



# Teach Your Child to Read the Room

by Caroline Maguire, PCC, MEd

**W**E'VE ALL SEEN SIGNS OF A CHILD who doesn't quite know how to follow the unwritten rules of proper etiquette. The child with ADHD who barges into someone's house and sits on the couch in a wet bathing suit. The teenager who tries to get the attention of his teacher while she is hurriedly packing her briefcase in a room with the lights off and trying to exit the school for the day. Or how about the girl who brags about winning a spot on an elite swim team while her friend sits fuming after just having been rejected from the same team? We've all witnessed these awkward experiences.

Often children with ADHD seem to miss body language, tone of voice, mood, and facial expressions as well as other important social cues that tell us how to adapt and what to do. In a nutshell, these signals give us the ability to scan a situation and read the room.

As a parent, you may have noticed your own child talking too long when someone is trying to inch out of the classroom—or maybe it's on the playground when a friend has to leave. Reading the room is critical in situational awareness. It's about picking up what is going on around you—the people, the setting, your role in it, and what it means. This isn't new to you. You have asked your child a million times to pay attention or tune in to what is going on, and yet she just does not seem to notice.

So, what can you do about your child's lack of awareness?

You are your child's original teacher. Just as you taught her to ride a bike, you can help her learn to read the room. Teaching your child of any age to read the room can be done at specific times. Set aside time for fun field trips. Or it can be something you and your child are partnering to do in daily life. Use the many organic opportunities you have with your child to practice—as you shop at the mall or stand in line at the grocery store or wait in the lobby for a doctor. You have unlimited chances to be your child's social skills coach and use the daily life of a parent as time to practice social skills.

First, carefully, suggest that you and your child work together and learn to read the room in a way that will be fun. This will allow your child not to see this as an accusation but rather to understand that just as you are going to teach her to change a tire or do laundry, you are her guide in life. You would like to work on learning to read the room with her.

The following steps will take you through the process of teaching your child to read the room.

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## STEP 1

### Help your child learn to pause, spy, and observe.

It is important for your child to learn that body language, social cues, and what people say and do are all clues to help her understand and predict what behavior best fits the situation. To do this, your child must become a more observant person.

#### *How: Help your child become a social spy.*

Build your child's awareness by teaching her to be a social spy. The concept is that the child can go into public with a mission to be a social spy where she will obtain specific social information. You will rehearse with her ahead of time, so she learns to watch other people in a subtle, covert way and to listen without looking like she is listening. The idea is to assign her a mission as you begin the lesson or enter a space, asking her to observe a specific behavior. This will help her learn crucial information about her peers, such as how they dress and what they talk about at lunch. It will teach her how to observe and notice other people's behavior, mood, energy, and to scan and read the room.

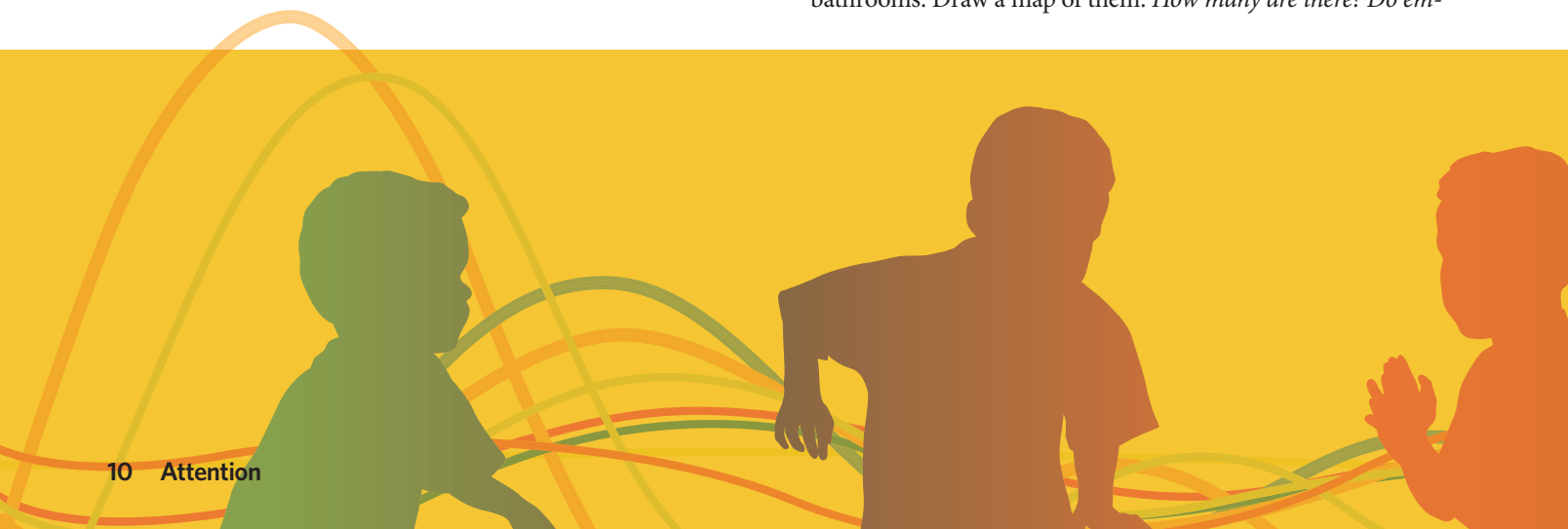
## STEP 2

### Determine how the place is like this, not that.

When you pause to consider the similarities and differences of an environment and the people, there is a quick, useful way for you to figure out the Social Guidelines and Unspoken Rules for the situation. It helps to try to remember past situations and experiences and to notice the similarities and differences in your current situation. How is the situation like this but not like that? For instance, when your child enters a birthday party, he can consider when he has been in that scenario before. Learning how to adapt can be so helpful as children with ADHD have to cope with the swirling stimuli of a situation.

#### *How: Take a box store field trip.*

Take a field trip with your child to a public place like a mall, a box store, or a large shopping plaza, and spy on shoppers and workers in the stores. Have him spy to notice social, verbal, and nonverbal cues. Collect the information. Notice all the entrances, exits, and bathrooms. Draw a map of them. *How many are there? Do em-*



employees wear uniforms? What do the uniforms tell you about who is doing what job? Based on what you observe, who is in charge of this store? Who is in charge, but does not wear a manager tag? Who is the grumpy employee? What do verbal and nonverbal cues tell you how someone feels? Who is in a hurry? What social cues tell you they are in a hurry?

STEP  
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### Learn to read body language.

In every social situation, it is important to observe and notice social cues, such as tone of voice, people's body language, and facial expressions.

#### *How: Read the face in the crowd.*

Most communication is through body language and facial expressions. At your next social event, play a game with your child. Ask her to read the faces of people at the party from afar. Remind her to spy covertly, not glaring or staring. Ask her to share with you, discretely, five people's facial expressions and what they say about the person.

STEP  
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### Decode the unspoken rules.

Remember to interpret the unspoken rules in each situation so you can quickly identify the Social Right Turns you need to make.

#### *How: Spy at a party to identify the unspoken rules.*

In every environment, there are unspoken rules, the subtle and nuanced rules of how you are expected to behave, and what is acceptable in that environment. During the holidays, as you take your child to different environments, practice having him enter each event to covertly spy and uncover the unspoken rules of the household. You can start by prompting him and sharing your observations. Then have him spy and report back. Have him notice: *Is the house casual or formal? How do the members of the family treat the furniture? Are they tidy, messy, do they care about organizing? What is important to them? Should you touch items in the house or keep your hands to yourself?*

STEP  
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### Take the room's temperature.

Within the situation, evaluate the people's mood, emotions, and energy. Adjust your behavior to meet that mood. Taking the room's temperature also helps you understand the unspoken rules and social guidelines.

#### *How: Read the mood in the family.*

At an event with friends and family, prompt your child to pick out two people in her family. Have her observe and then report back what are their facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice when they are angry, frustrated, nervous, or frightened. Continue to spy on people's moods throughout the holiday season and ask your child how she should adapt her behavior based on the other person's mood.

STEP  
6

### Step into another person's shoes.

When you enter any situation, think about how your behavior and messages will be received. Thinking about other people's feelings helps you know when you need to adjust your approach to meet the unspoken rules of a situation.

#### *How: Gamify reading the context of a situation.*

Context is the situation, the environment, the mood, the circumstances, and what has been going on around you. Some children struggle to pick up on the context and then to adapt their behavior to that context. At a social event, ask your child to adapt his behavior to match the audience to which he is speaking. Share some examples in advance: *Did they just get bad news? Are they hurried and busy? Are they sharing good news?* Ask him to demonstrate adapting to the context and then share it with you.

Practice makes everything better. Whatever you and your child focus on together can become a fun game you play and something your child or teen learns to pay attention to. Continue to make this a game with your child or teen, so that whenever she enters a new situation through the front door or exits the car on her way to school, she can tune in and pick one reading-the-room mission. 🕒