

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN VERBAL INDIVIDUALS WITH AUTISM

Communication is key to human interaction. Communication is the sharing of information, needs, attention, experiences, and ideas between two or more people. Communication usually involves spoken, written, and nonverbal forms of communication such as eye contact, gestures, and facial expressions. Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) often lack the understanding and/or skills to communicate effectively. Verbal children and adults with ASD often have difficulty with reciprocity (back and forth sharing) in conversation, expressing their thoughts and feelings, using nonverbal communication, and understanding figurative language like puns and idioms. These weaknesses in communication can significantly impact their social functioning and ability to make and keep relationships. This handout is designed to support parents in getting started with teaching social communication skills to their verbal child or teen with ASD.



It is important to recognize that for individuals with ASD, social communication skills are generally not “picked up” over time by watching others. Instead, they need to be systematically taught through education, prompting, and practice, and then generalized to a variety of situations and people. In each of the sections below, there are example activities that you can work on with your child. You should adapt the materials based on the age of your child.

RECIPROCAL CONVERSATION

For many individuals without autism, reciprocal conversation is an intuitive, enjoyable activity done with other people. For many individuals with ASD, however, reciprocal conversation is a complex process requiring a person to understand another person’s perspective, use and interpret subtle non-verbal cues, have flexibility in thought and attention, show active listening skills, and have an interest in other’s thoughts and experiences. Children and teens with ASD may show the following difficulties in conversation:

- Maintaining equal conversational turns
- Maintaining a conversation initiated by another person

- Taking the perspective of the listener to monitor for comprehension and interest in the topic
- Asking questions and making comments, and balancing the two
- Providing enough background information for the conversational partner
- Taking the perspective of the listener to monitor for understanding and interest
- Using eye contact and other nonverbal behaviors such as nodding

After figuring out which of these skills is challenging for your child, you can then explain the skills clearly to your child (using visual supports), break the skill down into steps, and practice it with guidance and coaching.

One way to help your child understand social communication skills is to use **social articles**. A social article is a written/visual explanation of a social skill that describes the skill, why it is important, and how others are affected by it. Below is an example of a social article about reciprocal conversation and several activities that reinforce the concepts in the social article. The article and activities are geared for older elementary children through middle school aged children who are fluent readers. The activities can be adapted for younger children by creating a simplified version of the social article and by adding conversation topics that are more geared towards your child's age.

Participating in a Reciprocal Conversation – Social Article

Having a conversation with someone is a reciprocal activity. This means that words are exchanged between two or more people.

When people play a game of catch, they toss a ball back and forth to each other several times. Having a reciprocal conversation is a lot like playing a game of catch. You and the other person will talk about a specific topic "back and forth" as if you are throwing and catching words and thoughts to each other.

Usually, two people will have a topic of conversation that they talk about for a little while. While one person speaks by making a comment or asking a question about the topic, the other person listens and waits for their turn. Then, the second person gets a chance to make a comment or ask a question about the same topic.

The topic of conversation usually gets "tossed" back and forth at least three times. If both people really like the topic, they may "toss" the conversation back more than three times until they run out of things to say about the topic.



Instructions:

- Read the social article with your child, paying close attention to key underlined concepts.
- Demonstrate how a reciprocal conversation is like a game of catch by throwing a ball back and forth as comments or questions are made about a specific topic. Use conversation topic cards to spark ideas about what to talk about.
- Have your child practice this slow and deliberate way of experiencing a reciprocal conversation with multiple people such as teachers, parents, and peers.
- Review the "Conversation self-check" form with your child.

The **Sender/Receiver game** is another activity that can be used to practice taking equal turns in conversation, staying on topic, and listening to others. This activity also helps children summarize information, formulate thoughts, and draw conclusions from what they hear in conversation.



Instructions:

1. Create materials. One deck of cards will consist of 4 cards. One card will have the word "receiver" written on it. The remaining three cards will have the word "sender" written on them with a number ranging from 1-3.
2. The second deck of cards will have various topics listed, each on one card.
3. The players will select a card from the Sender/Receiver pile. This card will determine their role in the game.
4. One of the senders will draw 1 card from the topic pile. This card will tell the senders what they need to discuss. The senders will not reveal the topic of the discussion to the receiver.
5. The child who picked "sender card 1" will say 2 sentences about that topic. Next, "sender card 2" needs to add 2 sentences about the topic selected, then "sender card 3" will need to add the concluding 2 sentences. For example, if the topic was "TV." Sender 1 could say, "Hey, did you see the new episode of _____?" "It was so awesome!" Sender 2 could say, "No, I didn't see that but I saw _____. I wish they came out with some new episodes." Sender 3 could say, "Yeah, I agree. I wish they would make that show into a movie!"
6. The child who drew the "receiver" card will need to listen to each of the presentations and at the end, summarize in their own words what they heard about the topic and guess the name of the topic.

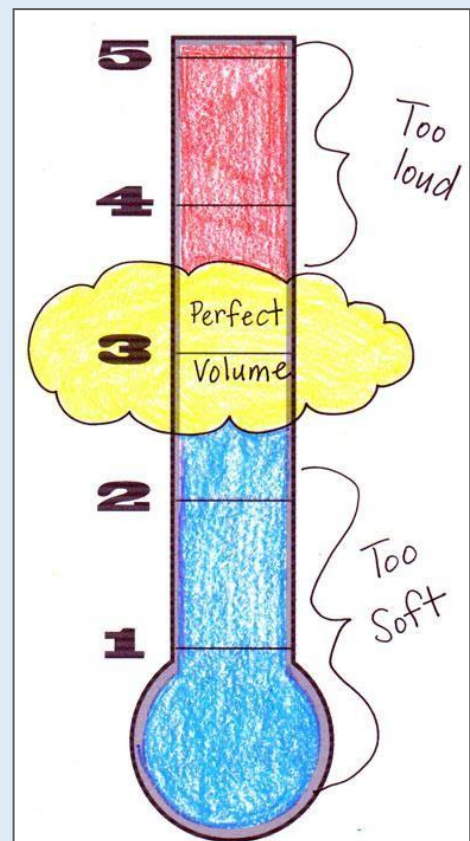
NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Nonverbal communication can be just as important to social communication as the words spoken. Understanding and using nonverbal communication is a core deficit in individuals with ASD. They have difficulty “reading” and appropriately using facial expressions, using and understanding gestures and physical space, and using eye contact during social interactions. Nonverbal communication also involves the *way* in which words are spoken such as voice volume, tone of voice, and rate and rhythm of speech. Below are suggested activities to work on these deficits with your child.

Voice volume is a common problem with children with autism. They may talk too loud or too soft or use a volume that is inappropriate to the setting.

Instructions:

1. Create and read a social article with your child about the importance of voice volume. A sample of a simplified social article for a preschool/lower elementary age child is provided below.
2. Show your child the “visual thermometer” and explain the differences in voice volume.
3. Practice different voice volumes by using the animal cards and deciding what animal would match what loudness level (e.g. a lion is “loud”). Then, have your child match his or her voice volume to the animal’s voice volume.
4. Use the location cards to decide what voice volume is appropriate for what setting (e.g. quiet voice in the library). For an older child, you can simply make a list of locations and have them write down the words “quiet” “normal,” or “loud.”



Understanding **facial expressions** is another challenging skill for children with autism. They have difficulty reading expressions and using this information to inform what they say and how they act.

Instructions:

1. Practice having your child identify emotions using the emotions cards provided. Use multiple formats, such as acting them out, showing them in magazines and TV shows, taking pictures of family members with different emotions, making an emotions book, and by having your child try to act them out.
2. Next, show your child the “visual thermometer” and explain the concept that emotions have different degrees and that different degrees have different words associated with them. Make visual thermometers for basic emotions.
3. Finally, play emotions charades. Create a set of emotion cards and action cards. Take turns picking one emotion and one action and acting it out (e.g. angry throwing).



General Tips

We have provided a sample of visual supports and concrete activities for you to get started working with your child on social communication. You can use similar visual teaching tools and concepts to work on a wide range of skills. Some tips to keep in mind include:

- Assess your child with the skill before you teach it. Break the skills down into steps. Write down what steps he does well and what steps he needs help with.
- Incorporate materials or activities your child enjoys to make learning the skills motivating. Ask yourself: “What are my child’s interests?” “What does he spend time doing?”
- Use visual cues to support your teaching and keep language simple and clear, even if you child is very verbal. Avoid long verbal explanations.
- Share what you are teaching with others in your child’s life so that they can reinforce the skills as well as help generalize them to other people and settings.
- Encourage your child to look at what other children are doing to learn from them.
- Identify naturally occurring situations when your child uses appropriate social skills, point them out, and praise them.
- Model appropriate social skills and point out what you are doing and why.