully control their own behaviors and problem solve without hiccups. It's a learning process for us all!

We are, however, able to teach children the building blocks of understanding that will go a long way in helping them become better at problem solving a situation. The goal of this unit is to increase our children's awareness of the following concepts, which ultimately contribute to them learning better self-regulation:

- Problems come in different sizes
- Emotions and reactions come in different sizes
- Reactions come from emotions
- It's expected that the size of the emotion and related reaction matches the size of the problem.

## Where do we start?

To begin, we define the following concepts:

- **Problem:** A problem is something that happens that was not part of the plan and negatively influences it. Problems make people feel uncomfortable.
- **Size of the Problem:** Problems come in different sizes. *Small problems* can be taken care of quickly and can be solved on our own or with the help of another person. Kids can help other kids solve small problems. *Medium* problems take more time to solve and require more help. Usually adults help solve medium problems. However, it's expected that kids help solve medium problems with the adults. Finally, *big problems* take a lot of time to take care of and require a lot of help from others. When big problems happen, even adults need help from other adults.
- **Feelings:** Feelings are what happen on the inside of our bodies. To help us talk about our feelings we use words such as happy, mad, sad, and scared. When problems happen, we have different feelings of different sizes or intensities. Because problems make people feel uncomfortable, we usually use words such as *frustrated, stressed, sad, upset, disappointed, nervous, worried, and afraid*.
- **Reactions:** Reactions come from our feelings. A reaction is what we show on the outside by what we say and do. Just as problems and feelings come in different sizes, so do our reactions. It's expected that the size of the reaction on the outside should match the size of the problem.

By teaching the above concepts, we help establish norms around defining and emotionally responding to a problem. With our early learners we want children to better understand that when they share space and interact with others, they constantly have to problem solve. When problems occur, there are expectations for how they will respond or try to respond to them.

That DOES NOT mean we actually expect kids to SHOW the expected reaction. Many young children struggle to keep calm when they feel passionately about something! By teaching children to be aware of the size of the problem, size of the emotion and size of the related reaction, we are helping them think about their problems and learn that they can have control over how they react to different problems.

It's also important to note that we aren't telling kids how to feel. Each of us has the right to our own emotional reaction, which is a combination of hardwiring (temperament) and life-experience. We are suggesting that children can learn to adjust how they are feeling by learning more about what constitutes a problem and that problems come in different sizes. A number of children think any problem is a huge devastating event. We are trying to help them learn that something called a "problem" might not be such a huge event. It may actually be a "small problem." Knowing this, in turn, can help us stay calmer; we learn we can solve it quickly! Teaching these concepts and ideas is essential to social emotional regulation. Having a big reaction to a "not big" problem creates a new problem, since people tend to react to the emotional reactions of others.



As we work to build this self-awareness in our early learners, and we encourage them to look at how others react to various sizes of problems, children may eventually gain enough self-regulatory capacity to hear those words in their brains and in the moment think, “Stop, and think. This is a small problem. I can stay calm.” This level of self-awareness and self-regulation could be years and years away, however. Think of your role as planting seeds of understanding.

It is very helpful to model this thinking and behavior for your children. As small or medium problems emerge in your life, talk to your children about what you’re noticing, how you feel, and how your feelings are tied to how you’re reacting. The more times you can point out your own thinking and behavior the more opportunity you give your child to learn about what goes on inside your mind. This will help them learn how they can think inside their own minds too when problems arise!

### To figure out the size of the problem we think about:

- How long it will take to make the problem smaller, fix it, or make it better
- How much help we need and from whom (kids or adults)

**Small problems** are considered small because they do not take a very long time to make better. It can take a few seconds up to a few minutes to solve them. Who helps? Children can solve small problems by themselves or with the help of another person. That person can be another kid or a grown-up. If children can stay calm when small problems occur, problems are solved even faster!

**Medium problems** take a longer time to fix or make better. It can take minutes up to hours. Who helps? It takes more people to solve a medium problem. An adult usually helps solve a medium problem alongside the child. Because the problem takes some effort to solve, children may feel a little bit sad, worried or frustrated. Children can talk to an adult about how they feel and adults can let children know their plan to help solve the problem!

**Big problems** take a really long time to solve. It can take days, weeks, months or even longer to make these problems better. Who helps? When big problems happen, even grown-ups need help from other grown-ups. It takes a lot of people to work through big problems. They can make people feel scared, upset or mad. Adults and children usually have to talk about big problems and think about different solutions. Big problems usually mean people have to make some big changes to solve them. This is part of what can make people upset.

Note: The concept of time is developmental. Understanding the passage of time can be especially difficult for some students. Many students will not know the difference between a few seconds and minutes, for example. So, keep this in mind when discussing the “how long will it take?” component of problem solving. Timers, a clock or a stopwatch can be effective when used



in the moment to capture the amount of time it takes to solve a problem. We recommend the use of the Time Timer ([timetimer.com](http://timetimer.com)) to help teach students about the passage of time. The Time Timer is a visual timer that shows the passage of time. You set the timer by moving a red disk on a clock face to the desired time for an activity. As time elapses the red disk disappears, allowing children to literally see the passage of time.

## Activities to try at home

1. Highlight naturally occurring times when you (as the caregiver) encounter a problem. It's important for your child to understand that you are constantly being challenged by problems of all sizes. Thinking out loud about problems and their solutions models the language of problem solving for your child.

In using the language of problem solving, we have found it helpful to follow a formula of sorts in breaking down a problem or situation. You don't need to include all elements in all examples!

- What happened
- The size of the problem
- How you felt about it
- Ideas for solving the problem or making it smaller
- What you did
- How you felt about it afterward

Consider the following examples and how you might talk out loud through the situation:

- "This morning I spilled my coffee on the table when I was reaching for some fruit. I felt really frustrated because I wanted to drink it and now there was a mess. Then I thought about how it was just a small problem. And I could fix it by myself. I stayed calm, wiped up the spill, and poured myself another cup. It was quick and easy to fix that problem. I felt proud of myself for staying calm."
- "I really wanted to wear my green shirt today, but I spilled yogurt on it. I was disappointed. I thought about how I could wash it and wear it another day. I stayed calm and changed into another shirt. It was just a small problem, no big deal."
- "Oops, I missed that parking spot. That's okay; we can just park a little further away. Small problem!"
- "When I went to the store they were all out of bananas. That wasn't my plan. I was calm and chose apples instead. I can get bananas next time. I was proud of myself for being flexible and having a small reaction to a small problem."

2. Reinforce times when you observe your child engaged in problem solving and demonstrating small reactions to small problems. While it's much easier to catch your child in a moment where his or her reaction does not match the size of the problem, it's important to set a positive tone with this vocabulary. In our experience, when children hear you point out that they're having big reactions to small problems in the moment they're having that reaction, it can escalate the problem and create negative feelings toward the language and terms.

Consider the following examples:

- “Wow, when your crayon broke you stayed calm, and chose a different color to finish your picture. It didn't take very long to get another crayon and you made the problem smaller all by yourself!”
- “I know you wanted to keep building when it was time for school. We made a plan to build more after school today. I am so proud of your flexible thinking! We kept the problem small!”
- “We're going to play a game together. Everyone will choose a different colored game piece. We might not get the color we want. That's just a small problem. Maybe we can get a different color next time. If we can stay calm and be flexible, we can play the game! That will make everyone feel good. We can always play again, and if you are calm, everyone else will feel calm too and we will want to play again.”
- “You lost the game. I know it feels like a big problem and I understand that you are upset. But it's just a small problem. Even though it feels like a big problem, it's expected you show a small reaction. We can play again. Maybe next time you will be the winner.”

## Size of the Problem: Activity Worksheet to use at Home

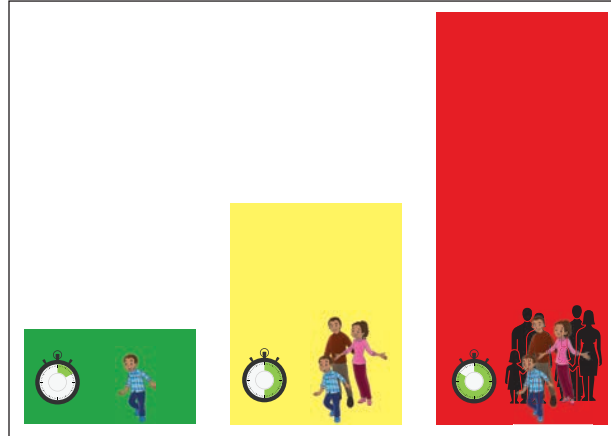
The purpose of this worksheet is to reflect on problems that happen at home. By completing this with your child, you are establishing a language you and your child can use to talk about problem solving and reactions. Please note: the best time to fill out this sheet is AFTER a problem has occurred and your child is calm. You want to find a time when your child is ready to learn, not when the child's emotions have taken over.

### Directions

1. Before you sit down with your child, think of a time when he or she was **successful** with problem solving. Think of a moment when you were perhaps surprised at his/her ability to stay calm in the face of a problem. It is best to start from a positive perspective.
2. Complete column 1: What is the Problem? Help your child identify the problem. Write down what happened.

3. Complete column 2: How did you feel? Use the Word Bank provided.
4. Complete column 3: What is the size of the problem? Use the Size of the Problem Scale to guide your discussion.

Size of the Problem Scale



The purpose of this visual is to help children learn how to put problems in perspective. As we think through various problems and their relative sizes, we can see how they compare to each other. By determining the relative size of the problem, students will gain a deeper understanding of how to look at the “big picture” and put problems into perspective. On this scale green represents a small problem, yellow is a medium problem, and red is a big problem. The clock represents the amount of time it typically takes to solve this level of problem, and the people indicate who might help solve the problem. For instance: a small problem (green) can be solved pretty quickly and usually just by the person alone.

Some children may readily be able to identify the size of the problem. For others, this will be much more challenging, as it requires a child to take perspective and put clues together to make a smart guess. This becomes even more challenging if we are asking a child to identify the size of his or her own problem. The goal with this worksheet is to start the discussion.

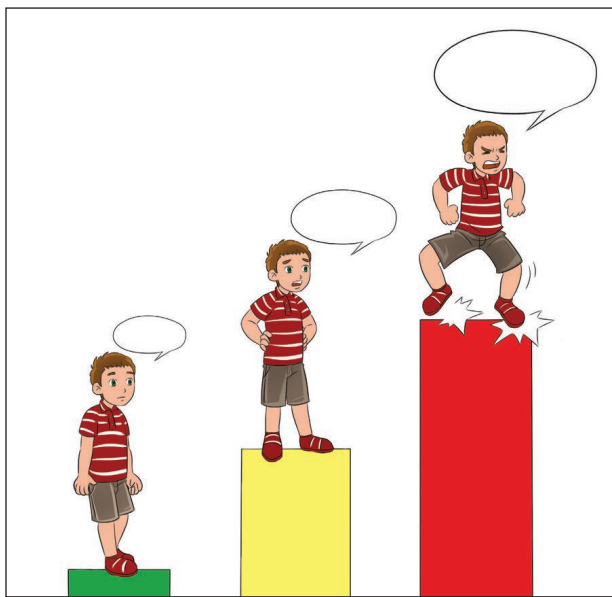
### **To figure out the size of the problem we think about:**

- How long it will take to make the problem smaller, fix it, or make it better
- How much help we need and from whom (kids or adults)

## 5. Complete column 4: Size of the Reaction

- Identify the size of the child's reaction for the situation. To talk about different sizes of reactions we use the Problem, Feelings and Reaction Scale.

Problem, Feelings and Reaction Scale

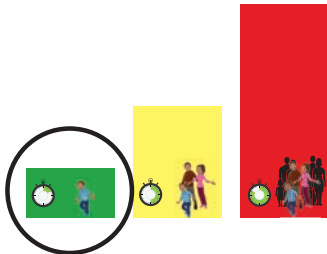
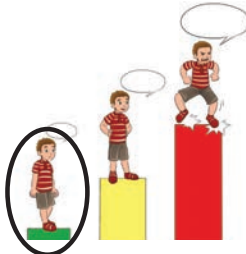


The boy on the blocks is Evan, one of the characters from the storybook: *Size of the Problem: Dinosaur Adventure*. As you can see, Evan is calm when standing on the small block and increasingly frustrated as the blocks get bigger. Different sizes of reactions are expected for different problems. Most of the problems that come up during the day are small. For kids, however, sometimes small problems FEEL like big ones. We don't want to tell kids how they should feel about something or label their feelings as good or bad. Our goal is to teach that when a small or medium problem occurs, it is expected that the child shows a small or medium reaction (behavior) on the outside. The size of the reaction should match the size of the problem.

While a child may be able to *tell* you a small reaction is expected for a small problem, when the problem is his own this understanding may fly out the window and his reaction may be quite different! We expect that children will be able to talk about the relative sizes of problems (and reactions) long before they are able to demonstrate that knowledge in the moment or use a strategy to maintain or regain a regulated state. By having this conversation, you are helping your child better understand the expectations around problem solving.



6. At this point, you will have completed one example. It will look something like this:

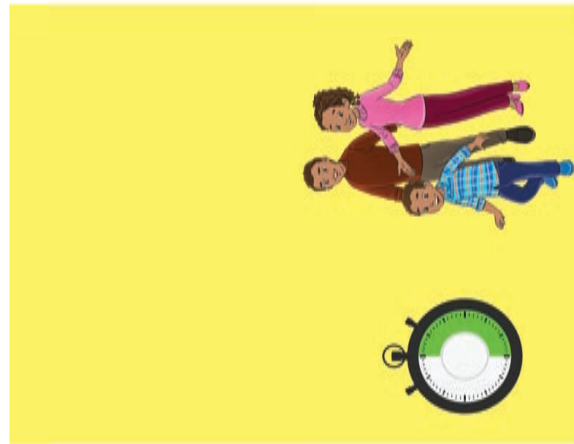
Size of the Problem and Reaction: Family Worksheet			
What is the problem?	How did you feel?	What is the size of the problem?	What is the size of the reaction?
At bedtime there was only time to read one book, and we usually read two or three books.	<i>Sad</i>  <i>Disappointed</i>		

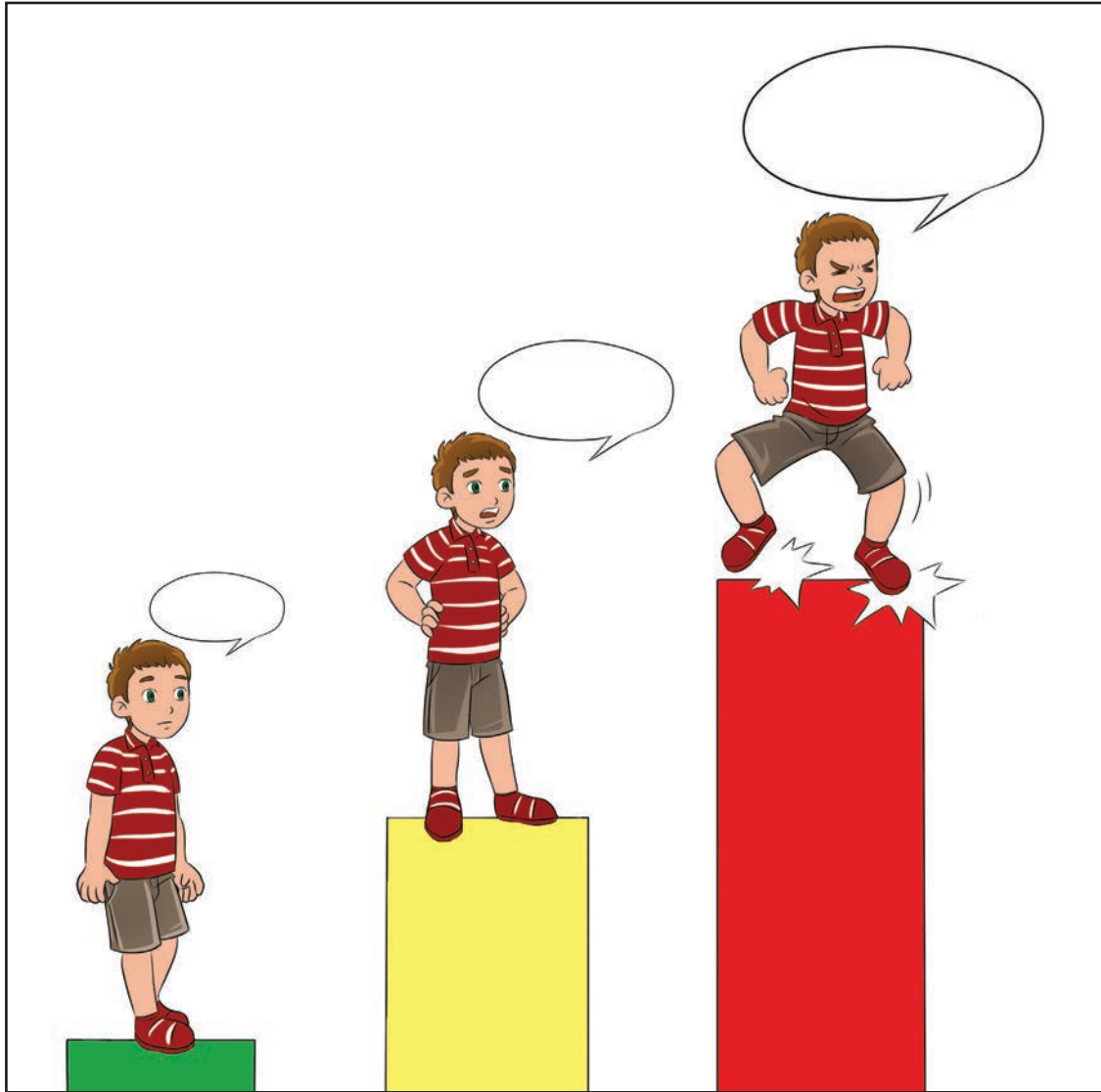
7. Over time, fill out the remainder of the worksheet, one problem at a time. Use examples of times when your child was successful AND had challenges in matching the size of the problem with the size of his or her reaction. As you talk through each example, discuss if the size of the problem matched the reaction. Why or why not? Always keep in mind that this is meant to be a learning opportunity. You and your child are exploring a complicated process. With practice, your child's thinking and skills will evolve over time.

\*The storybook mentioned in this letter is part of *Social Problem Solvers*, Volume 2 of the *We Thinkers!* series, our Social Thinking early learner curriculum. Volume 1 (*Social Explorers*) and Volume 2 each consist of five storybooks that introduce social concepts through a themed adventure, and a curriculum book with units, activities and tips to teach the concepts. A music CD, *The Incredible Flexible You*, supports the curriculum with 12 songs, each of which relate directly to the Social Thinking Vocabulary concepts introduced in the two volumes. It's not necessary to purchase any of these materials to work with your child on these concepts at home. The Family Letters share basic information and vocabulary and suggest some at-home activities. Also, there are many free articles on the Social Thinking website that describe the core philosophy of Social Thinking ([www.socialthinking.com](http://www.socialthinking.com)).

The music CD and each set of five storybooks are sold separately from the curriculum, should you like to extend your child's learning at home. Parents purchasing either the storybook set(s) or the music CD for at-home use are eligible to enter discount code "storybooks10" at checkout to receive 10% off the retail price of those products.

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Size of the Problem and Reaction: Family Worksheet			
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# Feelings Word Bank

Use the following word list to talk to your child about feelings. Helping your child label the emotions he/she experiences goes a long way toward processing and understanding the emotions the child is feeling. Our kids often have difficulty using words that go beyond the basic: happy, sad, mad, and scared. Increasing your child's emotional vocabulary will be helpful in many areas, including problem solving!

## Happy

- Calm
- Glad
- Pleased
- Great
- Wonderful
- Excited
- Proud

## Sad

- Unhappy
- Upset
- Down
- Gloomy
- Disappointed
- Let down
- Lonely

## Mad

- Angry
- Bothered
- Frustrated
- Troubled
- Cross
- Horrible
- Furious

## Scared

- Uncomfortable
- Uneasy
- Nervous
- Worried
- Frightened
- Afraid
- Terrified



# Unit 10

## Sharing An Imagination



## Family Letter and At Home Activities

Think about the last conversation you had with a friend. What did you talk about? To have the “back and forth” exchange of stories and experiences, you each had to share an imagination. Although you may not have realized it at the time, when your friend told a story—about work, for instance, you had to imagine his/her experience, even though you probably have never been employed at the same company or worked with the same people. You can still appreciate a funny (or serious) story about something that occurred there because you are imagining the experience!

Sharing an imagination is at the heart of conversation. But how do we learn to have a conversation? Conversation actually has its roots in play! Imagine a group of young children engaged in shared imaginative cooperative play. For example, think of a group of kids pretending to be a family in the dramatic play corner of a classroom. Each child has a role (mom, grandma, baby, etc.) and they work together to make and eat dinner. To join in and keep this kind of play going, the children have to share an imagination. They have to coordinate their ideas, goals, and interests with others to pursue a common plan (eat dinner!). This type of shared imaginative play “grows up” over time. As kids age, they gradually fade out the toys and props and connect through sharing ideas and imaginations. As adults, we call this conversation.

Many times our students with social learning challenges have difficulty joining and keeping this type of play and conversation going. They may have wonderful creative ideas and imaginations, but the difficulty comes because they can’t figure out how to share in an idea if it was not their own. And,

they often don't realize that a verbal exchange is needed for other kids to know they are sharing the imagination of the group. For example, when building with blocks, a child might have a detailed and innovative design for making an airport. On his own, he can create a brilliant structure. Asking that same child to build the airport and share his ideas with others, however, can present a great challenge. Additionally, if the child's peer is also building an airport, it may be difficult for the child to imagine another's ideas and add his own ideas to the ongoing play so it unfolds in a cooperative manner.

When we are all doing something concrete together, like building, it is easier to see that we are all thinking about the same thing. Having a conversation, making plans together as a group, and even playing together is much harder because we are all thinking about something intangible, that we can't see. We have to *imagine* or hold in our minds a common thread (concept, picture, idea, plan, etc.) for it to be successful.

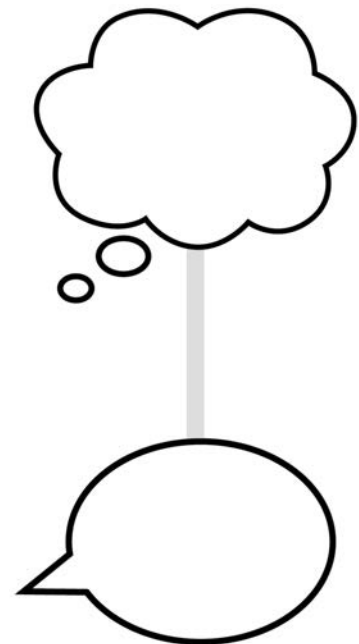
By encouraging children to practice sharing ideas and imaginations, we are helping them learn the same skills that are crucial for more sophisticated social interactions and conversation as students age.

Here are some ways to practice this concept at home:

- Make the Imagine and Share visual:

Cut out the thought bubble and talking bubble images at the end of this letter. Attach the thought bubble to the top of a tongue depressor or ruler and the talking bubble to the bottom. This visual is used to help your child make a connection between imagining an idea and telling others about it.

Many times, children have difficulty entering in play and sharing ideas. When playing together, use this visual. Consider the following example: You and your child are playing with play dough. You pretend to make a birthday cake. Hold up the visual so the thought bubble is close to your brain and the talking bubble is close to your mouth. Say, "I'm imagining this play dough is a birthday cake. You didn't know this was a cake until I told you. I can also show you my idea by pretending to blow out candles." Now have your child make something out of play dough while you watch. Using the visual, reinforce the concept. "I don't know what you're imagining until you either tell me or show me your idea!"



- Play together! Any opportunity to engage in shared collaborative play is an opportunity to practice sharing an imagination. Some ideas to get you started:
  - **Play a guessing game.** Tell your child, “I’m thinking of an animal. Let’s see if you can share my imagination and figure out what it is!” Then give clues (e.g., it has a long neck, is yellow with brown, and eats leaves). Once your child makes a correct guess, give positive feedback using the vocabulary. For example, “Yes! I was thinking of a giraffe. Now you are sharing my imagination and thinking of a giraffe too!” To extend this game, act out being a giraffe together reaching long necks out to munch on some leaves.
  - **Play charades.** Play the classic guessing game of acting out an object, word, person, or animal.
  - **Read the book,** *Not a Box*, by Antoinette Portis. In this delightful story a bunny pretends his cardboard box is anything but. It can be fun to share an imagination and act out the pages of the book together, pretending the cardboard box is a car or a robot or anything you can imagine!

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