



## Teaching Children With Autism to Mind-Read

A Practical Guide for Teachers and Parents

### Curriculum Overview

Teaching Children with Autism to Mind-Read is a curriculum designed to enhance the social and communicative abilities of children by developing their understanding of mental states, also known as "mind-reading" or "theory of mind." Theory of mind is the ability to infer other people's mental states (their thoughts, beliefs, desires, intentions, emotions, etc.) and to use this information to interpret what they say, make sense of their behavior, and predict what they will do next.

Some of the core ideas the program teaches include: Perception causes knowledge, meaning a person will know something if they saw or heard about it.



For example, Snow White doesn't know the apple is poisoned because she didn't see the witch put poison in it. Desires are satisfied by actions or objects, meaning if a person wants x, s/he will be happy to obtain x. Conversely, if a person doesn't get x, s/he will be unhappy. For example, the children want to go to the park and are happy when their mother takes them. They are not happy if they go to the supermarket instead. Pretense involves object substitution or outcome suspension, which means when a person pretends x, s/he does so without the usual objects or consequences, just for fun. For example, Alan holds a banana to his ear. He is pretending to talk on the telephone.

This curriculum is designed to help children with a language age of at least 4 years old, as this is the level at which children typically begin to show mind-reading abilities. It is intended for ages 4 to 13, but can be adapted with appropriate modifications for older individuals who meet the basic language and cognitive requirements.

## Concepts Taught in the Curriculum

### Part 1: Understanding Emotions

This section is structured across five levels, progressively building a child's ability to recognize and interpret emotional expressions and their causes.

1. **Facial Expression Recognition (Photographs):** Recognizing basic emotions of happy, sad, angry, afraid from real-life photos.
2. **Facial Expression Recognition (Cartoons):** Matching schematic (drawn) facial expressions to the correct emotion label.
3. **Situation-Based Emotion Recognition:** Identifying emotions triggered by specific situations (e.g., fear when an accident is about to happen). Children should be able to predict how a character will feel given the content of the picture.
4. **Desire-Based Emotions:** Understanding that emotions result from whether desires are fulfilled or unfulfilled.
5. **Belief-Based Emotions:** Interpreting emotions based on what a person believes, even if their belief is false.

### Part 2: Informational States (Knowledge & Belief)

This part focuses on how people acquire knowledge and form beliefs, and how those beliefs influence their actions.

1. **Simple Visual Perspective-Taking:** Recognizing that different people may see different things depending on their position. The child can judge what you (therapist) can or cannot see.

1. **Complex Perspective-Taking:** Understanding not just what someone sees, but how it appears to them.
2. **“Seeing Leads to Knowing”:** Knowing that people learn things through direct or indirect experiences. There is a connection between seeing and knowing, and also hearing/feeling and knowing.
3. **Predicting Actions Based on Knowledge:** This tests the child’s understanding of true belief. Children are required to predict a person’s actions based on where that person believes an object to be.
4. **Understanding False Beliefs:** The standard approach to theory of mind reasoning. Here, children are required to predict a person’s actions based on where that person falsely believes an object to be.

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### Part 3: Pretend Play

This final section explores children’s capacity for symbolic thought and imagination, which is essential to theory of mind development.

1. **Sensorimotor Play:** Simple manipulation of toys (e.g., banging, lining up, sorting by size/color).
2. **Emerging Functional Play:** Using objects appropriately but without imagination (e.g., putting a cup on a saucer, pushing a toy car).
3. **Emerging Pretend Play:** Includes object substitution, using imaginary objects and scenarios, and pretend/real distinctions.
4. **Established Pretend Play:** Rich, sustained imaginative play that involves characters, plots, and emotional roles.

### Looking Ahead: Future Directions

Some possible directions for future work in this area:

- Using gaze direction to infer interest or intention
- Representing beliefs through pictures and visual cues
- Using cartoon thought bubbles to represent internal thoughts
- Developing skills in joint attention and empathy

# spotlight