

# Introduction

*Practical Theory of Mind Games* is geared for children between the ages of 4 and 12 who are diagnosed with autism. It is designed to help them understand literature and social interaction by teaching them theory of mind (ToM) through fun activities, games, and stories drawn from children's literature.

Theory of mind is the ability to understand that the perspective and intentions of other people are different from your own perspective and intentions. Most children understand ToM, including the fact that other people can have false beliefs, by the age of four. Yet children with autism show a specific deficit in understanding ToM. Without understanding what another person can know or believe, a child with autism is not able to predict how a person may behave. *Practical Theory of Mind Games* demonstrates how to assess a child's ability to understand ToM and how to teach it on a step-by-step, developmental basis.

Consider a very early toddler board book, such as *Good Night, Gorilla* by Peggy Rathmann. In this story, a gorilla takes the zookeeper's keys when he's not looking and lets other animals out of their cages. All the animals follow the zookeeper, but the zookeeper doesn't know they're behind him. Most 2-year-old children think this is a very funny book, but an older child with autism may not realize that the zookeeper doesn't know the animals are behind him. *Practical Theory of Mind Games* takes beginning children's literature, such as *Good Night, Gorilla*, and breaks down the ToM components for the SLP to teach through creative dramatics and games. The student rehearses different perspectives and gains an understanding of what others can know, want, and believe.

Many children with autism receive social skills training and are taught social skills directly through rules and social stories. This is appropriate because these are children who need explicit instruction in social skills. This could be called a "top down" approach. However, there is also a need to learn social skills from the "bottom up." This is theory of mind instruction. If children are not taught ToM along with explicit social skills, they may imitate social behavior, but they may never really understand it.

Carol