Porchlight
Autism Education Series
Greeting People

Introduction

Saying "hello" to others might be one of the first social communication skills that your child learns to use outside of your home. This behavior is called GREETING. A greeting is usually only one to two words, but the social skills associated with it are more complex. During the first year of life, children begin to recognize the most familiar people in their lives. Over time, they may begin to recognize other familiar people such as your friends and then teachers and therapists.

For children with autism, recognizing or even looking at faces can be a challenge and your child may have a difficult time matching a name to a face. Therefore, greeting a familiar person may not come naturally to a child with autism and may need to be taught. Greeting requires the ability to notice people who are familiar in a social setting, glance at them, and use words or gestures to greet them. Greeting serves a social function and therefore it is an important skill for your child to develop. Greetings are also an "entry" into almost every conversation. It is therefore a more complex skill than it appears to be.

As you think about teaching your child greeting skills, keep in mind that there are developmental steps involved in greeting and social awareness skills. Language development happens as a step by step process. First a child learns to gesture, then use a single word, then to combine words and finally to communicate in more complex ways. Social awareness also develops step by step. First a child learns to attend to people's voices, then learns to look at and recognize faces and finally, learns to recognize them in different social settings. To learn to greet, a child needs to be able to combine these language and social skills together to use the correct words and gestures in the correct social context.

There are a few different ways in which you can teach your child greeting skills – here are three ways. The first involves modeling the desired greetings. We will also review using pretend play and social scripts to teach greetings. Modeling is a great way to teach basic greeting skills. Here are some suggestions for you to remember as you model greeting for your child:

- If your child is nonverbal, you can start by increasing their social awareness skills such as noticing familiar people in a social setting and using a nonverbal way to greet. You can model waving as you say "hello".
- If your child is verbal, you can model a single greeting word such as "Hello" or "Hi" in social settings or a two word greeting such as "Hello Mary" or "Hi Pablo".
- If your child speaks in sentences, you can model a greeting routine as follows:
    1. Greet or respond to a greeting using one or two words "Hi" or "Hi Mary."
    2. Ask "how are you?" and answer "fine" or "good" when asked.
    3. Close the verbal exchange by saying "Goodbye" or "Bye Mary"

Encouraging Your Child to Greet

There are several things you can do to encourage your child to use greetings. Some of these include:

1. Using natural opportunities to greet others. This could include family members as they enter or leave the house, bus drivers as they pick up or drop off your child or even your child's peers as your child enters a classroom.
2. Help your child notice others around them by saying things like, "I see Jonathan coming!" or "There's Jonathan!" This will help develop what is called "joint attention skills" where you are both attending to or looking at the person at the same time. If your child does not look at the person, you can gesture towards the person and say "Look, there's Jonathan" or similar.
3. Sometimes a child may have an "echoic" response to others' greetings. When someone says "Hi David!" to your child, he may respond by saying "Hi David". If this happens, you can ask the person who is speaking to your child to drop your child's name when they greet him to avoid this error. Speak with your child's speech and language therapist to address this issue.

Pretend Play

You can also teach a child greetings through pretend play. For example, use a favorite stuffed animal or doll and pretend they are coming to visit your child. Pretend to open the door and greet the toy or doll. This will give your child opportunities to practice greeting skills. Create a number of pretend settings to practice in. For example, you could create a classroom with your child's toys and greet each one of them by name. This will help your child learn that every person has a unique name by which they are addressed. For children who are verbal, you could also role play a more complex interaction between two characters.

Social Scripts

Social Scripts are another great tool you can use to teach a verbal child how to greet. A social script is a verbal script that is personalized based on your child's skills and social settings. The script is written specifically for your child to help them learn exactly what to say and when to say it. It can be practiced ahead of time, but to really understand the skill, it needs to be practiced in authentic settings. Here is an example of a social script created to teach a child some rules about how and when to greet peers:

When I walk down the hallway at school and I see a student from my classroom, I can say "Hi".
I can look at their face and smile too.
If my classmate says "Hi" or "Hello" first, I can look at them and say "Hi" back.
Then I can go to the playground or the classroom.

Greeting is one of the early developing skills that combine language skills with social skills. We hope that you have found these tips helpful.