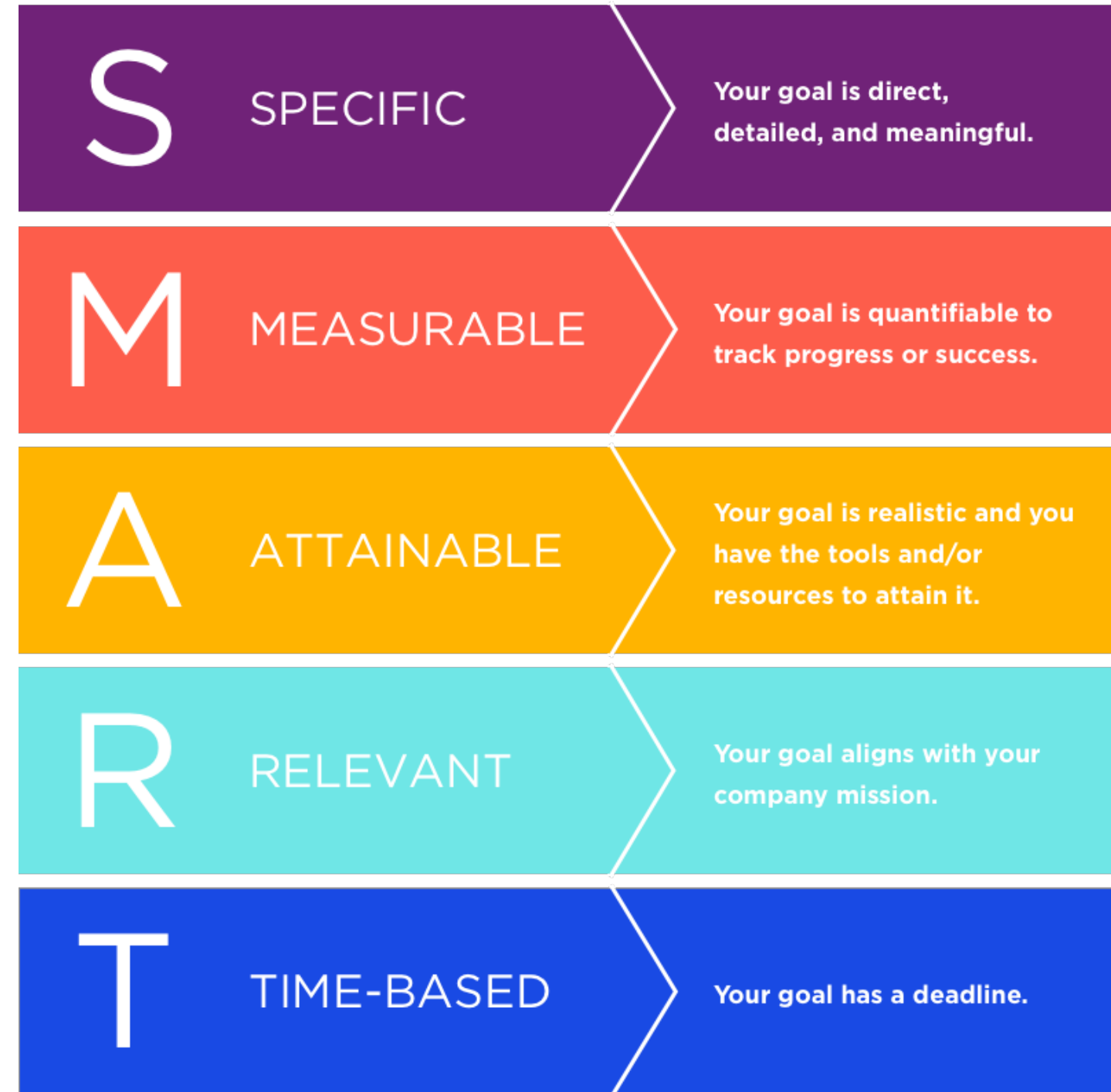
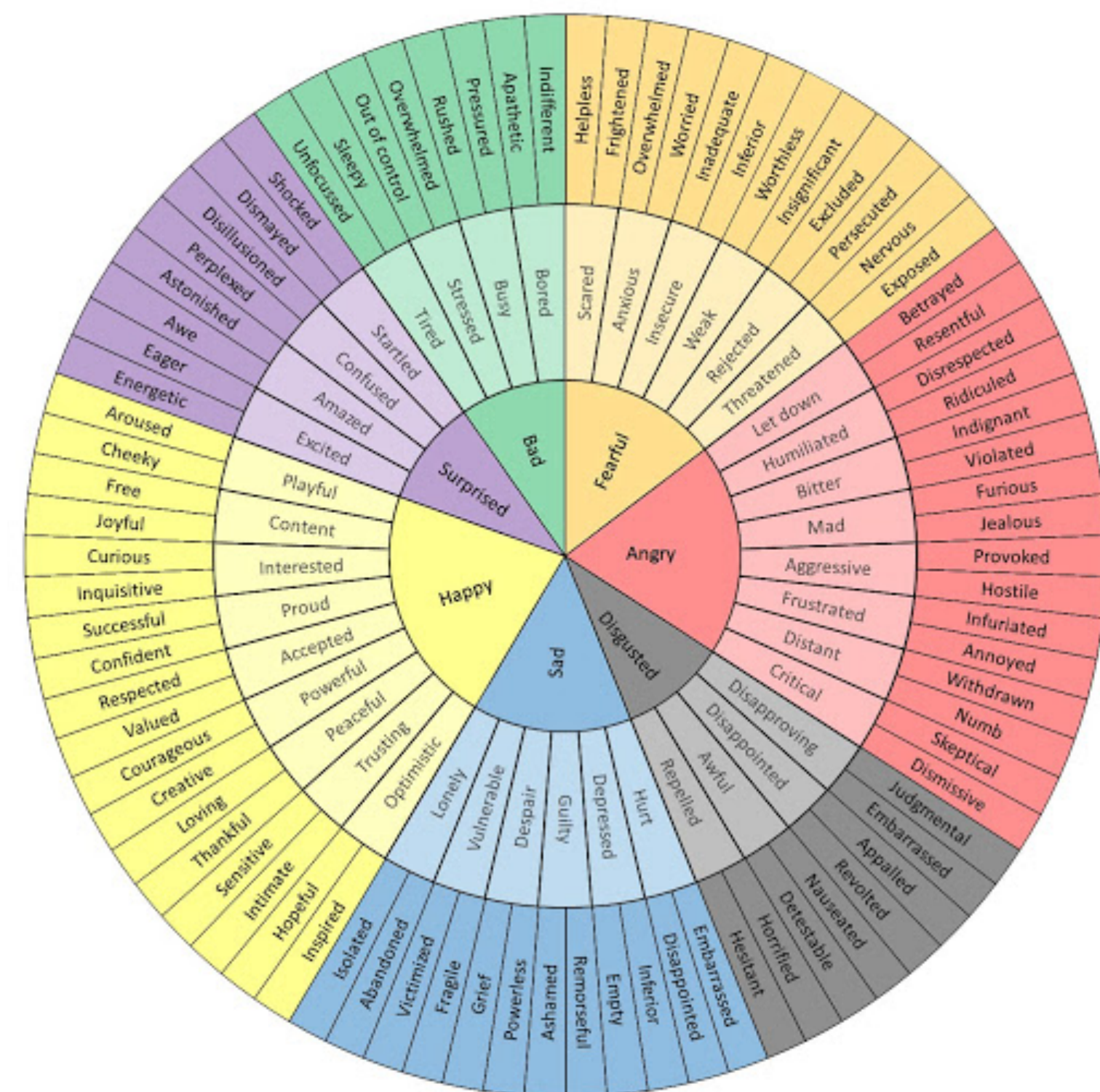




Background

Community Partners is the area agency that serves Strafford County, NH. As an area agency, Community Partners provides developmental and behavioral health services. Spectrum Connection is a clinic owned and operated by Community Partners that provides applied behavior analysis (ABA) services to people with autism in clinic, daycare, and home settings. Spectrum Connection currently provides parent training and 1:1 ABA services but does not yet provide weekly social skills groups. The purpose of this project was to create a framework for social groups as well as a manual for Community Partners to use as a guideline to begin and maintain social groups. Through research, the project expanded to evaluate current research and deficits teaching nuanced social skills to people with autism.



Findings

Several common themes were discovered through this research:

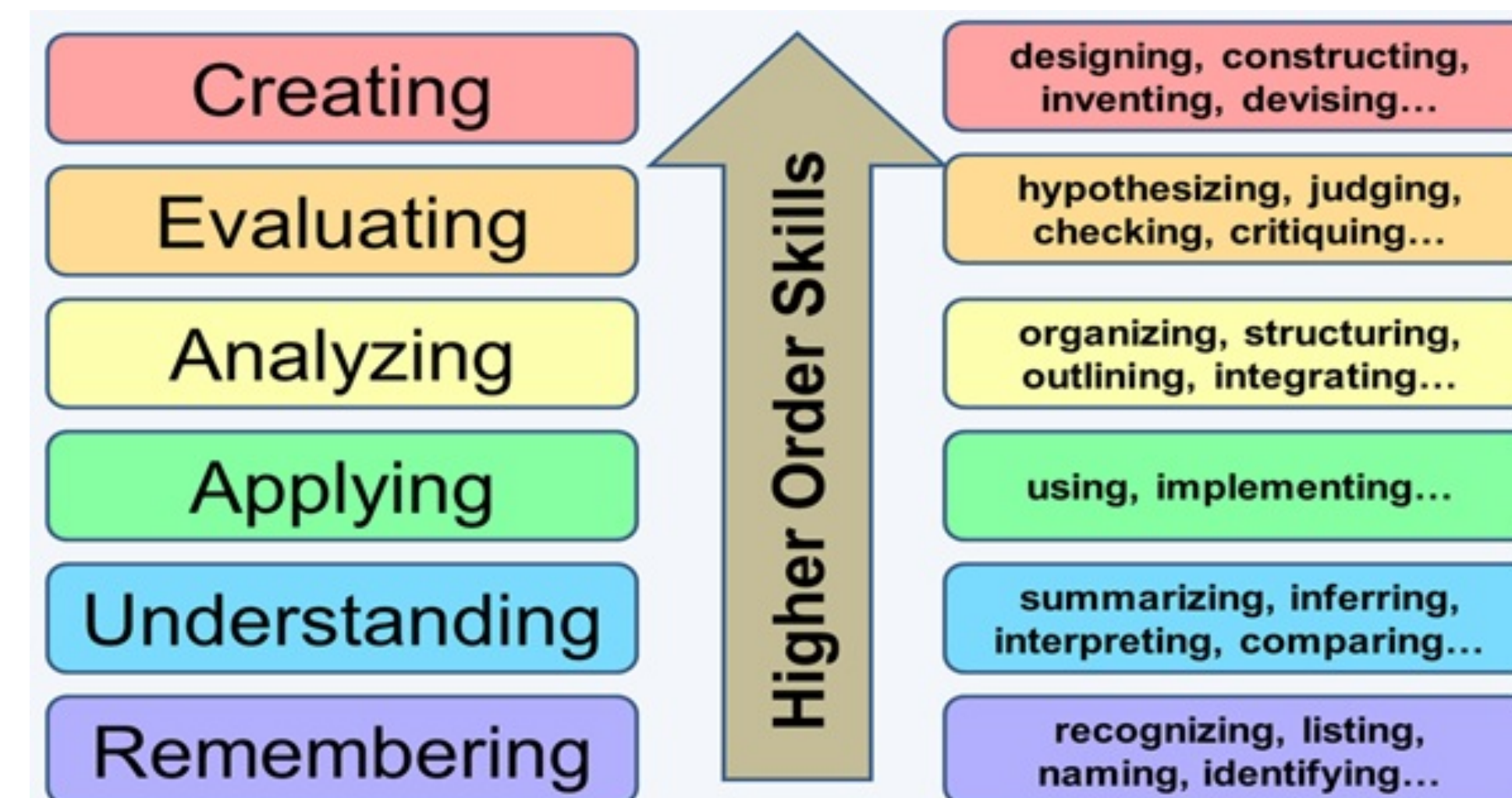
- While there are assessments for emerging social skills, such as in Socially Savvy, and while there are curriculums targeting the more complex social skills for individuals with autism, such as the PEERS program, there does not exist an assessment for clinicians to use to evaluate nuanced complex social skills.
Learning critical thinking skills was the biggest deficit identified in current or previous social skills groups by professionals, parents, and individuals with autism.
Behavioral cusps have not yet been identified to teach someone the skills they need to make moment to moment judgments within an infinite amount of social situations versus teaching the skills to use in each context separately which is what is currently being done.
Joining a social skills group as a young adult can feel stigmatizing. Peer-mediated and/or interest-specific groups may be a solution to that problem.
Teaching social "scripts" and social "rules" in social skills groups may overgeneralize to inappropriate contexts and in some instances, is seen as an attempt to "normalize" individuals with autism.
There is a deficit in research in the assessment and treatment of someone having difficulties with nuanced social skills, which is an issue that affects many people and extends beyond the social challenges associated with the diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Manual

The manual created for Spectrum Connection comprised of the following resources:

- Intake process
Assessment
Criteria for 1:1 coaching or creating group services
Creating goals
Data collection and graphing
Task analyses for prior to, during, and after services
Sample 1:1 and group lesson plans
Gathering feedback from participants and adjusting the existing program
Expansion of program and considerations for future research

Additionally, a separate research compilation was created to assist future research around teaching nuanced social skills, as well as teaching young adults how to create and maintain healthy relationships.



Next Steps

For Community Partners, the next step would include running a social skills group aimed at teaching complex social nuances using the manual created for this purpose. Data should be taken to evaluate the efficacy of teaching these skills in a clinical setting versus an in-vivo setting. Additionally, data should be taken to evaluate differences in outcomes in 1:1 versus group service delivery. Community Partners can use the groups or 1:1 services to contribute to the growing research within the field of behavior analysis around teaching social skills.

Future Research

This project uncovered many deficits in what behavior analysts currently have as tools to teach individuals with autism to navigate complex social situations. Those deficits include:

- Current research on complex social skills
Curriculums for advanced learners
Assessment of complex social skills
Instruction-heavy social skills groups
Relying on teaching scripts within social skills groups
Poor delivery of instruction resulting in perception that implies the goal is to "normalize" and further stigmatization

More research must be done to explore:

- Identifying behavioral cusps for navigating complex social situations to avoid having to teach on a context-specific basis
Evaluating the use of assessing nuanced social skills using Bloom's taxonomy as a framework
Using a young adult's support network to assist in identifying goals and social challenges
Using acceptance and commitment therapy as a tool to increase psychological flexibility and assess the quality of one's relationships
Conducting a component analysis to identify individual factors that contribute to and yield an increased social validity score among participants in young adult social skills groups

*References available upon request

Research Process

Research to inform the production of this manual included:

- Interviews with people with clinicians, individuals with autism, and parents of individuals with autism
Review of current literature and publications within the field of behavior analysis
Review of theories including Bloom's Taxonomy and Theory of Mind and therapies such as acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT)
Current assessments and curriculum for teaching social skills to individuals with autism including Socially Savvy, AIM, Crafting Connections, and PEERS Curriculum
Review of books and resources relating to social skills
List of social nuances titled "Things I Don't Get" given to me by a self-advocate with autism
Informal online support groups and meetups for social skills