



Teaching Conversational Skills

Conversational skills build a foundation for developing friendships, cooperating with other people, and communicating effectively with people in every aspect of life. Although the art of conversation is difficult to address, below are some strategies for teaching basic conversational skills.

1. Model Skills – Children learn from watching other people and then practicing skills. Role play is a fun and extremely effective way to teach skills because it lets children learn from examples. During role play model an appropriate greeting or conversation. Let children see how questions are asked and answered and how people remain on topic. Keep the ‘skits’ short and simple at first to establish the basic skills then expand on them later.

2. Practice Small Steps - Just like any other skill, social skills need to be broken into smaller steps and practiced repeatedly. Role play greetings by teaching the child to say, “Hello” and then expand to, “Hello, how are you?”

3. Multiple Phrases, Settings, and People – Conversational skills should be developed with a variety of people, phrases, and novel settings. To promote generalization of skills, introduce different questions and wording when role playing such as: “Good morning,” “Hello,” and “Hi there!” By doing this, children learn there are various greetings and responses. Since conversations occur throughout the day with different people, recruit people in the school or community to help the child practice. Ask the crossing guard or librarian to engage the child in a conversation that incorporates the skills being practiced.

4. Remember Body Language – When practicing conversational skills, be sure to include key skills such as personal space (approximately an arm’s length is considered appropriate in the United States), body language, and facial cues. These unspoken aspects of conversation are often extremely difficult for children to grasp and should be included in role play and instruction.

5. Ways to Reduce Repetition – Children frequently learn saying hello or asking someone their name is part of a conversation, so they may repeatedly incorporate these phrases in the same conversation. One way to practice saying something only once is to hold up a finger as a visual cue during role play. For example, if there is a question or phrase that should only be used once, hold up a finger during conversational practice time. After the child asks the question put your finger down. This is a cue that the child already has asked the question. After the child has used this cue successfully a number of times, practice without the visual cue and then praise them for remembering to ask the question only once. Another strategy is to have the child keep a hand (preferably the left hand if you are teaching them to shake hands) in their pocket with one finger pointed. After they ask their favorite question, have them stop pointing or stop pointing and remove their hand from their pocket. This allows the child to remind themselves they used this phrase or question and other people are not able to see this personal cue.

6. Praise and Review - Praise children for greeting people, using a phrase once, or ending a conversation appropriately. Often it is best to praise children during role play or after the child is away from other people to avoid embarrassing them. To reinforce the skill, be sure to review what they did correctly. For example, “I like the way you asked Mr. James if he was having a nice day only once.” If a novel situation occurs naturally, role play it later and use it as a learning experience.

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