Social Communication is a relatively new term that has emerged over the last decade. While this may appear to be a ‘new’ concept, it is a regrouping and re-categorizing of the previously known concepts of social reciprocity, social interaction, social skills, communication or communication skills, and language or language skills. Many recognize that the behaviors of social reciprocity (social interaction, social skills) and the behaviors of communication and language overlap to result in one’s ability to communicate socially, therefore, Social Communication. Social Communication is best understood through knowledge and understanding of a definition of social reciprocity and a definition of communication. Please note that many papers and books have been written to define these concepts and this essay simply highlights the key points. The reader is referred to additional references for more in-depth knowledge and understanding of these concepts.

Social Reciprocity is social interaction and is displayed through the use of joint attention to share experiences and emotions with another person for a variety of events and in a variety of contexts. Joint attention is the ability to coordinate one’s visual attention through eye contact, or eye gaze, and gestures with a social partner, regarding an object or an event. The person is expected to respond to, as well as, independently initiate behaviors of joint attention to reflect the ability to act in a socially reciprocal manner. The social partner expects the person to be responsive to social partners interests and needs, not just to their own interests or personal needs.

Communication involves three key areas: speech, language, and pragmatic language. Speech is the expressive production of sounds to produce words and phrases. Language is the understanding and use of words, phrases and grammatical structures to effectively understand and convey messages for a variety of interactions within a variety of contexts and with a variety of people. Pragmatic language refers to the use, purpose, or function of speech and language. Pragmatic language is the use of non-verbal and verbal behaviors of speech and language combined to express and respond to functions such as request for basic needs, request for assistance, protest, and persuade. Non-verbal behaviors include facial expressions, gestures, and body proximity. Verbal behaviors include voice prosody, voice stress, and voice intonation. Verbal behaviors are manipulated to change the meaning and intention of sounds, words and phrases verbally expressed in a social interaction. This pragmatic use of language follows socially mediated rules that allow others to interpret and understand another person’s intentions and motives and further enhances the meaning of particular social communication interactions.

We now recognize the necessity to consider social reciprocity and communication as one concept since the skills required for both significantly overlap and act in a reciprocal fashion. Social reciprocity utilizes communication and communication occurs in the presence of social reciprocity. Communication behaviors are required to engage effectively in joint attention and sharing of emotions and experiences with others in a social interaction. In addition symbolic language in the form of words, phrases, sentences and abstract language such as idiomatic expressions, figurative language and sarcasm are included in the verbal and non-verbal behaviors exhibited to participate in an effective social interaction.
Social Communication occurs in all settings and requires the support of all members of the students’ educational team. School professionals and the students’ parents may coordinate their knowledge and expertise with activities to effectively increase social communication in individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders. For example, with information from the parents and student team members, the Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP) may assess and develop specific language skills of vocabulary and syntax as well as the pragmatic language skills of using such behaviors as facial expressions, gestures, body proximity, and prosody. Simultaneously, the School Psychologist may assess and develop those specific behaviors required to increase joint attention and to increase the interpretation of and expression of a variety of possible emotions for various activities and events, reflecting reciprocal interactions that consider the thoughts and feelings of others that lead to the development of friendships.

The parent, the special education teacher, and other support staff share the role of implementing strategies suggested by the SLP, School Psychologist and the team for the maintenance and the generalization of those key social communication behaviors that are being addressed as identified in the goals and objectives in the students Individual Education Plan (IEP).

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The following are suggested references for additional information regarding social communication as it relates to individuals with ASD:


Although the primary purpose of this book is to share recommendations regarding the educational content and strategies to support the education of individuals with ASD, specific knowledge and understanding regarding social communication is also provided. See pages 31, 47-65, 69, and 71-81.


This two volume set contains specific chapters that identify and define behaviors related to Social Communication, particularly as they relate to individuals with ASD. The reader is referred to chapters 11, 12, 14, 25, 30, 36, 37, and 38.