



Troubles with Generalization and Theory of Mind

Over time, children develop the ability to understand that others have thoughts, ideas, and feelings that differ from their own (i.e., theory of mind). This ability to understand the perspective of others plays a significant role in communication interactions. For instance, in conversation, children need to continually monitor what the communication partner knows and expects in order to make information relevant. Only with this social perspective can children interpret the meaning and intent of what others are saying. Social perspective taking also allows children to continually adjust their own language and communication with others.

It is common to observe an individual with autism who appears to understand what is said in one context or with one person and then shows confusion in another context or responding to another person. Poor **generalization** of language meaning is common due to a limited ability to consider all aspects of the social context and the speaker. It is easy for adults to misinterpret context-specific language comprehension as intentional noncompliance or "not paying attention" on the part of the individual with autism.

Individuals with autism tend to develop an understanding of concrete words and concepts, but may have difficulty understanding more **abstract** language whose meaning is social and relationship-based.

Be aware of the following:

- Be careful what you say to a person with autism, as their perspective may be different from your own.
- A person with autism tends to understand in concrete, literal terms or apply multiple meanings of words.
- A person with autism may understand a concept or appropriate response in one context, but not in another similar situation or setting.
- Generally a person with autism is honest and will tell the truth and may not understand the consequences of their choices or the effect on others.