



THEORY OF MIND

What is theory of mind?

Theory of mind is the ability to attribute mental states – beliefs, intents, desires, emotions and knowledge to oneself and others and to understand that others can have beliefs, desires, intentions and perspectives that are different to our own.

We use theory of mind to explain our own behaviour to others, by telling them what we think and want, and we interpret other people's behaviour by considering their thoughts and desires.



Development of theory of mind:

It is thought that pre-school children between the ages of three and five begin to develop skills related to theory of mind through social experiences such as play, pretending, stories and relationships with both their parents and peers. These skills are thought to develop in the following stages:

1. Understand 'wanting' – the knowledge that different people want different things and will act in different ways to get them
2. Understanding 'thinking' – different people have different but potentially true beliefs about the same action. Their actions are then likely to be based on what they think will happen.
3. Understanding that 'seeing leads to knowing' – if someone hasn't seen something, they are unlikely to know and will therefore need additional information to understand
4. Understanding 'false beliefs' – sometimes people believe things that are not true and will act according to their beliefs, not what is actually true
5. Understanding 'hidden feelings' – people can feel different emotions to what they display

After age five, children continue to develop their theory of mind into adolescence and adulthood, as well as complex language that relies on theory of mind such as sarcasm, lies and figurative language (sayings, metaphors etc.)

Difficulties with theory of mind:

It has been identified that children with the following conditions may take longer to develop skills associated with theory of mind and may not develop some skills

at all; Autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and social communication difficulties.

Some of the difficulties associated with poor theory of mind include:

- Difficulties understanding why people say and do certain things
- Having and maintaining conversations
- Story telling
- Understanding character's perspectives in stories
- Making friends
- Engaging in pretend play

Ways to support the development of theory of mind:

- Talk about mental states in your everyday routines for example, "I **feel** so hungry today" "I don't **know** where Dad left the keys, I'm **guessing** they're in the kitchen".
- Talk about past experiences
- Talk about upcoming events
- Name the mental states as they happen, for example, "what do you think John is thinking? Shall we ask him?"

My notes: