

Six Tips for Teaching Conversation Skills with Visual Strategies

Working with Autism Spectrum Disorders
& Related Communication & Social Skill Challenges

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Learning effective conversation skills ranks as one of the most significant social abilities that students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) need to accomplish. Educators and parents list the challenges:

- “Steve talks too much.”
- “Shannon doesn’t take her turn.”
- “Aiden talks when no one is listening.”
- “Brandon perseverates on inappropriate topics.”
- “Kim doesn’t respond when people try to communicate with her.”

The list goes on and on. Difficulty with conversation prevents these students from successfully taking part in social opportunities.

What makes learning conversation skills so difficult?

Conversation requires exactly the skills these students have difficulty with, such as:

- Attending
- Quickly taking in and processing information
- Interpreting confusing social cues
- Understanding vocabulary
- Comprehending abstract language

Many of those skills that create skillful conversation are just the ones that are difficult as a result of the core deficits in Autism Spectrum Disorders.

Think about it. From the student’s point of view, conversation can be very puzzling. Conversation is dynamic. . .fleeting. . .changing. . .unpredictable. . .

- People say things students don't understand
- Conversation rules change with different people
- Conversation may cover topics the student isn't interested in
- People may talk about things the student doesn't know about
- The student doesn't know what to talk about
- And lots of other things that change or are unpredictable or difficult to interpret

How can you teach conversation skills effectively?

Use visual strategies. We tend to teach students by talking. That is our most natural choice for communicating. Yet it is critically important to understand the learning style of students so the most effective teaching can occur.

Most students with Autism Spectrum Disorders tend to have strength in *visual* learning. That means they understand what they *see* better than what they *hear*. The significance of this observation has immeasurable implications for helping students develop better conversation skills. Visual tools can be used successfully to provide support for more effective in conversation interactions. The visual supports can help students remember to communicate and recall what to talk about. The visual tools help extend meaningful interactions.

How do you decide what to teach?

One approach is to focus on teaching some specific skills that students can use in a variety of situations with a variety of people. Let's look at some ways to use visual strategies to teach these useful conversation skills.

1. Conversation Books

Is your wallet full of photos of your family or your favorite pet? What a great way to share your personal life with others. Students can benefit from that same technique to jump start conversations with others.

Help them create a conversation book in a wallet or a little photo album that they can carry in a pocket or backpack. Include a picture of grandpa that we visited last weekend or the student's new pet lizard. Include pictures that represent those people, activities or events that are significant to the student.

When students have a lot of language, the conversation book helps them remember what to talk about. If necessary, write a little note to help the student remember what to say about the pictures. The books also help communication partners. The conversation book will provide cues so the communication partner will know what to ask about.

These books are also perfect for students who have emerging conversation skills. They can help the listener in case the student's communication attempts are not clear. Use a note to explain the significance of the picture so a communication partner will know how to support the conversation interaction.

The best conversation books will change regularly as life evolves. Help the student think about what he would like to tell other people. Work together to assemble the book. Then teach him how to retrieve the book and use it to initiate a conversation or respond when someone else starts one.

2. Guess What I Did?

This is similar to a conversation book, but it focuses on something exciting that has happened in the student's life. A very verbal student who went to an amusement park last weekend will burst into the room with "Guess what I did!" Our students with conversation challenges can benefit from creating something visual to help them convey that same kind of information and emotion.

When you do something special or when you have an experience that is meaningful to the student, collect a few photos, advertising flyers, tickets, prizes or the placemat from the restaurant to include in the book. Try using a 3-ring binder or a small photo album or a wallet for this communication tool. Some students may do this best by putting the memento in a pocket

Help the student write a little text to record the event. Writing it down and rehearsing it will help him remember what to say when he is sharing his information. Teach the student how to show the book to people while telling them about the event. The book will remind the student what to talk about and help him to share more details than he might share without the visual support.

The communication partner can get clues from the book to help keep the conversation flowing. Save this book in its final form. Go back to it regularly for an opportunity to reminisce and talk about that past event.

3. Learning Stuff That Other People Talk About

One of the challenges for many students with ASD is that they don't have the same interests as their peers. That makes it difficult to participate in conversations.

Pick a topic to teach that is important to other people in the student's life. Try to choose something that other students or family and friends are very interested in.

For example, sports seem to be a universal subject for many people. Choose what family or peers are interested in. Choose hockey during hockey season. Then become immersed in it. Teach the student about it. Learn the player's names. Watch the games. Cheer for a goal. Read the headlines in the newspaper. Read the sports page every day to follow what is happening.

Try to relate the information to the student's personal skills or interests. If he likes to work on the computer, find info on the Internet. If he is a "numbers kid," learn how to keep score and watch the standings with other teams. Make it all very visual. Cut out the game schedule from the newspaper. Collect hockey cards from the sport store.

Collect all this information in a hockey book or on a bulletin board or the refrigerator. Talk about it. Ask questions about it. Go buy a hockey jersey and perhaps a pair of skates. Keep this going for a long time. . . like the whole season.

A few intermittent references are not enough. Real interest comes from long-term learning and sharing. This strategy works for many interests and hobbies, from stamp collecting to horse back riding. The result is a well-developed topic for the student to talk about with others.

4. Know Your Partner

A skilled communication partner remembers information about another person. That information guides the questions and discussion that develop into good conversation.

If I remember that you are going away on vacation, I can ask you how your vacation was when I see you. If I know you have a special hobby, I can ask about that, too. Helping students learn and remember personal information about the people they have conversations with will help them become better friends.

Try creating people books. Use a separate page for each person. On each page write some things you know about that person. Then write some questions you could ask that person, based on what you know about him. Tackle this activity one person at a time. Write more information as you learn it. Writing it down helps organize it in our brains. Review what we know before spending time with that person.

5. Think of conversation starters

Brainstorm a list of questions or conversation starters that will help students when they are talking with others. Write them down. Some things on your list may be general questions to ask everyone. Other conversation starters may be for specific people. Keep a list. Carry it in a pocket. Practice.

General Conversation Starters:

What's up?
What have you been doing?
What are you going to do this weekend?

More Specific Conversation Starters:

How did you like (*current sporting event*) the Tigers game?
How was your (*vacation, activity*) trip to Disneyland?

Keep in mind that open-ended questions can work the best.

If you ask, "Did you watch the Tigers game?" you will get "YES" or "NO."

If you ask, "What did you think about the game?" you are inviting a more elaborate answer.

6. Remember the Rules

Establish a few rules to follow for being a good conversation partner. Target specific skills the student needs to work on. Pick out those two or three things that are most significant for the student to learn. Here are some possibilities:

- Look at (or face) the person you are talking with.
- Say something the first time you see a person
 - Hi
 - What's up?
 - How are you?
- Show the person your conversation book
- Tell the person something
- Keep your hands away from your face
- Don't interrupt
- Wait until it is your turn to talk
- Talk when it is your turn
- Ask a question

Conversation is complex. Visual tools can provide support for students with emerging language skills. If students have more verbal ability, visual supports help to increase the effectiveness of their conversation attempts.

Developing effective conversation skills is something that evolves over a long time, often many years. Visual tools provide concrete cues and information so students can participate more independently, without needing to rely on prompts and cues from others. Visual tools and strategies are an important part of successful communication training for students who experience the communication challenges of autism spectrum disorders.

Linda Hodgdon, M.ED., CCC-SLP is a Speech Pathologist, who for over 25 years has specialized in addressing the communication needs of students with Autism Spectrum Disorders. She pioneered the development of *visual strategies* and is the author of two of the most recommended books in the field: *Visual Strategies for Improving Communication* and *Solving Behaviors in Autism*. Considered essential resources for professionals and parents, these books are packed with practical, effective ideas for improving communication and behavior with visual strategies.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

WEBSITES:

More information and resources available at:

www.UseVisualStrategies.com

www.AutismStuff.com

www.QuirkRoberts.com/tour

www.LindaHodgdon.com