

Conversation Skills

This short review will provide you with ideas on how you can support your child in developing basic conversation skills.

Introduction: A conversation is defined as the informal exchange of ideas through spoken words. Basic conversation skills are an important part of a child's development, because they give a child the tools to build relationships and friendships, communicate their thoughts and ideas and even solve problems. Conversations are also an expected part of a child's daily interactions with others around them.

Conversation skills are challenging for people with autism because most people with autism have impaired language, communication and social skills. Many children with autism use language functionally – to communicate their needs and desires, or to protest or reject something but they may be unable to communicate their feelings and thoughts. Often, children with autism will also not be able to talk about the past or the future and be unable to read verbal cues and body language.

Teaching a child conversation skills is a complex process and will most likely require the guidance of a speech and language therapist. We will focus on introducing you to concepts that you should be familiar with to support your child with conversation skills.

Parts of a Conversation: The different parts of a conversation can be broken down into the following steps:

1. Letting someone know you want to talk to them, or responding to their invitation to talk. This includes approaching a person, waiting for eye contact, and standing at an appropriate distance from them. It also includes using their name to get their attention.
2. Taking turns talking to each other. This includes looking at a person's eyes occasionally and talking and then letting the other person respond. It also involves answering the other person's questions.
3. Talking about the same topic. This involves saying something relevant about a topic and then listening to the other person's ideas and responding appropriately. It also involves nodding, or saying "uh-huh" and asking questions.
4. Letting them know when you are finished talking. This includes something like "Oh, I have to go", or "Bye. See you later" to let them know you are done with the conversation. Most preschoolers do

not formally end conversations. This is a skill that is developed at an older age.

To teach a child conversation skills, you will need to focus on teaching them how to conduct themselves at each step in a conversation. Appropriate conversation topics for younger children include their toys, meals/snacks, an outing, a video or a book they just read, a show and tell item, what they did at school or what they did at the playground.

Here are a few tools you can use to teach a child with autism to engage in basic conversations.

1. **Social Scripts** - One of the more common tools for teaching conversation skills is social scripts. A social script is a script written specifically for your child to teach them exactly what to say and when to say it during a conversation. It can be practiced ahead of time, but to really understand how to use the skill, it needs to be practiced in natural settings.
2. **Using activities to teach conversations** – You can also teach conversation skills by using activities that focus on one particular key aspect of a conversation. For example, if you are trying to teach your child to make eye contact, you could play a game where each of you stare into the other's eyes, and the one who does not turn away wins. Your child's therapist will have many ideas on how you can use activities to teach conversation skills to your child.

Things to Remember When Teaching

Conversation Skills: No matter which techniques you use to teach your child conversation skills, they all need to be systematic and concrete. Any visuals you use should include pictures or words or both. You also need to be able to fade the technique, which means that over time, you need to be able to remove the visual supports, and reduce the number of prompts until your child is able to conduct a conversation independent of the teaching tools.

Also, remember to choose appropriate topics to talk about with your child. Children are more inclined to carry on a conversation about topics that interest them. Ask your child's therapist or teacher for activities and tools that you can use to teach various aspects of conversation skills.