

The Hidden Curriculum



What is The Hidden Curriculum?

The Hidden Curriculum is a way of teaching the unspoken parts of social interaction to individuals with autism spectrum disorders. So much of our interactions with other people is non-verbal, and many of our interactions require people to see beyond what is directly being said, which are very difficult skills for individuals with autism. The Hidden Curriculum works to break down those difficult skills into more understandable pieces so individuals with autism can be more socially successful. It teaches the unspoken rules and expectations in society that most people innately know, but individuals with autism may need directly taught.

Steps to teaching the Hidden Curriculum

- 1) Assess the specific areas where the learner is struggling socially. It is impossible to address the hidden curriculum in all settings simultaneously, so pick one place to start.
- 2) Identify standard expectations in that environment to ensure the learner understands the basics (e.g., the expectations in the lunchroom, the general protocol for a date).
- 3) Teach the learner about the hidden curriculum. Ensure s/he understands that there are unspoken rules so s/he can look for them across environments.
- 4) Teach the learner ways to learn these rules (e.g., observing/imitating, asking questions, using rating scales, identifying a mentor for those situations, etc.)

Why is teaching the Hidden Curriculum Important?

There are many parts of everyday life that aren't specifically taught, but are important for being successful. For example, students may naturally learn that they can get away with talking in one teacher's class but not in another's. They may realize that they can tease and joke with one friend's parents but with other friend's parents they must only speak respectfully. Children learn that they aren't supposed to speak to strangers, but its okay to make small talk with the librarian while she checks out your books. It's okay to hug and kiss grandma, who we see twice per year, but not the mailman, who we see everyday. Social rules also change over time—it is cute when toddler hug the leg of a stranger, it's odd when an elementary age child hugs a stranger, and it's criminal if an adult hugs a stranger.

Social rules are confusing and illogical, but essential to follow for social success. Because individuals with autism do not naturally learn these social expectations, they must be specifically and directly taught. It is important to identify the hidden curriculum items that your students struggle to understand and then create a direct teaching plan to help them learn the expectations.

Example

Tahlia is 14 years old. When she was younger she had playdates that her mother set up, but those types of activities aren't scheduled for her anymore. She would like to spend time with other children, but she's not sure how. Tahlia has a brother, Noah, who is a year older. Noah spends lots of time with friends; he walks in the room, tells his mom that he's needs a ride to his friend's house, and then she drives him. Tahlia decides to do the same thing. She tells her mom that she needs a ride to Lana's house (a girl Tahlia used to play with in 1st grade). Tahlia's mother asks, "Are you sure? You haven't played with Lana in years!" Tahlia has made up her mind that she will go to Lana's house, so she replies, "Yes, I'm sure! Now, please!" Tahlia's mother drives Tahlia to Lana's house but nobody answers the door. It's dark inside. Tahlia gets back in the car and goes home feeling frustrated. Her mother asks, "Are you sure you had the right day and time? What did Lana say when she invited you?" Tahlia feels confused. She didn't get invited. Did Noah get invited when he went to friends? She never heard him get invited, so she didn't think about that part. She just copied what she'd seen.

Tahlia is missing the hidden curriculum. She focused on the observable parts of her brother's friendships—asking for a ride. She'd missed the parts that Noah didn't verbalize: that he and his friends had talked about the time/place, that the friend had invited him, that Noah already had a relationship with the person.

Tahlia's teacher should first identify her goal—spending time with friends—then work through the hidden curriculum towards that goal. Spending time with friends requires building friendships. Teach how to identify potential friends and the steps to build friendships. Teach the process of getting to know one another, first at school and then outside of school. Teach the steps to setting up time with friends outside of school. Specifically, Tahlia might benefit from a checklist to identify who qualifies as a friend (someone who chooses to talk to me at least 3x/week, someone who smiles when I approach them to talk, someone who asks to partner with me in group projects, etc.). With the checklist, she might see that Lana would not qualify as a friend, but another child in class does some of those things and might be a good person to seek out as a new friend.

How Can I Learn More?

Books

- Endow, J. (2010). *Navigating the Social World. The importance of teaching learning the Hidden Curriculum*. Autism Advocate, 3. Retrieved from <https://www.autism-society.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/hidden-curriculum.pdf>
- Myles, B.S. (2014, May 1). *Making Sense of the Hidden Curriculum*. Retrieved from <https://www.education.com/reference/article/hidden-curriculum-school-asperger/>
- Myles, B.S, Endow, J., & Mayfield, M. (2012). *The Hidden Curriculum of Getting and Keeping a Job: Navigating the Social Landscape of Employment A Guide for Individuals With Autism Spectrum and Other Social-Cognitive Challenges*. Lenexa, KS: AAPC Publishing.
- Myles, B.S, Trautman, M.L., Schelvan, R.L. (2013). *The Hidden Curriculum for Understanding Un-stated Rules in Social Situations for Adolescents and Young Adults 2nd Edition*. Lenexa, KS: AAPC Publishing.
- Myles, H.M., Kolar, A. (2013). *The Hidden Curriculum and Other Everyday Challenges for Elementary-Age Children With High-Functioning Autism* . Lenexa, KS: AAPC Publishing.



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