



Understanding others' perspectives is a developmental milestone and is critical for academic and social success. Kindergarten through third grade students who understand others' perspectives (Theory of Mind) acquire greater language skills.

Theory of Mind (ToM): the ability to understand others' perspectives.

One of the strongest predictors of being able to use ToM skills is an individual's language abilities. Teaching specific vocabulary can support ToM development and can start with children as young as two.



Help students develop Theory of Mind

- Explicitly teach vocabulary words for feelings and emotions (e.g., *think, feel, know, hope, sad, happy, guilty*).
- Move from basic to complex vocabulary when discussing thoughts and emotions (instead of *happy* use *joyful, playful, or content*).
 - Many charts exist to assist with moving from basic to complex vocabularies, such as the feelings wheel (use QR code to access), which supports moving from basic to complex feeling vocabulary.
- Relate the emotions of a character in a book to students' own feelings.
 - *"If you were Timmy, how would you feel if Lassie fell into the well?"*
- Preteens and teenagers develop advanced ToM, as seen in the skills of:
 - sarcasm and
 - considering another's thoughts about someone else



Those from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds and with diverse learning styles can find it challenging to understand ToM/others' perspectives.



Specific sentence structures can help students learn Theory of Mind. These sentence structures are called sentential complements.

Sentential complements: A sentence of paired ideas (one idea embedded in another); one part can be false and the other true.

Teaching Sentential Complements

Teaching a specific type of sentence (sentential complements) instead of just referencing thoughts and emotions, can help students grasp ToM understanding.

- Introduce the structure of the sentence using: *she thinks, she believes.*
- Teach the structure of sentential complements: "She thinks the earth is flat."
 - Describe how someone can say, think, or feel something even if it is false in reality.
 - Include a direct explanation of how it is false: "She thinks that the earth is flat, even though it is actually round."
- Use real-life experiences as examples.
 - "Alex thought that his book was lost."
 - "Alex is crying because he thought his book was lost, but it was really in his backpack."
- Use examples from literature, specifically statements that contrast thoughts or emotions with reality.
 - "Little Red Riding Hood thought she was visiting her grandmother, but really she was talking to the wolf who was pretending to be her grandmother."



Access the white paper by TRRC Faculty Affiliate, Dr. Kristen Secora, to read more about the research support for ToM and how it can be taught.

