

Superflex®, the Team of Unthinkables and the Five-Step Power Plan

By Michelle Garcia Winner

When we introduced the Superflex® teaching curriculum in 2008, little did we realize the far-reaching effect it would have on kids, parents, teachers, counselors, and clinicians across the country and around the world. Superflex and the engaging characters that are part of the



curriculum – the Unthinkables and Thinkables – have been infused in creative ways into social groups, classrooms, even on a school-wide basis to help all students become better social detectives, social thinkers, and social problem solvers.

Background and a Brief History of Superflex and the Team of Unthinkables

Superflex is a superhero people have in their minds to help them use strategies to promote self-regulation, social thinking, and related social skills. *Superflex...A Superhero Social Thinking Curriculum* was first published in 2008, and is a colorful, kid-friendly Social Thinking curriculum created for K-5 students. It's paired with a cute comic book that introduces the concept of the Team of Unthinkables, characters that represent the different ways our brain has not-so-flexible thinking in social situations. The first comic focuses on the very common Unthinkable, Rock Brain, who gets kids stuck on just one thing and thwarts their superflexible thinking. While the curriculum was originally designed for K-5, over the years we've learned that the self-regulation piece requires a deeper level of thinking and processing that is better suited for third to fifth graders. So, even though K-2 kids really like to learn about the powers of their Social Detective, and about Superflex and the Unthinkables, in using the curriculum with this age range we let go of the expectation that they will self-regulate to control their Unthinkable's power and maximize their superflexible thinking.



Today the Superflex series is also being introduced in mainstream elementary school classrooms for use with all students, and as part of Social Emotional Learning, Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports (PBIS) and Response to Intervention (RTI) programs. Teachers also use these pro-social teaching methods for helping students analyze characters they are reading about in language arts or to help students develop narrative essays for written

expression. The concepts related to Superflex and the Team of Unthinkables have also been used by mainstream teachers as part of teaching concepts included in the Common Core



Standards. For example, students learn about “Point of View” as they study the powers of One-Sided Sid (left), another popular Unthinkable who likes to make people talk only about their own interests or themselves.

As interesting and motivating a teaching curriculum this is, Superflex is *not* the place to start when preparing students to learn more about the powers of their brains in socially-based situations. We first introduce our young learners to the concepts of expected versus unexpected behaviors in particular situations to help them explore their own Social Detective skills. Our comic book, *You Are a Social Detective*, teaches both adults and children about Social Thinking concepts that are the foundation of, and precursor to, learning about Superflex and how to monitor and empower superflexible thinking while learning to minimize the powers of our Unthinkables. It’s an important first step.

After students are introduced to these core concepts (also taught through the use of our more expansive curriculum, *Think Social: A Social Thinking Curriculum for School Age Students*), the Superflex curriculum now has the power to help students learn more about their own self-regulation while also paying better attention to the expectations that surround them. Ultimately we want kids to learn that Superflex, our Social Thinking superhero, can help the citizens of Social Town outsmart the Team of Unthinkables and diminish their powers to distract, disengage, and otherwise detour children in their efforts to think about others and use their social thinking abilities.

Once the concepts and strategies in *Social Detective* and *Superflex* have been taught to children, adults can move on to individual comic books that focus on specific Unthinkables. These story-based books explain a character’s powers in more detail and provide workable strategies that children can be taught to use when that Unthinkable invades their brain and overpowers their thinking. Our books published after 2009 also each contain a CD which provides additional lessons plans—we call them “thinksheets” - to help kids complete “fun work” which promotes more learning around the specific concepts taught in the books. To date four comic books focusing on specific Unthinkables have been released; we have plans to release more over time:

1. *Superflex Takes on Rock Brain and the Team of Unthinkables* (2008), which is packaged with the Superflex curriculum book

2. *Superflex Takes on Glassman and the Team of Unthinkables* (2009)
3. *Superflex Takes on Brain Eater and the Team of Unthinkables* (2012)
4. *Superflex Takes on One-Sided Sid, Un-Wonderer, and the Team of Unthinkables* (2013)

Social Thinking's teachings are a work in progress and we readily accept feedback from the community. Since its release we have received many accolades for how this teaching system helps students learn more about themselves, which helps them improve their own self-regulation skills. However, that doesn't mean it is the perfect teaching tool. Over the years some teachers and parents asked us to explain how Superflex got his powers. To this end, in 2012 we released a new book (*Social Town Citizens Discover 82 New Unthinkables for Superflex to Outsmart*) with information on how to teach Superflex's Very Cool Five-Step Power Plan. While the Power Plan can be very helpful, at this point the teaching becomes more complex and is best used with students who are at least in third grade.

Superflex's Very Cool Five-Step Power Plan:

Helping Students Organize their Thinking to Defeat the Unthinkables

Here's the story we share with upper elementary school-age students about Superflex's Power Pals. The more our students learned about their own Superflex the more they recognized that many more Unthinkables existed beyond the original 14 we had written about in our core curriculum. We started getting emails and drawings about Unthinkables such as Blurt Out Blue, Rule Police, Negasorus Nix, Empathy Eraser, Perfect Pete, and Dr. Downloader, to name just a few. In fact, when we issued an invitation to Social Town citizens everywhere, they responded with 500+ submissions of new Unthinkables that were invading the brains of our students!

Superflex realized that with the growing number of powers trying to defeat his own thinking, he needed to develop even stronger superflexible thinking. So he called on five of his closest pals to teach him more about the critical powers needed to truly defeat Unthinkables. His five pals—Decider, Social Detective, Brakester, Flex DoBody, and Cranium Coach - came together with Superflex's guidance to think as a team to create a plan that would help Social Town citizens everywhere develop true superflexible thinking. Each of the Power Pals shared one special lesson or power:



DECIDER provides Power #1, the ability to **stop**, **decide**, and **describe** which Unthinkable(s) is trying to overpower your superflexible thinking.

Decider taught Superflex how to **stop** and **describe** what was happening within the student's body and brain so that Superflex and the student could decide which Unthinkable was attempting to invade. Once the Unthinkable was identified, Decider also helped Superflex select which of his/her many powers and strategies to use. As Decider explained to Superflex, it doesn't make sense to use a strategy designed to defeat Mean Jean if he was trying to defeat WasFunnyOnce!



SOCIAL DETECTIVE provides Power #2, the ability to **stop** and **observe** the situation and the people in the situation.

Social Detective took the time to show Superflex that a critical power lies within everyone's own observation toolbox. Social Detective taught Superflex about using **clues** from his eyes, ears, and brain to help understand the situation and the people in the situation to figure out what was expected behavior at that particular time. Wow! This was amazingly helpful to Superflex because it helped him develop supersensitive observation powers (a whole surveillance system) in his brain.



BRAKESTER provides Power #3, the power to **stop** and **think** to discover the hidden rules in the situation.

Brakester taught Superflex how he could **stop** and **think** about the hidden rules once he'd observed the people in the situation. Brakester talked about how the hidden rules are almost like hidden treasures because they're the secrets of the social situation and help to explain why people are expected to act in certain ways! Superflex was very excited to gain this power but also knew that our students needed to do more than just think about what is expected, they needed to do more expected behaviors.



FLEX DoBODY provides Power #4, the power to **use flexible thinking** to determine which strategies would help the student do what's expected.

Flex DoBody reminds students there is a choice of strategies and helps students figure out which strategy to choose so they can practice new behaviors in that situation. Superflex knows this requires students to become more flexible thinkers so they can flexibly pick the best

strategy to use at the right time and in the right place. So Flex gave Superflex a test by saying: “Now that you’ve described your Unthinkable, observed the situation, and stopped to think about what’s expected, what strategies will you **flexibly** think about? Which one or two will you choose to **do** to defeat this scoundrel?” Superflex realized that Flex was teaching him the secret of **flex** and **do**! Superflex understood that thinking and observing are super important but using flexible thinking, making choices, and carrying out a plan to defeat an Unthinkable are also important. This power helps Superflex finish any job he’s started!



CRANIUM COACH provides Power #5, using **self-talk** with help from your built-in brain coach! (Remember: This coach is usually in your brain and just silently coaches you.)

Superflex learned the last strategy from his very wise pal, Cranium Coach, who explained to Superflex that everyone needs to develop an in-their-brain-coaching-system to help them self-evaluate when they “did a good job” or when they need to “hang in there” or “keep trying.” Cranium Coach revealed to Superflex that everyone actually has a built-in inner brain coach who can silently coach us and motivate us to keep working to defeat whatever Unthinkable is near. We need to practice accessing it and using it! Cranium Coach helps you notice that you’re improving even if you aren’t great at something yet! And, you can also use your inner coach to help you describe the things you did that helped you through the process!

The Thinkables Emerge

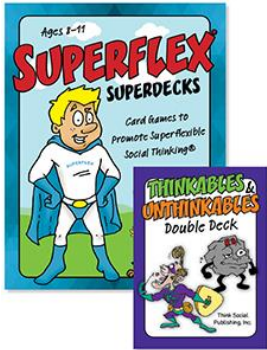
We noticed that citizens of Social Town were accomplishing some great feats by learning how to use their superflexible thinking and the Five-Step Power Plan to defeat the Unthinkable(s) that were trying to control their brains. As citizens became better and better at using their strategies and making choices to keep Superflex in charge of their brains, their Unthinkables weren’t showing up as much to really challenge Superflex anymore. Some citizens became so good at this that their Unthinkables were mostly defeated most of the time. This was very exciting! With the help of the five Power Pals, Social Town citizens were developing more positive thinking and as a result, new Thinkables started to appear. Rainbow Girl teaches people how to stay calm when something goes wrong. Space Respector helps citizens to be mindful of others’ personal space. Focus Tron gives people greater focusing powers. Sunny Sun (right) helps people see all the good things in a day and feel pretty good about their lives. As more and more citizens developed stronger superflexible thinking, more and more Thinkables started appearing so that citizens were now



getting help from entire teams of Thinkables! And, what was even better was that the very cool Five-Step Power Plan could also be used to figure out how to most effectively work with the Thinkables too!

The Learning Continues

Detailed information on how to teach and use the Five-Step Power Plan, along with many examples of completed Power Plans are presented in *Social Town Citizens Discover 82 New Unthinkables for Superflex to Outsmart* (2012). In this book, we also introduce various Thinkables and explore how students can replace their Unthinkables with Thinkables once they develop a certain level of self-regulation....but more on that in the next article!



Two Superflex games released in 2014 take Superflex learning to the next level! Superflex Superdecks, and the Thinkables & Unthinkables Double Deck, are both designed to be companion teaching tools for adults who are teaching Superflex or to use in creative new ways with students who are already familiar with the Superflex series. These card-deck based games are the ultimate superflexible products for adults to use in different ways to reinforce superflexible thinking in the individuals with whom they work.

All books and products mentioned in this article, and others that describe the Social Thinking teaching framework, are available at www.socialthinking.com. While there, sign up for our free newsletter, access free articles, and learn about Social Thinking conferences offered in the U.S. and around the world.

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