Information on mental states and social perspective taking

To understand social perspective-taking we need to understand mental states. Mental states cannot be seen. We infer them through our observations of the behaviours of others. An oversimplification would be a person is crying and we could infer that they are sad; we cannot 'see' their sadness, but we can see that they are crying. A person's ability to attribute mental states to themselves and others, is referred to as 'Theory of Mind' (ToM).

Social perspective taking is the ability to look at a situation from a **different point of view**. To understand another's mental state, you also need to look at the situation from the **persons' point of view**. Social perspective-taking is important for successful social interactions and social inclusion.

Social perspective taking:

- helps to explain and predict the behaviour of others (Howlin, Baron-Cohen & Hadwin, 1999).
- is associated with a range of common social behaviours (see table), and
- is essential for successful social communication (Howlin et al, 1999)

Examples of	
mental states	**social behaviours**
desires	empathy
intentions	pretence
knowledge	deception
beliefs	persuasion
emotions	irony/sarcasm
thoughts	jealousy
	lying

Reflection:

During an average day, track each time that you infer a person's mental state. What behaviour did you see that led you to this inference? If you couldn't infer the mental states of others, how easy would it be to understand their actions? How do you check that your inferences for others' mental states are valid?