Understanding the emotions (e.g., “effective Theory of Mind”, ToM) and cognitive states ("cognitive ToM") of oneself and others is critical for positive academic and social outcomes (Secora & Devine, 2022). Because ToM is related to a variety of linguistic structures, SLPs are positioned in a way to support the academic and social outcomes (Lecce & Devine, 2022). Because understanding the emotions (e.g., “affective Theory of Mind”, ToM) abilities are connected with language abilities and should be incorporated into therapy and literacy activities with individuals who have communication disorders; however, SLPs need to be cognizant of how to support neurodiverse individuals within these discussions.

What skills fall under ToM?

- **Cognitive ToM**
  - Knowledge of self
  - Awareness of self
  - Understanding of others
  - Understanding of others’ emotions

- **Affective ToM**
  - Understanding of self
  - Understanding of others

- **Narrative Comprehension**
  - Extract information from written material

What is the Neurodiversity Framework?

- Neurodiversity: variations in neurocognitive functioning within the population (Singh, 1999)
- Neurodivergent: neurocognitive functioning for the neurominority that diverges, or is different, from that of the neurotypical (Walker & Raymaker, 2021)
- Neurotypical: neurocognitive functioning for the neuromajority (Walker & Raymaker, 2021)

ToM Research Has Caused Harm to Autistic People

- There is a lack of evidence for assumptions of the fundamental deficit in all autistic individuals
- Autistic people are uniquely impaired in ToM (Gernsbacher & Yergeau, 2019)

ToM Skills Can Be Targeted within Literacy-Based Activities

- SLPs can support the vocabulary, syntax, and narrative comprehension elements that are thought to support ToM development
- But SLPs must be mindful of how they approach incorporating ToM components within therapy and who they work on these skills with (not just autistic students)
- For individuals who want to learn about others’ perspectives (i.e., who, consent), discussions about others’ thoughts and feelings should be viewed with a “difference” rather than “deficit” lens
- Children’s literature can highlight different individuals’ perspectives. SLPs should be purposeful about selecting books that feature neurodivergent characters and structuring discussions to highlight differences and similarities both between and within neurotypes

ToM Abilities to Relate to Language

- Situational stories
- Verbs of cognition
- Verb of communication

ToM Can Be Targeted within Literacy-Based Activities

- Choose books with neurodivergent characters
- Point out differences between and within neurotypes on inferences about mental states
- Discuss similarities between neurotypes on inferences about mental states

Conclusions

- SLTs can support the vocabulary, syntax, and narrative comprehension elements that are thought to support ToM development
- But SLTs must be mindful of how they approach incorporating ToM components within therapy and who they work on these skills with (not just autistic students)
- For individuals who want to learn about others’ perspectives (i.e., who, consent), discussions about others’ thoughts and feelings should be viewed with a “difference” rather than “deficit” lens
- Children’s literature can highlight different individuals’ perspectives. SLTs should be purposeful about selecting books that feature neurodivergent characters and structuring discussions to highlight differences and similarities both between and within neurotypes

Select References

- Secora, K. (2021, March). ToM can be targeted within literacy-based activities. Poster presented at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville
- Widen, J. M., & Aylward, S. (2017). ToM skills can be targeted within literacy-based activities. Poster presented at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Contact Information & References

- Kristen Secora: ksecora@utk.edu
- SLT research lab

Speaker disclosures:

- Financial: Salaried fulltime assistant professor at the University of Tennessee Knoxville
- Nonfinancial: none to report