



# Helpful Tips for Parents: Conversation Skills

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Adapted from:

- <http://www.parentingscience.com/social-skills-activities.html>
- <http://www.behavioradvisor.com/SocialSkills.html>
- [www.autism.uk.org](http://www.autism.uk.org)
- <http://www.livestrong.com/article/236359-social-skills-games-for-kids-with-special-needs/>

Conversational skills may be difficult for your child for a number of reasons. Conversations are not predictable and involve an immediate response. This is why some children avoid conversations with their peers and will often talk to adults or children much older or younger than themselves. You can help your child become more comfortable by practicing some of these skills:

- **Back to basics:** deal with basic skills first, such as how to stand, which way to face, appropriate distance, etc. This can be supported with the use of visuals.
- **"I LOVE to talk about...."** Many children have a particular field of interest or topic that they know a lot about and they like to share this information with other people. However, they may need to learn that talking about their specific interest for 20 minutes may not be as interesting to many people. Create a little treasure box or bag with different topics listed in it. Include some topics that are of high interest and other more general topics that other people may be interested in (such as their favorite animal, best holiday, favorite singer, a movie you want to see, something you want to buy, etc.). Instruct your child to take one out of the bag and begin a conversation based on that topic so they learn to talk about different topics outside their immediate sphere of interest. Throw that one out when finished and move on to something new the next day.
- **Being talked 'at' rather than talked 'to'.** At times you may feel like you are a very passive part of a conversation with your child and it can feel like you are being lectured at rather than actually spoken to. It's important for children to learn to take turns in conversation. Consider using a tangible item such as a 'talking stick' that someone must be holding to enable them to have their turn at speaking and timers to indicate the end of their turn (this is especially helpful after school or during family dinners when everyone wants to share something about their day).
- **'Out of bounds' questions.** Discuss which questions are appropriate. For example, "how old are you?" might be o.k. to ask to a friend but not to an adult. Or if your child wants to ask, "where do you live?" you may need to explain that it's ok to find out an area, but not press someone for their street name.

- **"Pardon me"....**Some children can develop quite a formal way of speaking which can make them sound older than their peers and may make them stand out. It's important to make sure they have responses that are age appropriate. You may like to practice with them: "yeah, cool" instead of "I would like that" or the current appropriate phrase.
- **"Different places, different faces"**. Help your child distinguish the language used for different contexts, e.g. the way you address a classmate is not appropriate for when you see the principal.
- **The 'never ending story'**. This can be lots of fun done in a pair or in a group. One person starts and says one word only such as one, the next person says another word such as "day", and you keep going between yourselves adding one word at a time. This requires the both of you to listen to what the other person has said and tailor your response to keep the story going. These stories can end up being very silly and fun - but they are a great way to develop listening skills and spontaneity.
- **"A picture says a thousand words"**. Use cartoon-type drawings or pictures of people and draw in blank speech and thought bubbles. Encourage your child to use their observation skills to establish what the context is, what the characters are saying and thinking, and how other characters might respond.
- **Don't assume!** Do not assume your child knows how to act or what to say. New situations and new people require different behaviors and skills. Your child may need to practice these skills over and over. Therefore, it may take many times in the same situation until your child masters what to do and what to say. Be patient and praise your child for their efforts. Focus on telling them what to do ("ask them how they are doing today") rather than what not to do ("don't just stand there").