



Theories of Cognition in Autism: Understanding the Challenges and Strategies for Success

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Psychologists have identified theories to explain the core deficits observed in individuals with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Each theory explains patterns of thinking that provide challenges for individuals on the spectrum. Understanding how individuals with ASD approach the world can lead to a better understanding of supports and strategies that lead to success.

	Theory of Mind	Weak Central Cohesion	Executive Functioning
The Characteristic Challenges	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Explaining their behaviors 2. Understanding their emotions 3. Predicting the behaviors or emotional state of others 4. Understanding the perspectives of others 5. Inferring the intentions of others 6. Understanding that behavior impacts how others think and/or feel 7. Differentiating fact and fiction 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Fixation on details 2. Reading comprehension 3. Literal thinking, <i>i.e.</i>, “black-and-white” thinking 4. Generalizing information learned to different domains 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Planning ahead, preparing for the next activity 2. Keeping things organized 3. Following multi-step directions 4. Combining information from several sources to problem solve
Helpful Strategies	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Explicit teaching in emotion identification 2. Teach and role play appropriate behaviors in social situations 3. Don’t place blame, teach how behaviors affect others and the better choice 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use guiding questions and graphic organizers to help draw connections 2. Provide opportunities to succeed in detailed oriented tasks 3. Present information visually 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use daily organizers, checklists, and homework logs to keep organized 2. Post a schedule at school, work, and home 3. Supply directions one step at a time, allow time to process

Merrill, A. (2015). Linking theories to practice: exploring theory of mind, weak central cohesion, and executive functioning in ASD. The Reporter E-Newsletter 20(7). Retrieved from <http://www.iidc.indiana.edu/pages/linking-theories-to-practice>