



Mental & Behavior Health for Students with IDD: Conversation Skills Activity

This activity guide provides steps for teaching the pragmatic or social language skill of conversation basics to a small group of students. The activity is designed for students who require more support than Tier 1 classroom instruction and would benefit from Tier 2 group instruction to allow for meaningful interaction, practice, and carry-over across school settings.

In addition to supporting communication development, pragmatic skills play a critical role in mental health, social-emotional well-being, and quality of life for individuals with IDD. Strong conversational skills help students:

- Build and maintain friendships
- Feel included and valued
- Advocate for themselves and express needs
- Reduce feelings of isolation, anxiety, and frustration
- Participate more actively in school and community settings

Audience: Special Education Teachers MTSS Tier 2

Population: Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDDs)

Skill Focus:
Pragmatic language – conversational skills



Social Skills Targeted

- Greeting and initiating conversations
- Responding appropriately to others
- Turn-taking
- Staying on topic
- Asking and answering questions
- Making relevant comments
- Ending conversations appropriately
- Using appropriate nonverbal behaviors (eye contact, body orientation, personal space)



Materials Needed

- Conversation topic cards (pictures and/or words)
- Visual supports:
 - » Conversation rules chart
 - » Turn-taking visuals (ex. talking stick, ball, hat)
 - » Sentence starters
- Role-play scenario cards (ex. classroom, lunchroom, recess)



Activity Guide

Introduction: Purpose and Rationale

Begin by explaining the activity and why conversation skills matter.

Teacher Explanation:

"Today we are practicing conversation skills. A conversation is when we take turns talking with someone about a topic. Conversations help us make friends, feel included, and be part of our school and community. When we know how to take turns, stay on topic, and listen to others, people feel comfortable talking with us, and we feel more confident, too."

Choose one specific **target skill** for the session and review using visuals (e.g., turn-taking, staying on topic, asking questions).

Practice



Model Skill
(I do)



Guided Practice
(We do)



Independent Practice
(You do)



Activity Guide

Practice

Model the Skill – I Do

- Teacher models a short conversation with another adult or student.
- Think aloud and label the target skill being used.

Example:

"I waited for my turn before speaking. I also talked about the same topic the whole time."

Guided Practice – We Do

- Students participate in a structured conversation with teacher support.
- Teacher prompts, models, and provides immediate feedback.
- Students are encouraged to give simple feedback to peers (e.g., thumbs up, verbal / praise using Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), etc.

Teacher Prompt Examples:

- *"Whose turn is it?"*
- *"Are we still talking about the same topic?"*

Independent Practice – You Do

- Students engage in a conversation with minimal prompts.
- Teacher observes and collects brief data on target skills.
- Teacher provides additional instruction and independent practice based on data collected.

After the conversation, students reflect:

- *"What did you do well?"*
- *"What is one thing you will practice next time?"*

Wrap-Up and Generalization

- Review the target skill practiced.
- Reinforce why the skill is important for friendships, mental health, and community participation.

Teacher Wrap-Up:

"Today we practiced taking turns in conversations. You can use this skill when talking to friends, teachers, family members, and people in the community."

Encourage students to practice the skill outside the activity (e.g., during lunch, recess, or group work).



Example Activity Trial

Topic: Favorite Foods

Target Skill: Turn-taking and staying on topic

Group Size: 3 students

Materials

- Topic card with pictures of foods
- Turn-taking cards
- Conversation rules visual

Implementation

Introduction:

Teacher explains why conversations help us make friends and feel included.

Model (I Do):

Teacher and adult model a brief conversation about favorite foods.

Guided Practice (We Do):

Students take turns asking and answering questions using sentence starters:

- *"My favorite food is ____."*
- *"What is your favorite food?"*

Teacher provides prompts and feedback.

Independent Practice (You Do):

Students complete 2–3 conversation turns independently while teacher observes.

Wrap-Up:

Teacher reviews the skill and encourages students to use it with peers during lunch or snack time.



Supports

- Use picture-based topics for students with limited verbal language
- Provide AAC devices and model with device during conversations
- Manage use of more or less structure, depending on the needs of each student
- Increase complexity by adding follow-up questions or longer conversation exchanges



Progress

- Teachers can track progress on conversation skill(s) targeted and rearrange groups, topics, rules, supports, and complexity as needed
- Practice conversations across different settings for generalization

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