Social Perception

Social competence requires accuracy in social perception and this is closely related to a person’s emotional literacy level, a concept discussed previously. Social perception refers to an individual’s ability to interpret the various factors that affect the appropriateness of behaviour in a given situation. These factors include:

1. **Location** some behaviour patterns are socially acceptable in one situation/culture and quite inappropriate in another situation. For example, running around and calling to your friends is fine in the playground at lunchtime, but is not suitable behaviour for a classroom.

2. **Age** – socially acceptable behaviour varies for different age groups. Age appropriate behaviour enhances students’ acceptance into their peer group. For example, it is appropriate to hold the teachers’ hand when you are in kindergarten, but not if you are in Year five or six.

3. **Relationship** – students are usually aware of the presence of others. They depend on information and cues from others to assess their ability to cope with their social environment. At the simplest level, the presence of others provides the individual student with a frame of reference for understanding himself and others, a measure that would not exist if he were alone.

4. **Intent** – in order to assume that students intend to behave in a certain way, we infer that they have the ability to control their actions and are motivated to perform the action. The Swiss psychologist Piaget found that children under seven (7) years of age tend to view a harmful act by its consequences. Whereas older children evaluate these actions by the intent of the person responsible for the act. For example, a young child who is accidentally kicked may react with anger at being hurt, without considering that the kick was an accident.

5. **Peer group pressure** – groups impose controls on members to influence the range of acceptable behaviours. There is pressure to adhere to the standard. In the classroom and in the playground, the student may alter his/her way of behaving in the direction of the group “norm”. Students assess themselves and compare themselves with other group members to determine whether or not their views, attitudes, values and judgements correspond to those of the group. Students who fail to conform may be ostracised by the group. This raises the question: What might happen when the ‘school culture’ and the ‘home culture’ have different behavioural expectations?
Difficulties in social perception
Learners with special learning needs may experience difficulties in social perception or to put it another way, learners with special learning needs may have low levels of emotional literacy and experience difficulties because they:

- Often lack the ability to perceive emotional cues from others
- Often lack the instinctive understanding that other students exhibit about the suitability of their behaviour in a given situation
- May be developmentally delayed and therefore exhibit behaviours which are more appropriate for children of a much younger age
- Do not correctly perceive the meaning of others' behaviour
- May react impulsively in a given situation without intending to behave in a certain manner and often lack the ability to identify their own emotions
- May be unaware of, or insensitive to peer group pressures

Therefore, these students need to be explicitly taught how to respond to people appropriately, how to take cues, how to identify the significance and meaning of others' behaviour and how to modify their behaviour to comply with group norms. For example: “Children often need to be given direct, explicit instruction about how to behave in specific social situations. E.g. a child may need to be told that it is important to say “hello” back when somebody greets them, or to smile when approaching a child to ask to join in a game.”

(http://www.embracethefuture.org.au/resiliency/social_skills.htm)