

SPACE TRAVELERS

*An Interactive Program for Developing
Social Understanding, Social Competence
and Social Skills for Students with
Asperger Syndrome, Autism
and Other Social Cognitive Challenges*

Space Guide Manual



M. A. Carter and J. Santomauro
Foreword by Jeanie McAfee

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We appreciate ...

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- 🌐 St. Peter Chanel, Australia
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We dedicate ...

Space Travelers is designed to make a difference in the lives of children who have difficulty understanding and being successful in the social world. Many children we have come across in our professional lives find social interactions perplexing, frustrating and infuriating. They have difficulty establishing connectedness with others, let alone sustaining it. Their repertoire of competencies in navigating the social world is often sparse and frequently inappropriately executed. They require support in learning more constructive ways of creating and retaining successful social connections with others. It is for this purpose that we wrote this program.

We dedicate this program to children across the globe as they strive towards developing their competencies as social individuals, not only in their world as students in contemporary times but as leaders of the world tomorrow.

– M. A. Carter and J. Santomauro



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FOREWORD

I had the pleasure of meeting Josie Santomauro while I was studying with Tony Attwood in Brisbane in the spring of 2000. At that time, Josie had already authored a series of refreshingly up-beat booklets for children with autism spectrum disorders, their parents, and the professionals working with these very special children. In *Space Travelers*, Josie and co-author, Margaret Carter, have put together an easy-to-follow curriculum for an eight-session course in social-emotional skills for mid-grade school-aged children with Asperger Syndrome, higher functioning autism and related disorders. *Space Travelers* comes as a set containing both a teacher's manual and a student workbook.

The curriculum will work as either a brief introduction to social-emotional skills and anger management for children with autism spectrum disorders or, alternatively, as a complete course for children who are not on the spectrum but need help with social-emotional skills. It focuses on social problem solving and emotion management – both of which are key deficit areas for children with social-cognitive challenges.

Space Travelers is user-friendly, employing the same easy-to-use format in each of the eight lessons. The classes last 1-1/2 – 2 hours each, and are packed with activities that include written assignments, role-plays, guided imagery, conversational exchanges, games, arts, and crafts. The group leader may tailor the classes to the group with which he or she is working by choosing from several activities offered with each lesson. Weekly home handouts ensure that parents or guardians are informed of the goals and activities for each session. Teachers complete journal entries after each lesson to record what went well and what could be improved to help them structure future classes. Students also record their positive experiences in a journal after each session. The teacher's guide contains several handouts and templates that book owners may reproduce for use in their classes. All of the activities may be carried out with minimal preparation, and the needed supplies are inexpensive and easy to obtain. The many entertaining visual prompts are designed to appeal to young children with autism spectrum disorders, most of whom are visual learners.

Space Travelers is based on a series of eight fun and imaginative "space missions" in which students take the roles of space travelers and the teacher is the space guide. To mention a few highlights, Mission 2 includes several practical but creative "getting to know you" types of questions that students use to interview one another. This activity gives students practice in two-way conversations and finding a topic of interest to a conversational partner, and promotes generalization by providing scripts that students can





use later in real-life conversations. At the end of this activity, space travelers have a chance to mime their answers to the scripted questions in a fun variation of the game of charades. Another activity in Mission 2, Star Qualities, uses visual prompts to aid students in giving compliments to themselves and to each other. The authors use cartooning, art, and role-play in Mission 3 to help students explore positive vs. negative thinking. Students work on theory-of-mind skills (the ability to understand what another person is thinking, feeling, or intending) in Missions 3 and 4 using the media of cartooning, drawing, and writing. Missions 4, 5 and 6 help students to expand their emotional vocabularies, deal with anger, and work on problem solving in social contexts. In Mission 7 the students review previous lessons and work on organizational skills, teamwork, collaboration, and negotiation skills while they plan for an end-of-course party held during Mission 8.

Space Travelers will make a valuable addition to the library of anyone who cares for or works with young children with high-functioning autism, Asperger Syndrome, pervasive developmental disorders-not otherwise specified, nonverbal learning disabilities, or other social-cognitive challenges. Its refreshing and fun approach to teaching social-emotional skills will appeal to children in grades three through five, and the book will be a welcome tool for any teacher or caregiver who needs a well-organized, easy-to-implement curriculum in this complex subject area.

– Jeanie McAfee, M.D.
Author, *Navigating the Social World*,
Founder and Director, Social Solutions
Fall 2004

INDUCTION

What Is Social Understanding?

We spend most of our lives living as members of social groups. The success we have in these groups is primarily determined by the quality of our social interactions, and these interactions are directly influenced by our social understanding skills and competencies. For many children, including those on the autism spectrum, social interactions with peers and adults create daily challenges. These children have a narrow repertoire of social problem-solving skills and competencies and a limited understanding of the reality of social situations, including the most appropriate way to respond in a given social context.

To illustrate, let us look at the following example involving a baseball game at recess.

Tim wants to have a turn batting before the recess bell rings. Jessie is batting at the moment, and when he is out, it will be Tim's turn. Tim is worried that he will not get a turn to bat and is getting angry that he has spent most of recess time waiting for his teammates to bat. He thinks it is stupid that you are not out until you are struck out. Tim wants his turn NOW!

This creates a social problem for Tim. It is Jessie's turn, not Tim's, and the rules of the game are very clear: You are not out just because one of your teammates wants to bat. You are out when you have been struck out.

Tim runs over to Jessie and begins shouting at him in a threatening voice: "You stop batting now! I want my turn. It's not fair. You always bat and I never get a turn. I want a turn NOW. Give me the bat!! Tim grabs the bat out of Jessie's hands and pushes him to the ground.

Jessie looks shocked and surprised. "What's the matter, Tim?" he asks. "I was following the rules." Jessie gets up and quietly says to Tim, "Come on, you know the rules. Go and wait until I get out."

Tim glares at Jessie and begins jumping up and down, hitting the air with his fist and shouting, "No, I won't. You aren't my friend. You are mean and horrible. I never want to play baseball again."





Jessie calls after Tim, "Hey, Tim. Wait up; you can play when it is your turn." Tim shouts back, "Never. Can't you read my lips? NEVER, NEVER, NEVER."

As illustrated, Tim has narrow repertoires of dealing with and expressing his frustrating and angering emotions. His behaviors are unhelpful and inappropriate and will not help him get a turn any sooner. In fact, quite the opposite. Tim would benefit from expanding his repertoire of constructive responses to social situations so that when things do not go the way he wants them to, he can deal with it in a more positive way. He needs to develop his social competencies and associated skills, both within the given social context and across contexts, and be supported in learning and internalizing them.

As this example shows, children, especially those with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and other social cognitive challenges, need to be taught and consistently coached in using a range of strategies directed at broadening their social understanding skills and competencies so that their comprehension of and response to interpersonal interactions are more constructive and positive. This involves learning rational ways of living and working together in social situations and developing a more realistic understanding of the conventions of and the complexities associated with interacting with others within the social world. Being successful when engaging with others is dependent on social cognition, social skills, social competence and social understanding.

About This Book

Space Travelers is an eight-mission program based on a space journey theme for students in the middle elementary-school years, approximately grades 4 and 5. Briefly, the content is designed to introduce, develop and refine children's social understanding, social skills and social competencies in navigating the social world. By following the constellation chart (see page 14), the Space Guide (teacher or other facilitator) plots the journey for the Space Travelers (students), concluding with touchdown back on planet earth.

The purpose is for the Space Travelers to journey together through the galaxy, stopping at designated mission points to develop and refine their social skills and competencies. Once a mission is complete, the Space Travelers move on together to the next mission point, further consolidating and practicing their awareness and understanding of team travel.

Targeted areas include:

- social cognition and social understanding
- self-esteem and self-acceptance
- recognizing and respecting diversity
- understanding emotions, feelings and thinking patterns
- reflective problem solving
- stress release
- dealing with bullying behaviors
- goal setting and self-mastery
- self-regulation

Individuals with ASD experience significant difficulties understanding the social world, which in turn has the potential to create significant problems for them in terms of making and maintaining relationships with peers (e.g., Attwood, 1998). Successful social problem solving is often an enigma to these children, as are keeping calm, positive self-talk and teamwork. It is important that we teach children with ASD these concepts and the accompanying skills so that they continue to broaden their repertoire of social understanding and social competence. The *Space Travelers* program is written for this exact purpose – to help students with social cognitive deficits, including ASD, learn constructive social interaction skills in the area of social problem solving and emotion management.

How to Use This Book

The program is conducted during school time. It is facilitated by a classroom teacher, resource teacher, school administrator or school counselor in whole classes or in small groups of children (minimum of eight children). In addition, a newsletter (Mother Ship Update) outlining each mission is provided for home, in an effort to ensure that children have an opportunity to transfer their learning across home and school contexts.

The program is divided into eight missions that follow a similar format: Mission Ahead, constellation chart, core activities, Asteroid Asks, space journals, and Mother Ship Update. Each mission has a specific purpose, and the accompanying core activities are geared to this purpose. It is important that you as the Space Guide are clear about the purpose of why you are doing each activity and that you communicate this information to the children.





The time allocated for each mission is one and a half hours, except for Missions 1, 6 and 8, which are each two hours long. The eight missions can be taught over a semester (once a week) or half a semester (twice a week). The time may have to be adjusted depending on the needs of group members. For example, there may be missions where you complete every core activity and others where you choose to complete only two or three core activities. This may be because additional activities are necessary to fully teach a concept, because students' time on task is declining, and so on. However, while *Space Guides* have flexibility in terms of the number of core activities they choose to complete, we recommend that you complete a minimum of two activities for each mission.

Consider the following when planning your group sessions:

- Group size
- Group composition
- Group cohesion
- Time of day for session
- Academic engagement time of group members
- Suitability of mission itinerary for group members
- Need for paraprofessional (or other adult) support
- Availability of adult support
- Length of the session
- Frequency of the sessions

You may find it necessary to modify, adapt or change aspects of the program in response to the unique needs of individual children, thus ensuring that all children achieve success.

Space Traveler Manual

The accompanying *Space Traveler* manual is a unique component of this interactive program. It helps students stay on track and provides a way to keep their completed activities together. As such, the *Space Traveler* manuals also serve as an important review and assessment tool.

Missions Overview

The following outline shows the main purpose of each of the eight missions that make up the space journey.

- 1. LAUNCH PAD** – The Space Guide introduces the purpose of the journey to the Space Travelers using the constellation chart.
- 2. INTRODUCING THE CREW** – The Space Travelers recognize, develop and articulate their strengths, abilities, interests and areas of need.
- 3. STARLIGHT AND GRAVITY THINKING** – The Space Travelers are introduced to helpful rather than unhelpful ways of thinking.
- 4. THE FEELINGS SHUTTLE** – The Space Travelers' emotions vocabulary is introduced and expanded.
- 5. ATMOSPHERIC PRESSURE** – The Space Travelers explore angry thinking, and angry feelings and actions in more detail and look at appropriate ways to deal with them.
- 6. MISSION CONTROL** – The Space Travelers are introduced to reflective problem solving.
- 7. SPACE WALKING – PREPARING FOR LANDING** – The Space Travelers continue to learn various relaxation techniques and prepare for touchdown.
- 8. TOUCHDOWN PARTY** – Everybody celebrates and reflects on the Space Travelers' journey.

