

CONVERSATION STARTERS

CHARACTERISTICS OVERVIEW CHART

Verbal Skills	Grade Levels	Cognitive Level	Areas Addressed
<input type="checkbox"/> Nonverbal	<input type="checkbox"/> PK	<input type="checkbox"/> Classic	<input type="checkbox"/> (Pre)Academic/Cognitive/Academic
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Mixed	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Elementary	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> High	<input type="checkbox"/> Adaptive Behavior/ Daily Living
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Verbal	<input type="checkbox"/> Middle/High	Functioning	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Behavior <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Communication/Speech <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Social/Emotional

BRIEF INTRODUCTION

It is common for individuals with autism to have difficulty initiating or maintaining conversations. Conversation starters are strategies that assist children with autism in initiating and maintaining conversations and improving reciprocal interactions with peers.

DESCRIPTION

Conversation starters are useful strategies for addressing initial conversations between children with autism and their peers. The concept of conversation starters is similar to preparing for a public speech: The person purposefully prepares an outline and speech content, followed by anticipating possible conversations with the audience, or a rehearsal. For children with autism who need planning and prompts before initiating conversations in a naturally social context, conversation starters provide materials for practicing the thinking process in any potential conversations.

One example of a conversation starter is a Conversation Map (Bellini, 2006). The Conversation Map is a sequential framework that illustrates important elements of a potential conversation, such as the conversation partner, topics, interests, scripted initiation, and practice. Because visual cues are generally effective for children with autism, text or visual scripts or cue cards are also effective for initiating and maintaining conversations (Sarokoff, Taylor, & Poulson, 2001). Scripted planning procedures can address initial encounters and meaningful conversations in a predictable, controlled, and less stressful manner.

Conversation starters may be used in educational settings during social skills training as a way of enhancing communication planning and problem solving. Specific skills related to a child's challenging areas may be embedded into conversation planning. In addition to school settings, these strategies can be used at home or in community settings when parents or adults are provided with guidelines and materials for planning conversations.

STEPS

The following are steps/guidelines for using a Conversation Map (Bellini, 2006):

- *Select a child to play with.* In order to begin a meaningful conversation, a child should select a conversation partner to interact with.
- *Determine reason for playing with child.* The child understands the intention of interacting with the conversation partner.
- *Identify other child's interest.* It is important to know the interest of the other child to ensure the conversation will be meaningful for both parties.
- *Select topic of planned conversation.* For a conversation to maintain, the content is important. The child has to decide a topic or theme to have a conversation about.
- *Develop scripted initiation and expected response.* Based on the selected topic, a series of anticipated statements/questions is listed to prepare for the initiation.
- *Select best setting to initiate conversation.* To promote more natural social interaction, the child must be aware of the location where the conversation takes place.
- *Practice.* After completing the conversation scripts, the child rehearses how to perform the conversation.

BRIEF EXAMPLE

Ginger is a 10-year-old girl attending an inclusive classroom with pull-out services. She greets other classmates but has difficulty initiating and maintaining conversations. In order to promote social interaction, Ginger's teacher decided to write a conversation script for Ginger to assist her initiating with other peers.

During social skills class, Ginger and her teacher selected several topics for discussing what other students did over the weekend. To begin, the teacher taught Ginger that this conversation should be carried out on Mondays. Next, they identified a conversation partner: the girl sitting by Ginger. The teacher and Ginger then listed the activities Ginger might do on weekends and wrote short descriptions for conversations. They also prepared some questions for Ginger's potential conversation partner and wrote possible responses.

After completing the scripts, Ginger rehearsed the conversation dialogues with the teacher. Ginger felt more comfortable and confident talking about weekend activities with her conversation scripts.

TIPS FOR MODIFICATIONS

When using conversation starters, some prompt-fading techniques may be used to promote generalization of conversation skills. For instance, Sarokoff and his colleagues (2001) used script-fading procedures with embedded textual stimuli to teach conversational exchanges to children with autism. The purpose was to gradually remove the words from the scripts and allow more unscripted or unprompted conversation in the child's natural social situations.

SUMMARY

Conversation starters are communication planning strategies focusing on creating richer opportunities for children with autism to have socially meaningful interactions with peers. Strategies are designed to be implemented in a controlled way that involves predicting, reasoning, planning, and practicing.

RESEARCH TABLE

Number of Studies	Ages (year)	Sample Size	Area(s) Addressed	Outcome
1	8-10	34	Conversational exchanges: scripted statement, unscripted statement, unprompted statement, responses to peers	+

STUDIES CITED IN RESEARCH TABLE

1. Wichnick, A.M., Vener, S.M., Pyrttek, M., Poulson, C.L. (2010). The effect of a script-fading procedure on responses to peer initiations among young children with autism. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders, 4*, 290-299.

This study reports the successful use of a script fading procedure to teach three children with ASD (ages 5-7) to respond to peer initiations. In a multiple-baseline-across-participants design, all three children showed increased rates of responding to social initiations following the introduction of treatment. The children also showed increased use of unscripted responses to initiations following the fading of the scripts.

2. Ganz, J. B., Kaylor, M., Bourgeois, B., & Hadden, K. (2008). The impact of social scripts and visual cues on verbal communication in three children with autism spectrum disorders. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities, 23*, 79-94.

Three children with autism participated in this study. The intervention combined a series of social scripts and visual cues focusing on improving verbal communication skills. Results indicated improvement in scripted statements and reduction in repetitive phrases or words.

3. Carter, C., Meckes, L., Pritchard, L., Swensen, S., Wittman, P. P., & Velde, B. (2004). The friendship club: An after-school program for children with Asperger Syndrome. *Family and Community Health, 27*, 143-150.

Ten children with AS participated in two groups of a friendship club with facilitators being parents and leaders. Specific topics/concepts were selected for each classroom or community activity to teach children with AS appropriate social skills to maintain friendships. Participants and parents reported positive feedback.

4. Thiemann, K. S., & Goldstein, H. (2004). Effects of peer training and written text cueing on social communication of school-age children pervasive developmental disorder. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research, 47*, 126-144.

Five children with autism and 10 typical peers participated in two social interventions, peer training and written text treatment. In the first intervention, peers were trained to use five facilitative social skills. Results showed improvement in initiation and responses. The second intervention introduced direct instruction with written cues. Results showed increased communication skills.

5. Charlop-Christy, M. H., & Kelso, C. E. (2003). Teaching children with autism conversational speech using a cue card/written script program. *Education and Treatment of Children, 26*, 108-127.
Three boys with autism ranging in age from 8 to 10 years old were taught to respond to a question and ask a follow-up question using cue cards. All generalized to novel topics, peers, and settings.
6. Barnhill, G., Cook, K., Tebbenkamp, K., & Myles, B. S. (2002). The effectiveness of social skills intervention targeting nonverbal communication for adolescents with Asperger Syndrome and related pervasive developmental delays. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities, 17*, 112-118.
Eight adolescents with AS and related pervasive developmental disorders participated in this study. The social intervention targeted paralinguistic skills (e.g., nonverbal sound patterns) and identifying and responding to facial expressions. Teaching strategies included role-playing, modeling, and reinforcement through feedback, which occurred in the form of a social skills group. Even though there were no significant differences between pre- and posttest, participants reported an increase in social relationships and in the ability to read the nonverbal communication of others.
7. Sarokoff, R. A., Taylor, B. A., & Poulson, C. L. (2001). Teaching children with autism to engage in conversational exchanges: Script fading with embedded textual stimuli. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 34*, 81-84.
Two children with autism participated in this study. Stimuli with a naturally embedded textual cue were used to create conversation scripts. After the children mastered the conversational skills with verbal and gestural prompts, words were gradually removed from the scripts. Results showed positive conversation interaction and an increase in the use of scripted and unscripted statements.

REFERENCES

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- Bellini, S. (2006). *Building social relationships: A systematic approach to teaching social interaction skills to children with adolescents with autism spectrum disorders and other social difficulties*. Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Company.
- Carter, C., Meckes, L., Pritchard, L., Swensen, S. Wittman, P. P., & Velde, B. (2004). The friendship club: An after-school program for children with Asperger Syndrome. *Family and Community Health, 27*, 143-150.

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- Wichnick, A.M., Vener, S.M., Pyrtek, M., Poulson, C.L. (2010). The effect of a script-fading procedure on responses to peer initiations among young children with autism. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders, 4*, 290-299.

RESOURCES AND MATERIALS

- Conversation Starters: www.tinsnips.org/Pages/socialskills.html
This site provides examples of conversation starter cards and helpful suggestions for how to use them.

GENERAL RESOURCES

- Autism Internet Modules (AIM) www.autisminternetmodules.org. The Autism Internet Modules were developed with one aim in mind: to make comprehensive, up-to-date, and usable information on autism accessible and applicable to educators, other professionals, and families who support individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Written by experts from across the U.S., all online modules are free, and are designed to promote understanding of, respect for, and equality of persons with ASD.

- The Autism Web Course: http://cdd.unm.edu/swan/autism_course/about/index.htm. This web course was developed out of materials from the Interactive Collaborative Autism Network (ICAN). The Autism Programs at the University of New Mexico has updated and added information to this web course.
 - Characteristics
 - Assessment
 - Academic Interventions
 - Behavioral Interventions
 - Communication Interventions
 - Environmental Interventions
 - Social Interventions
 - Family Support Suggestions

- Indiana Resource Center for Autism (IRCA) <http://www.iidc.indiana.edu/irca/fmain1.html>. The Indiana Resource Center for Autism staff's efforts are focused on providing communities, organizations, agencies, and families with the knowledge and skills to support children and adults in typical early intervention, school, community, work, and home settings.
 - IRCA Articles: <http://www.iidc.indiana.edu/index.php?pageId=273>

- Texas Statewide Leadership for Autism www.txautism.net. The Texas Statewide Leadership for Autism in conjunction with the network of Texas Education Service center with a grant from the Texas Education Agency has developed a series of free online courses in autism. Please check the training page, www.txautism.net/training.html, for update lists of courses, course numbers and registration information. Current courses include the following:
 - Asperger Syndrome 101
 - Augmentative and Alternative Communication and the Autism Spectrum
 - Autism for the General Education Teacher
 - Autism 101: Top Ten Pieces to the Puzzle
 - Classroom Organization: The Power of Structure for Individuals with ASD
 - Communication: The Power of Communication for Individuals with ASD
 - Futures Planning for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder
 - Navigating the Social Maze: Supports and Interventions for Individuals with ASD
 - Solving the Behavior Puzzle: Making Connections for Individuals with ASD