

## Conversational Skills

Some children need to be taught the 'rules' of conversation as they don't pick them up automatically. These 'rules' include how to greet people, ways of handing over or ending a conversation, or how to tell if the other person is interested.

These rules need to be demonstrated and acted out with the child. Then they will need lots of encouragement to use the 'rules' in real life.

NOTE: with all of the games and activities below, make sure an adult/good role model takes the first turn to show the child what to do. You may need to show them several times and use visual and verbal prompts, e.g. tell me one thing about what it looks like.

### Starting a Conversation

#### Joining in

In pairs/threes, ask the children to role-play ways of joining in simple games or conversations about set topics.

#### Talking with Toys

- ⇒ Ask the children to bring in a toy from home.
- ⇒ Encourage them to show their toy to the group and to say a little bit about it.
- ⇒ Ask the children if they think any of the toys would like to 'play together'.
- ⇒ One child sits in the middle of the circle with their toy.
- ⇒ You model asking to play, e.g. 'Can my bear play with your rabbit?'
- ⇒ Let the children have a turn asking you, or each other, to play.
- ⇒ You could also model an inappropriate approach, e.g. 'Give me that rabbit!'
- ⇒ Then let the child help you to ask more appropriately.



#### Getting Help

Role-play ways of asking for help. Set up situations or activities with one thing missing, e.g. no pencils/crayons out on the colouring in table, the child then has to directly ask for help.

#### Silence

Sit and say nothing – make the children start off a conversation with you. This will feel strange at first but it is a good way to teach the child that they can start a conversation.

## Keep the Conversation Going

### Talking too much

Remind the child that their conversation partner needs to have a turn to talk too or they might get bored. Keep asking the child how they think their partner feels.

### Talking too much about their interests

When a child talks too frequently about a specific topic, make a rule about when that topic can / cannot be introduced into conversation.

Use a clear signal, such as a picture cue, gesture or code word, to remind the child.

### Changing the topic of conversation

If a child changes the topic of conversation, it might be because they don't fully understand or they have made inappropriate connections in their mind. When this happens, gently refocus them and remind them how their conversation partner feels when they start talking about something different.

### Asking repetitive questions

At times, a child may ask repetitive questions as because they are anxious or because they want some control over the conversation. If they keep asking irrelevant questions, don't answer the question but instead explain why it is not relevant. Explain when a good time would be to ask that question.

### Following on

Show older children how to use what their conversation partner says, to carry on the conversation. e.g. Partner says 'I went to the park yesterday.' So the child could say 'Did you have a nice time at the park?'

### What's Changed?

- ⇒ This is a group role play activity. You ask one of the children a question.
- ⇒ The child answers.
- ⇒ You give no response to what they are saying, just sit there looking blank. Ask the children to tell you how you were behaving.
- ⇒ Now repeat the activity but this time nod, ask questions and show interest in what the child is saying.
- ⇒ Ask the children to tell you what changed between the first and second role-plays and identify which role-play is best and why.
- ⇒ Make a list of the best ways to keep a conversation going.

## Giving Relevant Information

### General Strategies

- ⇒ Children may give unnecessary information or leave out important details during conversation.
- ⇒ This is because they have little or no insight into the listener's level of knowledge.
- ⇒ Tell the child what else you need to know if they have missed something out e.g. Say, "I don't know who this happened to" or "I haven't been to your house so I don't know what your garden is like"
- ⇒ Help your child to recognise unnecessary detail they have given by explaining why there was no need for it to be included e.g. "I was in assembly with you this morning so I saw that you got a certificate. You could tell Mrs Jones; she doesn't know because she didn't see you"

### Barrier Games

- ⇒ Using felt tipped pens, draw some simple shapes in different colours.
- ⇒ The shapes must be in different positions on the sheets of paper and must be easy to describe.
- ⇒ Show the picture to child 1.
- ⇒ Child 1 has to tell child 2 how to draw the picture without showing it to them. At the end see if they look the same.

### Describing games

- ⇒ Children choose an object/picture of an object from a bag.
- ⇒ They must then describe the picture without showing it to the group.
- ⇒ The group must guess what the picture is.

### Who am I?

A child picks a picture of a famous person/fictional character and give the group clues so the group can guess who it is.



## Interrupting

### Group Rules

- ⇒ In a group, make a rule that the only person who is allowed to speak is the person holding an object (eg bean bag).
- ⇒ Explain to the child that pauses in conversations are the times to speak.
- ⇒ Video clips are useful to practise recognising pauses. If they continue to have difficulty knowing when to join in, adults can use a signal to help.

### When a child interrupts

- ⇒ Remind them they need to wait for you to finish talking
- ⇒ Finish your conversation quite quickly
- ⇒ Then talk with the child. You can gradually extend the time you keep your child waiting but at first keep to a few seconds only. Give lots of praise when your child has succeeded in waiting and remembered their request.
- ⇒ Visual cues are good at reminding a child to take turns in class, put their hand up etc
- ⇒ They find it difficult to monitor their behaviour 'on the spot' and a visual cue is a gentle reminder.

### Discussion Points

- ⇒ Discuss how people can show that they are waiting to talk.
- ⇒ Discuss how and why people interrupt appropriately e.g. to give an urgent message.
- ⇒ Discuss why someone says 'Excuse me' or someone's name when they want to talk to them.
- ⇒ Discuss what might happen if they touch someone or pulled their clothes to get attention.

### Rule Sheet

Create a rule sheet. Write a series of sentences based on the discussion points. e.g. 'When we want to speak to someone we say...'

### Role Play

Role-play inappropriate interrupting behaviour for a group of children. Ask the children to spot what is wrong and how it could be put right, e.g. if you pull someone's clothes to get attention the child could tell you to say 'excuse me'. Get two adults to role-play talking non-stop. Children have to try to stop them using appropriate ways of interrupting.

### Conversation turns

Children have a discussion in a circle. You unravel the wool and pass it from speaker to speaker. At the end the children observe the pattern made – who had no turns (no wool) and who had lots of turns (lots of wool).



## Conversation Repair

### Nonsense!

- ⇒ The children have to suggest ways to repair conversations. You could start to talk but sometimes use nonsense words in sentences. The child has to recognise and respond when they do not understand what has been said.
- ⇒ You could deliberately misunderstand a child and they have to repair the breakdown in communication.

### Can You Spot it?

Show a video/role-play of a breakdown in a conversation. Children have to suggest strategies to repair the breakdown.

### More Information

You could give the child an instruction with inadequate content, e.g. 'Give me the thing', the child has to recognise and identify that he cannot respond appropriately.

## Ending a Conversation

### Role Play

- ⇒ Children can find closing a conversation difficult.
- ⇒ Explain that they can't just walk away from a conversation but that they need to give some indication that the conversation has finished.
- ⇒ Act out the right way and the wrong way to close a conversation.
- ⇒ Help the child to identify the differences.
- ⇒ Model the correct way to do it and encourage them to copy you.

### Brainstorm

- ⇒ Talk to a group about the different ways that we let people know that the conversation has ended. Include phrases like:

'Is that the time, I really must be going.'

'I didn't realise it was so late.'

'Oh well, I suppose I'd better go now.'

'Mum's waiting for me.'

'Nice to see you.'

'It's been great talking with you.'

'I'm going now.'

'I must dash, bye.'

Have a discussion about these phrases.