CONVERSATION STARTERS

CHARACTERISTICS OVERVIEW CHART

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verbal Skills</th>
<th>Grade Levels</th>
<th>Cognitive Level</th>
<th>Areas Addressed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>☐ Nonverbal</td>
<td>☐ PK</td>
<td>☐ Classic</td>
<td>☐ (Pre) Academic/Cognitive/Academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☒ Mixed</td>
<td>☒ Elementary</td>
<td>☒ High Functioning</td>
<td>☒ Adaptive Behavior/Daily Living</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☒ Verbal</td>
<td>☒ Middle/High</td>
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<td>☒ Social/Emotional</td>
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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**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Studies</th>
<th>Ages (year)</th>
<th>Sample Size</th>
<th>Area(s) Addressed</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>4–10</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Conversational exchanges: scripted statement, unscripted statement, unprompted statement, responses to peers, bids for joint attention</td>
<td>+</td>
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</table>
STUDIES CITED IN RESEARCH TABLE


   This study used script-fading to teach three children with ASD who could speak in sentences but who did not reliably initiate bids for joint attention to initiate joint attention with adults. All three children learned to use unscripted bids for attention and generalized the skill to new conversation partners, the classroom environment and other untrained stimuli. The results also show that when adults vary their responses, student responses vary more than when adults do not vary their responses.


   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.


   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.


   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.


   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.


   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.

Eight adolescents with AS and related pervasive developmental disorders participated in this study. The social intervention targeted paralanguage 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.


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**


**GENERAL RESOURCES**

- Autism Internet Modules (AIM) [www.autismininternetmodules.org](http://www.autismininternetmodules.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.

- Evidence-Based Practice Briefs [http://autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/content/briefs](http://autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/content/briefs)

- Indiana Resource Center for Autism (IRCA) [http://www.iidc.indiana.edu/index.php?pageId=32/](http://www.iidc.indiana.edu/index.php?pageId=32/). 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.

- Texas Statewide Leadership for Autism [www.txautism.net](http://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, [http://www.txautism.net/trainings](http://www.txautism.net/trainings), for updated 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
    - Strategies for Working with Students with Autism in the General Education Setting:
Strategy 1: Understanding Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders.
Strategy 2: Get to Know the Individual Student.
Strategy 3: Create Predictability.
Strategy 6: Create a Positive Learning Community.
Strategy 8: Use Instructional Strategies That Promote Successful Learning.
Strategy 10: Develop a Plan to Address Challenging Behavior.
Strategy 11: Borrow from the Special Educator's Toolbox.
Strategy 12: Respect Each Student's Dignity and Need for Autonomy

School-Based Applied Behavior Analysis Programs for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders:
Course 1: Introduction to Autism Spectrum Disorders, Evidence-Based Practices, and the Basics of Applied Behavior Analysis (45 minutes)
Course 2: Reinforcement and Extinction (1.5 hours)
Course 3: Challenging Behavior Assessment and Treatment (1 hour)
Course 4: Communication and Social Skills Training (1 hour)
Course 5: Instructional Strategies (4 hours)
Course 6: Classroom and Environmental Arrangement (1.5 hours)