

Social Perception Training – an essential Social Competence component when working with young people with behavioral problems

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Introduction

In grouping the Prepare Curriculum courses, Arnold Goldstein suggests that “Situational Perception Training” should be included with the courses addressing aggression problems

together with Skillstreaming, Anger Control Training and Moral Reasoning Training (Goldstein 2004). The reason for this is the fact that one of the most important risk factors for developing deviant behavior is misattribution of other peoples` intent as hostile or threatening (Crick & Dodge, 1996). If a person in an ambiguous situation perceives the action as hostile, this will have a considerable influence on how the subsequent interaction develops. The tendency for people with behavioral problems to perceive others` actions as hostile in ambiguous situations is consistent across different patterns of aggression and just as apparent as other perceptual problems, such as lack of attention and hyperactivity (Waldman I.D., 1996).

The development of Social Perception Training has been influenced by the social information processing theory formulated by Crick and Dodge (1994) with the later inclusion of emotions and morality into the model (Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000; Arsenio & Lemerise, 2004). Based on this model, we view the reaction of cognitive, moral and emotional processing through the following five-step process

- Encoding of Cues
- Interpretation of Social Signals
- Clarification of Goals
- Generating Alternative Actions
- Response Decision

How we interpret a social situation depends on a long list of factors. Some of them are connected with patterns of attribution of hostile intent developed through experienced physical or mental / psychological harm by parents or other members of a person`s network which has led to a tendency to believe that other people will also harm them (See Dodge, Price, Bachorowski, & Newman, 1990). Other interpretations are connected with a lack of actually knowing unwritten norms and rules and also an understanding of adapting behavior to situations that may involve different cultures. Further, the importance of emotional awareness, including identifying and expressing emotions is considered to be one of the key factors in social competence (Hallberstadt, Denham, & Dunsmore, 2001). Children who have difficulties interpreting other peoples` emotional status seem to be more disliked and are also in danger of being rejected by their peers (Fabes et al., 1999). Also other thinking errors: like

the tendency to blame others, minimize or other cognitive distortions influence how a certain social event is perceived.

Even if the main purpose of the program is to clarify ambiguous situations, the program also follows the situation through the further steps in Crick and Dodge's information processing theory. By the end of each topic, the trainers introduce a role-play. The situations are analyzed through reflection about the current session and the previous perceptual factors – but afterwards the participants suggest how the situations should progress based on clarifying those perceptual factors. The solutions should be based on what will be the best for all parties involved in the situation.

In the present paper, we will first describe Social Perception Training sessions and then give a brief evaluation of the implementation of SPT at the Hedebo Center, Denmark.

Social Perception Training sessions

Originally the program consisted of 10 sessions. However, when trying it out, trainers found out that they needed more time. The program has therefore been delivered as a 20-session program where each topic is presented over two sessions. Thus, the program has a more flexible nature than the ART-program, giving the trainers the possibility of working on different topics depending on the special needs of the members of the group.

The following gives a short description of the session outlines:

Session 1: Introduction to Social Perception Training

To *perceive* means to interpret or give meaning to what we observe. In the sessions, we will take a close look at some common social situations in which it is easy to be misunderstood or to misunderstand others. These misunderstandings often lead to conflict, loss of friendships, and other difficult situations. The object of the program is to learn social rules and norms to better handle these difficult social situations.

Session 2: Identifying Emotions

The ability to communicate our own feelings and also take into consideration other people's worries and emotions is the key to social success. If we can't interpret others' feelings and experience from others' perspectives, we can easily interpret social signals incorrectly and be confused about how we should react in an acceptable way.

Session 3: Open and Hidden Rules in Different Situations

Open rules are explicitly expressed and fairly easy to learn. Hidden rules are implicitly expressed rules that just occur within a culture or situation and that we need to master to avoid behaving in a socially unacceptable way.

Session 4: Cultural Differences

Cultural differences are differences in the ways groups do things. For example, different nations and ethnic cultures may have different hidden and open rules. Different subcultures may have different rules within larger nations or groups—for example, there may be different expectations for males and females or young people and adults.

Session 5: Setting Events

Often we bring experiences, thoughts, emotions, or physiological status (like pain or tiredness) from one situation to another. These setting events are important because they influence the way we think and act, even if they are not directly connected to the situation we are in.

Session 6: Thoughts, Feelings, Body Signals, and Actions

How we think about or interpret a situation can affect our feelings, body signals, and actions. Sometimes our feelings and body signals come first, and we might interpret a situation on the basis of how we feel and not what we think. Changes in any one of these factors will have an impact on others.

Session 7: Interpreting Others' Intentions

An intention is what you or another wishes to achieve in a certain situation. For example, you might want to be kind or to get something. It is important to be able to interpret others' intentions because it will influence how we react and respond.

Session 8: Cognitive Distortions

Cognitive distortions, sometimes called thinking errors, are arguments that often have the function of justifying deviant actions. The four basic thinking errors are blaming others, minimizing, being self-centered and assuming the worst. Understanding our thinking errors helps us to take responsibility for our actions.

Session 9: Timing

Timing means the right time and place for an action. To get along with others, it is important to be able to distinguish between situations where a specific action might be proper and where it might be considered untimely or wrong.

Session 10: Consequences

Consequences are what happen after an action, either right away or after some time has gone by. Consequences might be good or bad. Evaluating consequences helps us to predict what will happen and consequently make better choices for the future.

The internal structure of the session has the following steps:

1. Facilitator presents the topic of the day
This is usually done by presenting pictures, films or games that illustrate the topic.
2. Facilitator presents one situation usually in the form of a role play.
3. Participants analyze the situation based on the current and previous sessions
4. Participants suggest alternative ways of continuing the role-play
5. Participants choose one alternative solution
6. Participants plan and role-play the chosen solution
7. Facilitator and participants conduct a feedback round
8. Facilitator assigns homework

Homework is an important part of the program, together with other techniques of making the topics relevant for each of the participants. Therefore, we recommend that there are no more than 10-15 participants in a group and the participants should have time to reflect on the topics and make them personal. In the beginning of the program, we saw that some trainers emphasized the identification of as many intentions as possible and often these turned out to be negative. In the worst cases this made the participant perceive things in a more negative way, which was the opposite of what we wanted. Another pitfall turned out to be that trainers were looking at cultural differences and strict norms instead of creating flexibility and challenging stereotypical thinking. These pitfalls have been focused on in the book, but we can see that it is very important to address these factors during training seminars.

Experiences with the implementation of SPT at Hedeboencentret, Denmark

As a major center for social education for youth and young adults with both residential and outreaching services, the use of Aggression Replacement Training (A.R.T. / AART) came as a natural and very useful remedy when it was introduced 5 years ago. However, from our experiences, the main focus on AART was development of individual skills and awareness. There was not the same emphasis on the understanding of the basis for relationships with others and the characteristic of the social situations the youth participate in. Three staff members were trained in SPT in 2012 and implemented a couple of pilot projects using SPT. These preliminary experiences led to training a broader number of staff in SPT. The program is now a regular part of the program portfolio, both in combination with the components in ART and as a separate program.

Today most participants in A.R.T. groups are offered the possibility to continue with a semester of SPT, which is run over 10 weeks on one specific week day usually in the late afternoon. The training consists of 2 – 3 hours, including an evening meal. Furthermore the participants have a possibility to continue and become Junior SPT - Trainers as well as Junior A.R.T. Trainers. To date, 9 youth have accomplished this feat. Depending on the need, they participate in SPT groups as extra trainers/role models or in the ‘marketing’ of SPT. For many caseworkers the need to meet somebody who has participated actively in SPT is evident and the final argument to suggest to other youth that they consider participating.

When asked to evaluate participation in SPT, most of the youth acknowledge the advantage of being able to enhance their use of their skills from A.R.T. Overall the following statement seems to illustrate the youths’ experience with the program:

“Having developed the knowledge/awareness and skills during the A.R.T. groups we have been able to see and understand the situations where, and especially when, we should use our integrated knowledge and skills”.

It was also stated that while for some youth it was relatively easy to use A.R.T. skills and awareness, it was more appropriate for them to participate in developing a greater understanding of the situations where they would be involved in contact with others and required to solve difficult tasks or even conflicts. For most of the participants the ‘acquired’ knowledge was described to be a major contributor and platform for success when following further education, being new in a work place and even when participating in sports etc. One of the participants characterized SPT as the “Big brother of ART” meaning that the contents

of SPT gave them a frame of superior perspectives within which they could place the skills learned in A.R.T.

While SPT in a school setting focuses on the understanding of situations through media such as pictures, video clips and other graphic tools, SPT at Hedebo Center has been built around some of the basic ingredients of A.R.T. such as role play and discussions on understanding of and use of solutions in specific and relevant situations they recognize.

One important experience from SPT at the Hedebo Center, which also has been continuously expressed by the youth, is the advantage actually experienced by role play and thus also understanding how it feels being in an opposite or even conflicting position.

The participants, often long after the completion of their participation in SPT, mention the value of understanding issues and themes like background variables, hidden rules etc., and also the effect of the continuing review of the main conclusions from earlier sessions.

Based on the experiences mentioned above, the Hedebo Center has lately begun preparation work on a concept based entirely on SPT for a target group of young adults with no jobs or any affiliation with education etc. A trial run of A.R.T. for the same type of group a couple of years ago resulted in all being employed or part of further education – and with the experience and the statements mentioned above, it is now the aim to provide SPT as a direct enhancement of the youth's skills on their way to employment or education – something wanted especially by the authorities responsible for the advancement of the target group.

Conclusion

Except for a minor evaluation at the Hedebo Center, there has been limited research on the program to date. In one school study the participants (n=52) evaluated the program and its contents as useful, with 75-100 percent rating the program useful to a medium (3) or large (4) degree. At a post-training evaluation, parents also evaluated the program to be useful for their children. However, the program has not been tested on a large scale. A doctorate student is following a large project in the community of Mandal in Norway, but the results cannot be expected before next spring. However, preliminary experiences have already led to a decision of implementing SPT for all students in all schools in Mandal in the future.

Currently 230 trainers from Norway, 40 from Denmark and 1 from Sweden have completed 3 days of training in SPT. In addition, 3 trainers from Norway and 1 from Denmark have been

further educated to become Master Trainers. The experiences from training young people in SPT are very promising to date and interest in the program is increasing. Currently we are planning to train 20 psychologists from England in the program and hopefully future research will confirm the first promising experiences with the program both as an individual program and as part of a 4 component program addressing youth with deviant behavior.

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