



This handout is intended to be used to support you to discuss the importance of a social communication skill called Topic Maintenance with your child.

During a conversation people take turns sharing their thoughts and opinions about a topic. It is important to stay on topic so everyone can follow along and participate. If the topic of conversation changes too many times or too quickly, the conversation becomes difficult to follow. Some children with social communication difficulties may have trouble maintaining a topic of conversation for very long. They may change the topic abruptly or say something that seems to make no sense with what was previously said.

The following tips and strategies along with the games and activities given can be used to help your child increase their level of understanding of topic maintenance.

Keeping the conversation going in like a train

Talk to your child about how talking with someone else, which is called a conversation, is like a train. Everything we say in the conversation must be connected to the other things that have been said (just like all of the train cars are connected) and everything we say must stay on topic (just like the train cars must stay on the track). See activity details in the additional handout.

Know the topic before speaking

Talk to your child about the importance of understanding what the topic of conversation is before participating in a conversation. Teach them about self-talk (statements we say or think to ourselves) and how this technique can be helpful in social situations. For example, have your child think silently to themselves “Do I know what the others are talking about before I join a conversation.” Knowing this ‘rule’ can help them join in a conversation easily.

Ask questions to learn about the topic

Talk to your child about the importance of asking questions when having conversations. Tell them that a great way to participate in a conversation and to stay on topic is to ask questions. Emphasize that this helps them learn more about the current topic. Your child can practice the self-talk statement, “I will stay on topic and get more information about it by asking questions” to help with this.

Use comments and non-verbal gestures to show you are listening.

In one of our earlier social skills resources, we talked about body language and how it is very important during a conversation. Talk to your child again about the use of comments and non-verbal gestures, such as nodding your head, agreeing with comments and making eye contact can help keep a conversation going. Remind your child that these behaviours are all ways to show that you are listening and following the topic of conversation. You and your family can practice these non-verbal skills while role-playing. Then discuss what other comments and non-verbal gestures they can suggest to help move conversations along.

Add information about the topic to the conversation

Remind your child that conversations require both speaking and listening. Discuss the importance of sharing what you know about a topic during a conversation, but also talk about the importance of listening to others' comments and ideas. Let your child know that what they have to say and contribute is important... we all have something to share!

Let everyone have a chance to talk

A conversation is meant to allow everyone to have a chance to give information, ask questions, or comment about the current topic.

Wait to talk about other topics

With your child talk about the difference between comments that are on topic and those that are off-topic. Remind them about the importance of turn-taking in conversation, and that they need to wait until everyone is finished talking before introducing a new topic. Practicing our activities will help your child understand this skill.

Practice identifying others' off-topic remarks

Help your child identify off-topic remarks by focusing on listening to others' comments. Provide them with opportunities to focus on conversations they are not part of, and then provide feedback for what remarks were on topic during the conversation and which ones were not. Role-playing or watching videos are great ways to do this. See our video and other websites for practice.

References

<https://www.superduperinc.com/handouts/pdf/345%20Topic%20Maintenance.pdf>

<https://www.speechandlanguagekids.com/topic-maintenance/>