



Navigating the Social World

THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING AND LEARNING THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM

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One of the key elements for all of us to get along in daily life is our understanding of and ability to navigate the social landscape in the world around us. How we actually do this is referred to as our social skills. For those of us with autism, like me, it is said that we lack social skills—that is, we fall below the acceptable social standard, not displaying the myriad of social skills that seem to come automatically to most people. The reason for this is our autism neurology, meaning that unlike typical people, our brains are not wired to enable us to automatically pick up, incorporate and then effectively use the often elusive and transient information that is all around us. This information is called the “hidden curriculum.”

What is the Hidden Curriculum?

The hidden curriculum is based on the work of autism researcher Brenda Smith Myles. It is the social information that is not directly taught but is assumed that everybody knows (Myles, Trautman, & Schelvan, 2004). The hidden curriculum refers to those unstated rules or customs that, if not understood, can make the world a confusing place and cause those of us who are not neurologically wired to automatically “get it” feel isolated and “out of it” (Endow, 2009a, 2010). In fact, whenever you think or say things like “everybody knows...,” “common sense tells you...,” “it is quite obvious that...” or “I shouldn’t have to tell you, but...”, that is the hidden curriculum. As an adult with autism,

I have learned that whenever somebody says one of these phrases what is coming next is an explanation of some sort of social sin I have committed. Not understanding the hidden curriculum contributes to the often pervasive feeling that goes far beyond not fitting in, to feeling that you are not part of the human race. During my growing up years, I believed for a long time that I was an alien (Endow, 2006, 2009b).

For me, the most difficult part of having someone notice my social missteps is the underlying assumptions others then make about me. Here are two examples.

EXAMPLE #1

The bakery lady at my grocery store chased me down shouting, "What is wrong with you?" when I merely took free cookies like the sign indicated. The hidden curriculum item that I was unaware of was when the sign in a bakery says, "free cookies" (even though the word "cookies" is plural), it means only one cookie per person (Endow, 2009b). Although I never would have taken more than one cookie had I known, it was nonetheless assumed by the bakery lady that I had intentionally taken more than my fair share.

Another customer commented aloud for all to hear, "What a pig!" It felt awful to know I was thought of in this way, even if it was by strangers. I am not a thief or a pig, even though I did take more than my share of free cookies. I am not an inherently bad person, but because of my behavior I was a social outcast in the moment. When I make a misstep with acquaintances, it can be even worse. It means I may be forever banned from the group. Many times I never have a clue as to what I did, other than figuring out I must have committed yet another unforgivable social sin.

EXAMPLE #2

When the police officer asked why I was speeding, I answered as truthfully as possible by saying that I had depressed the accelerator with more force than needed to achieve the posted speed.

I was not trying to be a smart aleck with the officer—something that could make a bad situation even worse. At the time I was wondering how this guy ever graduated from the police academy without understanding how speeding occurs, but knew it would be disrespectful to say so having previously learned the hidden curriculum dictates to always be respectful to police officers. What I did not know was the additional hidden curriculum rule that says if you are stopped for speeding it is best to apologize and promise to be more careful from now on. Even though my behavior pegged me as a smart aleck, and could have gotten me into even more legal trouble, I am not a smart aleck or a speed demon. I have gotten a total of three speeding tickets over 40 years of driving.

The consequences of committing social sins can be anything from loss of friends to legal troubles with a resultant criminal record, depending on your age. Not understanding and following the rules of the hidden curriculum negatively impacts social functioning in all areas of life—home, community, school and workplace.

Students are at a disadvantage in school with a resulting negative impact on their education. Adults often lose more than friends when they do not understand and abide by the social rules of society. Some have lost their homes and jobs, and others have been incarcerated as a result of not behaving according to the rules of the hidden curriculum.

Rules Change Due to Variables

A difficult thing about social rules is that they are often a moving target. The rules change depending on a whole host of variables, such as age, who you are with, gender, culture and circumstance. For example, a child might be taught that when someone says "hi" to you in the school hall, it is polite to say "hi" back (Myles & Duncan, 2008). After school, the child is in a totally different social situation where safety dictates he should not say "hi" or talk to an adult stranger who approaches him as he walks home. Different circumstances dictate employing what can seem like conflicting rules. So, even if you know many of the hidden curriculum rules, it is not always easy to know which rule to follow when.

AGE

Age is a variable that can get both kids and adults on the autism spectrum in trouble if they have not learned the changing hidden curriculum rules as they grow up. Little kids often hold hands when they walk together in public places, but if a third-grader tried to hold the hand of a classmate he could be teased and laughed at by peers. If a high school student or an adult tried to hold hands with someone, romantic interest would be attributed to the act regardless of the intent. This could go bad either way. The recipient might return the assumed romantic interest with a sexual overture or, if appalled by the interest, the person might shout, swear or be physically abusive. Learning the hidden curriculum for those

of us with autism never stops. It is a lifelong endeavor.

There can also be serious legal ramifications depending on one's age. If a child peers into the bedroom window of his

your young student as a grown man if you do not teach him the hidden curriculum for using the men's room. Therefore, if you are a female professional supporting a male student, make sure you know and instruct your student how to behave in the restroom according to his gender—not yours.

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friend's home, it might be okay. The worst thing that might happen is somebody telling him it is not nice to look in someone's window; one should ring the door bell instead. However, if an adult does the same thing, it is very likely the police would be called and an arrest might result.

GENDER

Gender is another variable in the world of social rules. This can be quite important because we have a large population of male students with ASD in our schools that are supported by female professionals. There are gender-specific hidden curriculum standards specifically for males, such as restroom etiquette rules, that are very different from the restroom rules for females. Females talk in the restroom; males don't. If your young male student is conditioned to talk to you in the restroom, he may grow up talking to others in the restroom. If he does this as a teen or a man, whether he knows it or not, talking or even just making eye contact in a public men's room can be perceived as initiating sexual interest. Imagine the consequences for

Teaching the Hidden Curriculum

For people on the autism spectrum, learning the hidden curriculum is just as, if not more important, than learning academic skills. Yet, I rarely see hidden curriculum or social skills instruction in class schedules or in the IEPs of students needing to learn it. When a person's brain is not wired to automatically pick up this information, he will not somehow magically learn it as he gets older. It is not something our students with ASDs will outgrow. Instead, the hidden curriculum must be taught by direct instruction to students who have a neurology that does not permit them to automatically learn it in the same way neurotypical students do.

The ECLIPSE Model (Moyer, 2009) is a useful resource for teachers that includes sample IEP goals along with "pick up and use" lesson plans for teaching the hidden curriculum. *The Social Times* (Burton, 2010) is another resource for teachers, which is written directly to students in their "voice." Each new issue offers critical information in a format that makes learning social information fun for students. Another way to teach and learn the hidden curriculum is by using the *One A Day* hidden curriculum calendars, geared to both kids (Trautman

& Wragge, 2010) and older adolescents and adults (Endow, 2010). In addition, hidden curriculum items are available as iPhone applications for all ages.

However you choose to teach the hidden curriculum, know that learning it is not optional for those of us with autism. If you are a teacher, know that the hidden curriculum is likely the most important subject you will ever teach. Your school district will not mandate it, but wise teachers will make teaching it a priority.

If you are a person on the autism spectrum, know that you will need to keep learning the hidden curriculum as you graduate from school and move into the world. It is great to have earned a diploma, but you must not stop there. A diploma is merely the first step into adult life. For me, keeping up with and learning new, elusive and ever-changing hidden curriculum items is crucial. It allows me to fit in more comfortably with my family and friends, in my job and in my community, and lets me be all that I want to be in the world.

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Judy Endow, MSW, maintains a private practice in Madison, Wis., providing consultation for families, school districts and other agencies. Besides having autism herself, she is the parent of three grown sons, one of whom is on the autism spectrum. Judy presents on a variety of autism-related issues, serves on the Wisconsin DPI Statewide Autism Training Team, and is a board member of the Autism Society Wisconsin Chapter and an incoming board member of AUTCOM.