



Social Skills

Being a Good Conversationalist

Available in the format below:



**Learn Quickly!
Learn For Life!**

© 2015 Lisa Flowers



Being a Good Conversationalist

Frankly, it's not just individuals on the autism spectrum that could use instruction on being better conversationalists. We all have neurotypical relatives, friends, neighbors, and coworkers who monopolize conversations, or interrupt frequently, or tell long-winded stories with too much detail. Unfortunately, there's usually no comfortable way to let those people in our lives know that they need to change their behaviors. I'm happy to have the chance to work on social niceties and conversation skills with my students. We discuss each aspect of *Being a Good Conversationalist* and practice in a number of ways, sometimes focusing on just one aspect at a time. See therapeutic notes for more details.

Name _____

Date _____

Being a Good Conversationalist

1) Listen more than talk

- % rule
- don't monopolize!
- exceptions to that rule:
informative turns, including narratives and instructions
special events, such as an award presentation or wedding dinner
venting turns

2) Spatial Inclusion

- circles and triangles
- eye contact

3) Conversational Input enjoyed by many people:

- humor
- emotions
- conflicts/struggles
- negative experiences in general
- descriptiveness
- surprises
- extremes
- clarity
- intonation and volume variety
- visuals

4) Ask questions!

- try to be genuinely curious, stop thinking of what you plan to say next
- ask follow-up questions
- open-ended questions are good, such as "how...?" and "why...?"

5) Avoid:

- interrupting
- offending
- insulting
- excluding



Therapeutic Notes: Being a Good Conversationalist

1) Listen more than talk — *Have you ever heard the story of the guy on a first date that spent most of the dinner just listening? Afterward his date told friends what an excellent conversationalist he was. Most people like to talk about themselves and appreciate others who let them do that.*

- *% rule — I explain to my students that if two people are in a conversation then each should be speaking about 50% of the time, with three people each should be speaking about 33% of the time, and so on.*
- *don't monopolize! — I created an activity that keeps track of everyone's conversational turns. During a conversation, students are given a question chip or a comment chip for each turn they take, so that at the end of the conversation students have tangible evidence of how much they talked (longer turns get more chips) compared to others, and also evidence of their own balance of comments vs. questions.*

- *exceptions to that rule:*

informative turns, including narratives and instructions — This applies to situations such as when one person is telling an involved story, or needs to give extensive instructions.

special events, such as an award presentation or wedding dinner — Sometimes people give speeches.

venting turns — When people are going through difficult experiences they may need to vent, while the others mainly listen and give emotional support.

2) Spatial Inclusion

- *circles and triangles — I've taken my students around our school to "hang out" briefly in different spots, like on the stairs, in offices, in the gym, sometimes sitting and sometimes standing, with the goal of arranging ourselves in an appropriate shape for a conversation (triangular for three people, circular for four or more).*
- *eye contact — Everyone should be able to see everyone else's eyes.*

3) Conversational Input enjoyed by many people:

- *humor — Finding out you have the same sense of humor as someone else is a good way to connect.*
- *emotions — A great way to develop intimacy.*
- *conflicts/struggles — People can often relate to similar hardships.*



- negative experiences in general — *It's human nature. I give my students this example: "Which is more interesting? 'Yesterday I went on a roller coaster and it was so much fun I couldn't stop smiling' or 'yesterday I went on a roller coaster and felt so sick when I got off that I threw up on my little brother's sneakers.' "*
- descriptiveness — *Helps your listeners imagine your stories' events.*
- surprises — *People love plot twists.*
- extremes — *Best/worst, favorite/least favorite, out-of-the-ordinary details.*
- clarity — *It's important to give orienting details at the start of narratives.*
- intonation and volume variety — *Keeps your listeners engaged.*
- visuals — *Visuals are often helpful for clarity and interest, and we all know students like to show pictures or videos on their phones.*

4) Ask questions! — *Check out Celeste Headlee's TED Talk "10 Ways to Have a Better Conversation". Honestly, I believe being genuinely curious about your communicative partner is the number one way to be a good conversationalist. She talks about how the skills that make someone a good interviewer also make someone good at conversations. That's why I have my students interview staff members or other students for conversation practice. But, I also teach them to balance questions and comments so a conversation doesn't turn into an interrogation.*

- try to be genuinely curious, stop thinking of what you plan to say next
- ask follow-up questions — *I believe this is key to making the other person feel truly listened to!*
- open-ended questions are good, such as "how...?" and "why...?"

5) Avoid:

- interrupting — *Keep the focus on listening.*
- offending — *Refer to the perspective-taking activity Tact.*
- insulting — *Ditto.*
- excluding — *Avoid excluding spatially or through topic choice.*

