



What is social cognition?

What do we see when we observe children, or for that matter adults, interacting and communicating with each other? First, we see their behaviour - people being together, chatting, sharing concerns or having fun. But, if we observe closely we can also see some of what underlies their behaviour:

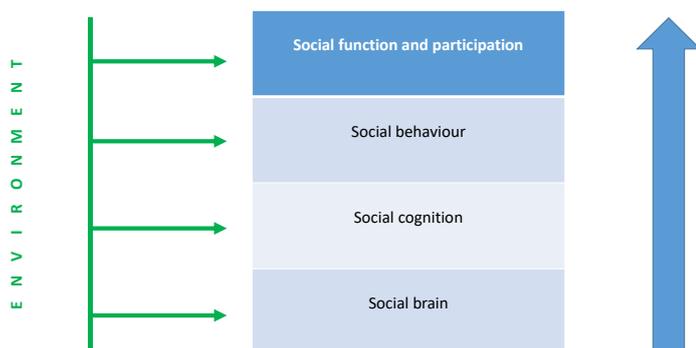
- ❖ people showing **interest** and **motivation** to interact and communicate,
- ❖ paying **attention** to others,
- ❖ making sense of what others are doing or saying – **perceiving their intentions, desires and thinking**
- ❖ using **reasoning** to make their responses
- ❖ maintain the to-and-fro nature of interactions – being **reciprocal**
- ❖ showing concern about other's distress – **empathising**
- ❖ **sharing** their interest with other, and
- ❖ enjoying being together – **shared enjoyment**.

Social cognition is the psychological processes that make most of our social behaviour happen – motivation, attention, perception, processing, social reasoning, theory of mind to understand others' intentions, thinking and desires, empathising, sharing and the ability to be reciprocal.

There are times when our social responses are rather automatic or learnt - we don't have to think to relate in these situations e.g. being respectful to elders or being nice to children. But, mostly we need our social cognition to be working well to relate with people, particularly with our peer group, otherwise we run the risk of being left out and ignored.

Isn't it all just about being clever and using our intelligence? Well, only to a small degree; the processes we use to be social, to know how others think and feel, to respond to others, to empathise and to resolve social problems are different from those used for non-social problem solving; they are special for our social behaviour and are served by special networks and regions in our brains. These processes are specifically affected in conditions such as ASD.





Some special features of social cognition

- ❖ Social cognition is highly variable; there are large differences among individuals and societies.
- ❖ Social cognition requires extended tuning, by experience, during development; how we perceive and behave socially depends on that tuning.
- ❖ Social cognition, or how efficiently it functions, depends on the context; we understand social meaning better in some situations than in others.
- ❖ Social cognition draws on a large number of different brain structures and their connectivity. This distributed nature of social cognition makes it vulnerable to insult, but also leaves open the possibility of compensation and recovery through other intact networks.

