

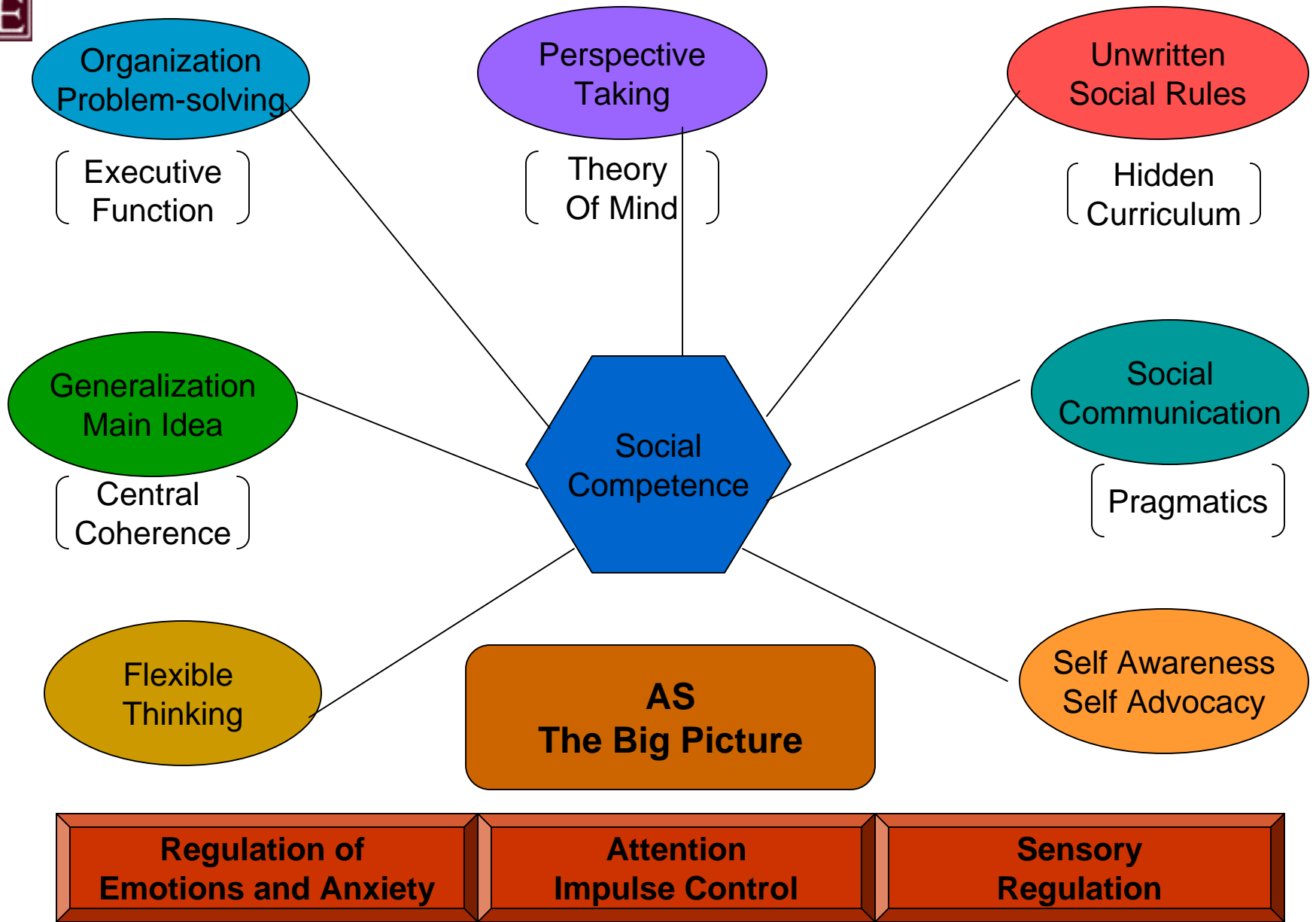
Asperger Syndrome: The Big Picture

Neurotypical people, those of us who don't have Asperger Syndrome (AS), tend to process social information quickly, efficiently and intuitively. People with AS process social information more slowly as they try to discern what's relevant to the situation and how to respond, in a systematic way. Processing social information accurately and responding appropriately (e.g. in an "expected" way), is what we call "social competence".

Many different processes affect a child's ability to function in a social situation. The components that impact a child's ability to be socially competent are shown in AS: The Big Picture. The rectangles along the bottom of the diagram represent the building blocks. Unless the child with AS can regulate emotions and anxiety, control impulsivity and regulate his/her sensory system, s/he won't be able to work on the complex skills that are represented in the rest of the diagram. However, none of these variables exists in a vacuum. Working in one area, will often positively impact another. For example, working on emotional regulation helps a child to cope while learning to be more flexible.

If a child is experiencing difficulty with social interactions, you can use AS: The Big Picture to help you determine what specifically is causing difficulty. The focus for support and teaching starts with regulation of emotions, anxiety, sensory systems, and impulse control if needed. If these areas are stable, then consider which of the other variables might be influencing the current difficulties (e.g. hidden social rules, perspective taking). More detail is available about each of these items in the bullet points listed after the diagram.

When we start to understand and look at social interactions through the lens of these components; we start to see how complex and challenging social competence is in daily life. Your child or student with AS exerts tremendous amounts of energy trying to understand and respond to the social information bombarding him/her throughout the day. Your instruction, support and understanding can make an enormous difference.



AS: the Big Picture: What impacts social competence?

Creating the Foundation

Regulation of Emotions and Anxiety: Difficulty with the following:

- Understanding what emotions feel like and look like in self and others
- Understanding gradations of emotion and responding appropriately (e.g. not over-reacting, see *The Incredible 5 Point Scale* by Buron & Curtis)
- Matching emotional response to people, activities and settings

Regulation of Attention and Impulses: Difficulty with the following:

- Controlling flight or fight response to anxiety producing situations
- Filtering out extraneous stimuli
- Analyzing relevant vs. irrelevant information
- Maintaining sustained attention to relevant information

Sensory Regulation: Difficulty with the following:

- Knowing where body is in space; avoiding bumping into people or objects
- Motor planning (knowing how to use the body to accomplish a task)
- Ability to integrate multiple sensations simultaneously and respond appropriately

Increasing Social Competencies

Executive Functioning: Difficulty with the following

- Problem solving
- Organizing thoughts, writing and materials
- Time management and prioritizing
- Initiating and completing tasks

Central Coherence: Difficulty with the following:

- Generalizing skills to other settings, activities and with other people
- Constructing main idea from text or conversations
- Recognizing and categorizing information
- Understanding complex or abstract concepts

Theory of Mind: Perspective Taking: Difficulty with the following:

- Recognizing and understanding others' thoughts and intentions
- Processing social information quickly and efficiently
- Being tactful and telling "white lies"

Flexible Thinking: Difficulty with the following:

- Understanding that there is more than one way to accomplish a task
- Using new strategies to solve problems and accepting help from others
- Changing routines

Hidden Curriculum: Difficulty with the following:

- Understanding the unwritten/implicit social rules that others intuitively know
- Knowing what to do or say in different social situations

Self Awareness/Self Advocacy: Difficulty with the following:

- Understanding one's own strengths and weaknesses
- Learning strategies to offset weaknesses and build on strengths
- Using words and actions to help get needs met, including asking for help

Social Pragmatics: Difficulty with the following:

- Noticing and correctly interpreting non-verbal communication (gestures, body position, eyes, tone, volume)
- Modulating one's own non-verbal communication within interactions with peers/adults
- Initiating, joining and maintaining social communication with peers