

# Social Perception

## DESCRIPTION OF THE PROBLEM

Competent social perception includes knowing that other people have thoughts, beliefs, emotions and intentions. Being able to read other people based on their words, behavior and facial expressions and adjusting one's actions based on those readings can be challenging for students with TBI. Many students with TBI have trouble with one or more of the areas of social competence. Difficulty with even one area can negatively impact the student's overall social competence.

## CAUSES

Social perception is tied to specific neurological circuits in the frontal lobes and limbic systems of the brain. The frontal lobes are particularly vulnerable in TBI. Therefore, deficits in social perception are a common effect of TBI.

## SOLUTION

Help students overcome social perception deficits.

## STRATEGIES

### **Understand the problem and help the student's peers do the same**

An adolescent boy might misread a girl's sympathetic smile as a romantic invitation and proceed to respond in a sexually offensive manner. Or a child might misread a peer's teasing gesture as a threat and react aggressively. In both cases, faulty social perception can lead to a socially challenging situation. Peers with some understanding of social perception and how a lack of it can cause problems can help prevent some of the more devastating consequences of mistakes. Explain to the student's peers that it is a result of the brain injury and suggest strategies they can use when awkward situations arise.

Example: If a student with TBI is having problems with another student, pull the other student aside and say, “Jenny’s brain injury makes it hard for her to pick up on social cues, so sometimes she misinterprets situations and reacts inappropriately. When this happens, it might help if you try to talk to her and explain what is happening with words.”

## **Talk about your own social perception with the student**

Describe what you see followed by what you think it might mean. Bringing your own perceptions into language shows the student how much a part of everyday life it is and demonstrate the specific cues you use.

Example: “I see you are smiling and quivering; I think you’re excited and happy about something.” “I notice that Tasha is clenching and unclenching her fingers; that’s a sign of stress. She might be nervous about the math quiz later today.”

## **Be clear about how easy it is to make mistakes in social perception**

Even the most skilled adult can misread cues and situations. Teach students to double-check their perceptions with words, if necessary. This is especially important for students who also struggle with impulse control. It is easy for impulsive students to misread cues through haste and then react without waiting to notice all the evidence. Making a quick verbal double-check habitual can force them to slow down, hear the answer and then react.

Example: “You look angry to me, are you?” “I think you’re teasing, am I right?”

## **NOTES:**

Original content modified from [LEARNet](#), a program of the Brain Association of New York State, and funded by the Developmental Disabilities Planning Council. Used with permission.