
BUILDING TURN-TAKING AND CONVERSATIONAL SKILLS



THE IMPORTANCE OF TURN-TAKING AND CONVERSATIONAL SKILLS

Turn-taking is a basic requirement of conversation. It does not always occur automatically and for some children must be taught by parents and teachers. Many children with language delays will have poor conversational skills. They may shift rapidly from topic to topic. They may fail to take their turn, and when they do, they may provide the wrong information or not enough information for the listener to understand what they mean.

WHAT ARE TURN-TAKING SKILLS?

Turn-taking begins without the use of words. Children learn to take a turn through gestures, eye contact, vocalizations and word approximations. Common, everyday routines provide opportunities for taking turns.

Games, such as 'Peek-A-Boo' or 'Roll-The-Ball', played with a parent or teacher, can help children to learn the routine of a game and to predict what will happen next. They allow him/her to practise signalling a turn, performing the action and keeping the activity going.

Try some of these strategies to promote the development of turn taking skills:

- Get down to the child's level and face the child.
- Get the child's attention before talking to him/her.
- Lean forward.
- Look expectantly for a response.
- Smile.
- Wait, and give the child enough time to respond.
- Use hand-over-hand to do the activity, if necessary.
- Use simple language to describe the activity.
- Provide modelling (e.g., "Your turn.", "My turn.").
- Give lots of praise when the child takes a turn as expected.

WHAT ARE CONVERSATIONAL SKILLS?

In conversation, the main goal is usually to take your turn to speak. In a conversation, two or more people take turns talking about a topic. Each person adds to the topic by responding to the meaning expressed by the previous speaker. This requires the ability to understand the topic and the ability to ask questions or make comments in order to maintain the topic. It also requires the child to end or shift topics appropriately.





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TRY THESE STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE CONVERSATIONAL SKILLS:

- **Comment on the topic and using open-ended questions.** If questions are used, they should be open-ended, thus allowing for more elaborated responses (e.g., "How did you do it?", "Can you tell me more?").
- **Talk about a routine.** Talk explicitly about a repeated and routine event (e.g., a reading activity, journal writing, working in centres etc.).
- **Talk about the sequence of actions.** Speak out about the actions involved in various routines. Children will learn the order of the actions and be able to talk about them. They will more likely stay on topic because they are talking about routine events.
- **Talk about the time sequence.** Talk about the time sequence. Emphasize such terms as 'first', 'now', and 'then' (e.g., "First we took out the paintbrush, now you are putting water in your cup, next you will paint a picture on the paper.>").
- **Talk about the objects and materials.** This will help the child understand how objects are used and how to talk about the cause and effect relationships that occur in the action sequence (e.g., "We put the paint brushes in the sink so that they can be cleaned.>").
- **Talk about the reasons for the sequence of actions.** Explain to the child why you are carrying out certain activities (e.g., "You need to put the apron on so that you don't get your clothes dirty.>").
- **Comment and question for the child to take a turn.** As you talk about events, give the child many conversational turns.
- **Encourage turn-taking by:**
 - Using sentence completion tasks (e.g., "We need to put some water in the _____.").
 - Having the child fill in the next action in the routine (e.g., "First you dip the brush into the paint, then you _____.").
 - Talking about cause and effect relationships (e.g., "The paint came out of the paintbrush because _____.").



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- **Respond to the meaning expressed by the child.**

If the meaning is appropriate, express that you understood and expand the phrase by adding an event or talking about plans and cause and effect relationships.

e.g., Parent/Teacher: "Now that the painting is finished, we need to let it _____."

Child: "dry"

Parent/Teacher: "Let's go clean the brushes. First we turn on the _____."

Child: "water"

Parent/Teacher: "So that the water will _____."

Child: "Come out and rinse the brushes."

If the meaning is inappropriate, the teacher reviews or summarizes what was said before then supplies the appropriate information.

e.g., Parent/Teacher: "We rinse the brushes with water and then we _____."

Child: "paint again"

Parent/Teacher: "First we rinse the brushes. Then we dry them and put them away."

ADDITIONAL TIPS TO BUILD TURN-TAKING & CONVERSATIONAL SKILLS:

- Encourage the child to look at the person when speaking and listening.
- Teach the child to keep an appropriate distance from his/her conversational partner.
- Model the use of appropriate body language (e.g., posture).
- Encourage the child to use verbal and/or nonverbal 'filters' when speaking with others (e.g., saying "uh huh" or 'head nodding' as a means of keeping the conversation going).
- Model the use of appropriate speaking styles (i.e., 'formal' versus 'informal'). The child should learn to use more formal language with a teacher (e.g., "Hello Miss. How are you?"), and less formal language with a parent ("Hi dad. How are ya?").
- Teach the child to wait to take a conversational turn.
- Model polite ways of entering the conversation.

Adapted from the 'Teacher Articles' and 'Parent Articles'

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