

# **STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE YOUR CHILD'S SOCIAL-COMMUNICATION SKILLS**

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## SESSION 1: Setting up the Home for Success

The techniques that will be taught throughout this program are designed to be used during daily activities as well as additional play times. Since parents spend the most time with their child they can provide treatment to their child throughout the day in a variety of settings. Recent literature suggests that teaching parents techniques to use with their child improves intensity of services which in turn improves outcomes. Literature also suggests that when parents teach during daily routines it improves generalization and maintenance of skills.

Prior to initiating these techniques it may be beneficial to rearrange the environment in order to set your child up for success. How the room is set up can greatly improve a child's attention and interactive skills. For some children they may benefit from having a defined space in which to play. This can be done by using visual or physical boundaries. Some children have a difficult time attending, especially to another person, when there are a lot of visual or auditory stimuli available. Part of the session today will be spent determining the environment that will work best for your child. As you move through this program you will learn to use the techniques in a variety of settings.

**Set up a defined space:** Set up a room or space in the home that will be your work and play area. It may help to have distinct visual and/or physical boundaries such a bean bag or small table and chairs. If you do not have a specific room available or only have a wide open space, try arranging furniture to make a smaller, more intimate space. It will help limit distractions. Also, if your child often runs away or likes to wander, it will help keep him or her close to you.

**Limit distractions:** Limit the amount of other sensory input your child has to attend to. Turn off the TV. You may want to dim the lights. Avoid clutter or visually stimulating items in the environment. You want to make sure that YOU are the most interesting thing in the room. If your child becomes overly distracted with items or toys in the room, make sure to remove them before you play with your child. This way, you won't have to compete for your child's engagement.

**Toy rotation:** Many children are interested in a toy for a few weeks and then become tired of it. This leads parents to buy more and more new toys to try to keep their child engaged. Not only is it expensive, it also can be distracting for the child with so many toys around. One way to make sure that toys remain interesting is to put them away for a while. Separate your child's toys into several groups. Make sure that favorite toys are evenly distributed amongst the groups. Only make one group of toys available at a time. Once your child loses interest in that group of toys, put that group away and bring out the next group.

Children tend to remain engaged best when toys are rotated every 2 weeks or so.

**Limit the number of toys available:** Most homes are filled with toys. The more toys that are available, the more things there are that can distract your child. Make sure to only have a few toys available at a time. Put the rest away so that your child cannot access them. You may use a toy box, closet, shelves, or plastic bins. Take only one toy out at a time and be sure to put it back when your child is finished with it. This will help your child focus on you rather than moving from one toy to the next.

**Schedule predictable play routines:** Some children with autism get frustrated when their parents try to play with them. One way to help your child get used to you playing with him or her is to schedule a time to play with your child every day. It helps to keep the play time predictable (e.g., always after nap or before dinner). You may want to always do play time in the same place until your child gets used to playing with you. Also, it may help to have a set of special toys that your child loves and only gets to play with when he or she is playing with you during this special time.

## SESSION 2: Following Your Child's Lead and Make it Interactive

The following strategies are used to increase your child's engagement with you by providing many opportunities for interaction. The goal is to follow your child's lead and react to your child's behavior, placing it in a communicative context and giving it linguistic mapping (Paul, 1995). Your child is not required to use specific skills or to correct an incorrect response.

**Follow your child's lead:** Let your child choose what to play with and how to play. It often takes a conscious effort not to anticipate what your child needs, not to ask him or her questions, tell him or her what to do, and not to choose the activity. However, waiting is key because it gives your child a chance to initiate. Waiting also ensures that the activity is child chosen which can increase your child's motivation and attention. *You may comment on your child's play, but avoid asking questions and giving commands.*

**Make the play interactive:** Actively join in your child's play. Although you are not requiring that your child responds to you in a particular way, your child should acknowledge that you are involved in his or her play through eye contact, affect, or asking questions, making comments, or sharing. All of these strategies can be used to encourage your child to interact with you during play.

**Make sure you are in your child's line of sight:** Sit so that you are face to face with your child, so that he or she can make eye contact easily.

**Imitate your child:** Do exactly what your child is doing. Imitate your child's play with toys, gestures and body movements, and vocalizations. For example, if your child is running back and forth, run with him or her. If your child is spinning the wheels of a car, spin the wheels of another car so your child can see. Do *not* imitate behavior that you are trying to decrease. If your child is doing something you do not want to see increase you can "imitate" the emotions of that behavior. For example, if your child is flapping his or her hands to show excitement you could "imitate" the excitement but express it by clapping your hands, or putting your hands above your head to say "Yeah, I did it" etc.

**Be animated:** Be excited about the activity. Exaggerate your gestures, facial expressions and vocal quality. For example, if you are happy, make the smile bigger, clap your hands along with the smile, and express excitement with your voice. Use words like "Uh Oh", "Oh No", "Wow" and even gasping to let your child know you have something to share. Try pausing with an expectant look in and exaggerated gestures between social routines (i.e., tickles, peek-a-boo) to encourage your child to initiate for you to continue the game.

**Assist your child in his or her play:** Help your child with his or her play. If your child is building a tower, give him or her the blocks or take turns putting a block on. If your child is driving a car, put a person in the car. If your child protests, this is a form of communication; respond to your child's communication appropriately. *Remember, your child is the leader so avoid directing your child's play or trying to teach him or her how to play "correctly".*

**Control access:** Sometimes you may need to encourage your child to interact with you by controlling access to the things your child wants so that your child has to acknowledge you are part of his or her play. You can hold up the toys your child is playing with so your child can see them, but has to acknowledge you to get them (e.g., eye contact, vocalization). You can also block your child's play with your hand or another object. When your child no longer has free access to desired toys, he or she is more likely to interact with you.

**Playful obstruction:** When your child is not engaged with an activity and wandering aimlessly or running back and forth, you can use playful obstruction to "block" your child. Turn this interaction into a game; "I'm going to get you" (block your child), ready set go (let your child go). You can also use playful obstruction if your child is "fixated" on a particular object. When you block access to what your child wants (either action or object) your child is more likely to interact with you.

**Make yourself part of your child's sensory experience:** If your child is very self-absorbed, try to make yourself part of your child's sensory experience. For example, if your child is flapping his or her hands in front of her face, try covering your child's eyes with your hands; if your child is staring at a light, put your face between your child's and the light so that he or she is staring at you. Most children enjoy physical touch. If you have a hard time getting your child to attend to you, you can use positive physical touch (e.g., back rubs, tickles, kissing body parts, rough-and-tumble play, placing a desired toy on your child's body) to encourage your child to attend to you. Make sure that your child is not simply a "passive recipient" of your physical touch, by pausing to give your child opportunities to initiate for more.

**Be Persistent:** Be sensitive to your child's frustration BUT be persistent in interacting with your child. Don't shy away from your child's protests. If your child expresses frustration, he or she is still interacting with you. Help him or her deal with the emotion rather than leave the interaction.

**Control the situation:** Even though you are following your child's lead, there are certain behaviors that are unacceptable such as throwing or breaking toys. If this happens, you should make it clear to your child that this behavior is not OK and remove the toys that are causing a problem, when necessary.

## SESSION 2: Modeling & Expanding Language

The type of language you use can have a large impact on your child's understanding and use of language. By providing appropriate models of language around your child's focus of interest, you can help your child learn new vocabulary and sentence structures.

**Simplify your language:** Use simple language that is slightly more complex than your child's language. For example, if your child is not yet speaking, use single words; if he or she uses single words, use 2-3 word phrases. In some cases, it is appropriate to simplify your language by leaving out higher level parts of language (e.g., "Feed baby" instead of "You are feeding the baby").

**Speak slowly:** Slow down your rate of speech. The slower you speak, the more your child will be able to pick out the important words and meaning. Pause between comments to give your child time to process the auditory information.

**Stress important words:** Children often have a hard time recognizing important words in sentences. You can help your child pick up "meaning" words by pausing before important words and stressing them ("You have a...BUNNY").

**Be repetitive:** Use the same language over and over. You can use the same phrase repetitively ("Down it goes. Down it goes") or you can repeat specific important words ("The car is rolling. Roll, roll. Rolling fast").

**Visual Cues:** Pair visual cues and gestures with the verbal model. For example, point to the baby while saying "want baby". This is particularly important for children who are not yet using verbal language.

**Model language around your child's focus of interest:** Talk about the things that are important to your child and that your child is paying attention to. Language *must* be linked to what your child is attending to be meaningful.

**Parallel Talk:** Describe what *your child* is seeing, hearing or doing *as it happens*. Provide labels for the *objects* your child plays with, touches, and sees. Don't comment on every action to give your child a chance to respond.

**Self Talk:** Describe what you are doing while your child watches. Don't comment on every action to give your child a chance to respond.

**Expand your child's language:** Expand your child's language by imitating your child's speech and then *adding* more information. By adding more words, you revise and complete your child's speech - *without direct correction*. For example, if your child says "buh", you could say "ball". If your child says "train" you could

say "yellow train". If your child says "I push car", you could say "I am pushing the car".

**Add information to your child's language:** Add one or more short sentences to your child's utterance. Be sure to use statements and not ask questions or give commands. For example, if your child says, "yellow truck", you could say "Yellow truck. It's a big truck". If your child says, "Uh-oh, baby cry", you could say "The baby is crying. He's tired."

**Give meaning to your child's actions:** If your child is not yet verbal or using intentional gestures, you can respond to your child's vocalizations and gestures in a logical manner in order to teach your child that his or her behavior carries meaning. For example, if your child makes vocal sounds without intending to communicate anything, you can respond as if your child's action was intentional (i.e., say "You want the ball" while handing the ball to your child). If your child is looking at the refrigerator, you can say "Juice" while getting juice out and handing it to your child. It is important to respond to your child's verbal and nonverbal actions to teach that both behaviors carry meaning.

**SESSION 3: Environmental Arrangement**

Set up your child's environment to increase opportunities for him or her to interact with you and wait for a response. Your child can respond in any appropriate way (eye contact, affect, vocalization/words). If your child does not respond after several seconds, continue with the activity. These strategies are easy to implement during everyday activities such as meals and snacks, dressing, bath time, and bed time. Plan extra time during these daily child care routines to use these strategies to enhance your child's communication.

**In sight-out of reach:** Put some materials within your child's view, but out of his or her reach. For example, place desired toys on a shelf that is in view or in a clear plastic container that your child cannot open on his or her own. If your child is very independent (e.g., helps self to food, or videos), place a lock on the locations (e.g. cupboards, drawers etc) where these things are kept. This will help motivate your child to communicate with you rather than getting what he or she wants by him or herself.

**Assistance:** Provide materials that your child needs help to use. For example: bubbles, tops, wind-up toys, balloons, etc.

**Inadequate portions:** Give your child a small amount or piece of the item he or she requested rather than the whole item. For example, if your child asks for a graham cracker, give him or her only a quarter of the cracker at a time and wait for him or her to indicate he or she wants more. You should be present when using this technique to watch for any sign of communication from your child.

**Sabotage:** If your child is familiar with an activity, give him or her only part of the necessary items. For example, when playing with the train set, have all of the trains missing or when making an art project that requires scissors, paper, and glue, only provide the paper.

**Protest:** Make a small change in the pattern your child typically follows to elicit a response. For example, if your child is placing toys in a line, take one out of the line and put it in a different place. If your child always puts a certain figure in a certain color car, put a different figure in that car.

**Silly situations:** Create a situation that violates your child's expectation. For example, instead of putting your child's shoe on his or her foot, try to put it on his or her hand. When playing with the dollhouse put food in the bed. Do something the "wrong" way while giving your child an expectant look.



The following are suggestions for using these techniques during daily routines.

### **Meal time**

- Serve your child small portions of his or her favorite food items (keep the rest of his meal in the middle of the table or in a sealed tupperware container).
- Serve food whole that needs to be cut or diced for your child to eat it.
- Pour small amounts of liquid from a larger pitcher into your child's cup.
- If your child uses silverware, have certain necessary pieces of silverware missing (e.g., no spoon with ice cream).
- Offer your child food items that he or she does not like.
- Pretend to eat a non-edible item (e.g., napkin). Make sure that you indicate that you are being silly by being animated, wait for a response, and then describe the correct way to do it (e.g., "Oh, I can't eat this, I need to eat the food!").

### **Bath time**

- If your child likes water toys that wind up, have these available. Most young child will need assistance to operate them.
- Place all of your child's favorite bath time items (tub toys, bubble bath, etc.) on a shelf in the tub that he or she can see but cannot reach when sitting in the tub.
- Place your child's favorite bath time items in clear plastic containers with lids. When the lid is on, the containers should float making the toys inside very attractive.
- If your child enjoys being washed, only wash one body part at a time. For example, wash one hand and then stop and wait for your child to indicate that you should continue washing.
- If your child needs assistance undressing, only take off one item of clothes at a time, and wait for your child to indicate to you that you need to continue to help.
- If your child has an established bath time routine that he or she enjoys, you can attempt to do certain steps out of order. For example, wash your child's feet before his or her head.

### **Bed time**

- If you read your child a book at bedtime, only read one page at a time. Wait for your child to indicate that he or she wants you to turn the page.
- If you sing your child specific bedtime songs, only sing one or two lines at a time and wait for your child to indicate that he she wants you to continue singing
- If you play certain music or videos at bedtime, stop the tape/CD or video periodically and wait for your child to indicate that he or wants you to continue to play it or give your child the tape/CD or video case without the tape/CD or video in it
- Offer your child a book, toy, music, or video that he or she does not like

### **Dressing**

- Only put on or take off one item of clothing at a time. Wait for him or her to request the next item of clothes
- Offer your child clothing items to wear that he or she does not like
- Try to put your child's clothes on incorrectly (e.g., put a shoe on his or her head; put your child's shirt on his or her feet). Make sure that you indicate that you are being silly by being animated, wait for a response, and then describing the correct way to do it (e.g., "Oh, your shirt goes over your head!").
- Try to take your child's clothes off out of the correct order (e.g., try to take his sock off before you take off his shoe). Make sure that you indicate that you are being silly by being animated, wait for a response, and then describing the correct way to do it (e.g., "Oh, I need to take your shoe of first!").

### SESSION 3: Direct techniques

Direct teaching techniques are used to elicit specific language and/ or gestures from your child by using prompting shaping and reinforcement. These strategies build on the indirect techniques. You will continue to follow your child's lead and make it interactive. However, at times instead of modeling new language forms you will use specific prompts to elicit these language forms. When the prompting and reinforcement strategies are all put together, the entire procedure looks like this:

- 1) **Follow your child's lead.** Make sure your child is interested in and motivated by the object or activity before beginning a teaching episode. If your child is not engaged with a tangible object follow what he is doing and make it interactive, remember the chase game, follow the leader etc. Alternatively you can market toys or activities until he is engaged.
- 2) **Gain attention.** Make sure to gain your child's attention before providing the instruction.
- 3) **Provide a clear, least supportive prompt related to the child's focus of interest.** Provide a clear prompt at a level that the child is likely to respond appropriately, but is least supportive.
- 4) **Provide a more supportive prompt if necessary.** If the child is unable to respond at the previous prompt level, increase the prompt level to ensure that the child responds and that the child is successful.
- 5) **Provide praise and expand on the child's response.** Once the child responds correctly at whatever prompt level is used, provide immediate praise and use expansion to describe his behavior.
- 6) **Deliver the desired object or activity.** Make sure to give the child the desired object or activity immediately after he responds. This should be done at the same time the adult provides praise and expansion.

## SESSION 4: Types of Prompts

### Prompts

There are a variety of prompts that are designed to elicit a more complex language form from your child. Prompts can be used to teach specific words, types of words (verbs), and/or gestures (point or sign). The prompts are listed below in their order of supportiveness with the first prompt being most supportive and the last being the least supportive. When using these prompt strategies with your child, it is important to remember that you want to use the *least* supportive prompt necessary to help your child respond correctly while providing enough support to ensure they are successful. Your teacher, speech pathologist, occupational therapist, and/or group leader can help you determine which level of prompts to use for your child.

**Physical prompt:** You can teach your child new skills by guiding his body movements with your hands. Physical prompts are typically used when teaching children to produce new behaviors that require physical movement such as pointing, using signs, waving 'bye bye', or imitating new play behaviors. Physical prompts are also useful when developing receptive language skills (e.g., help your child touch his tummy, in response to the question, "Where is your tummy?").

**Gestural prompt:** You can teach your child new skills by using meaningful gestures, such as pointing or showing, to help him or her perform a new skill. Modeling actions that your child can imitate (e.g., modeling how to play with toys, pointing) can also be thought of as a gestural prompt. Gestural prompts are often used together with verbal prompts to augment or clarify the verbal prompt.

**Verbal imitation:** For most children, the easiest types of language to produce are the immediate imitation of a model and verbal routines. When using verbal imitation to elicit a response the "adult" provides the target word and the child imitates. This prompt is most successful with children who are beginning to imitate words and sounds, and/or have some verbal language. Verbal imitation is one way to build new vocabulary and to keep motivation for trying high. When using this technique, it is important to keep the model very clear and distinct. It is also important to pay attention to your child's current language level.

**Completing a verbal routine:** Verbal routines are meaningful phrases that your child has heard many times. For example, "Ready, set, go" or "Peek-a-boo". To use these verbal routines as a prompt, start the verbal routine, but leave off the last portion of the phrase. For example, "Ready, set,....". Often times leaving off the end of the phrase will cue your child to fill in the last word to complete the verbal routine. This type of prompt is helpful for children who are just beginning to use verbal language because it is repetitive and consistent.

**Making a choice between two things:** For children who have some language, the goal is to move them away from imitation and completing verbal routines into using more flexible language and answering questions. Often open-ended questions such as "What do you want to do?" are very hard for children with autism to answer. Giving your child a choice between two items or activities will help him answer the question. Sometimes, children repeat the last choice they hear because it is easier (remember 'imitation of a model'). To help your child learn to discriminate between choices, you can place the item or activity that you think your child wants in the first part of the choice. If your child then repeats the second choice, give that to him. This way your child will learn that his language carries meaning and he has to attend to the "choices/language he is using" to get what he wants rather than imitating the model.

**Cloze Procedure:** Cloze procedure is a "fill-in-the-blanks" activity where the learner uses clues from the context to supply words that have been deliberately removed from the sentence. Usually it is the last word that is omitted. This technique is similar to the verbal routine in that you are leaving off a part of the sentence. It differs in that there is not always one right answer. It is important that you provide your child with visual as well as verbal cues. For example, if the baby is in the bed, you might say "The baby is in the \_\_\_\_\_ (bed)." If you hold up a food item to the baby's mouth, you could say "The baby eats \_\_\_\_\_."

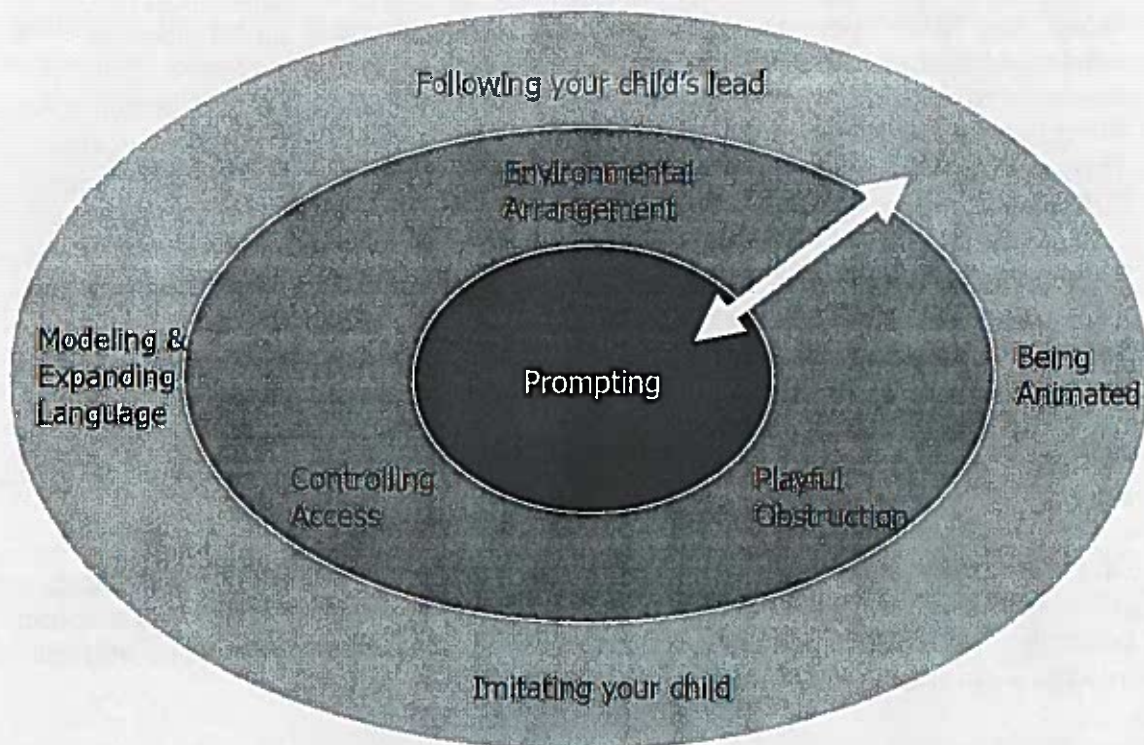
**Answering a direct question:** Direct questions allow your child to learn many different aspects around one item or activity. For example, rather than only requesting "tickle", your child can learn to answer questions about different aspects of "tickle", "What do you want?", "Where do you want tickles?", "Who do you want to tickle you?". What, Where, and Who questions are easier to answer. Why, How, and When questions are hard to answer. *Avoid* Yes/No questions. They are less likely to build your child's vocabulary and to encourage back and forth interaction.

**Time delay:** Wait for your child to show interest in an object or activity, gain his or her attention, use an "expectant" look, and wait for him or her to spontaneously request the object. If your child does not appropriately request the object or activity within 10 seconds, you can then add a verbal prompt such as, "What do you want?" or "Tell me what you want." Time delay is used to increase your child's ability to initiate and decrease his or her reliance on a verbal prompt.

**Changing prompt levels:** To help your child be successful and independent, you should use the least supportive prompt necessary to help your child respond correctly. If your child is unable to respond to a less supportive prompt, you will need to increase the level of support.

## SESSION 5: Putting It All Together

Now that you are familiar with both the indirect and the direct techniques, you should be able to use them together. It is important to adjust your use of the techniques based on the situation, your goals, your child's interests and frustration level. Since the indirect techniques lay the groundwork for all types of teaching, you will be using them more often than the direct techniques. One way to envision how to use the techniques together is to imagine three concentric circles which each have several of the techniques in them. The outer circle represents the basis of all of the techniques. It includes following your child's lead, imitating your child, modeling & expanding language, and being animated and should be used throughout the interaction with your child. The middle circle includes environmental arrangement, playful obstruction, and controlling access and should be used during roughly two-thirds of the interactions with your child in order to gain your child's attention and encourage your child to initiate if the previous techniques are unsuccessful at getting initiations. The smallest circle includes prompting and should be used during one-third of the interactions with your child to help your child increase the complexity of his response. You will move in and out of the three circles throughout the interaction. If you spend too much time in the center circle, your child will get frustrated. If you spend too much time in the outer circle, you won't challenge your child enough.



**When to use indirect techniques:** You will want to use indirect technique more in the following situations.

- Your child is not very motivated by the interaction, items, or activity
- Your child is highly frustrated
- You are in a situation in which you are unable to control access to items or activities
- You do not have time to follow through on commands and requests
- Your child is beginning to use a skill spontaneously, but is inconsistent

**When to use direct techniques:** You will want to use direct techniques more in the following situations.

- Your child is highly motivated for the interaction, items, or activity.
- Your child is not or only moderately frustrated
- You are in a situation in which you can control access to items or activities
- You have the time to follow through on commands and requests
- Your child is not yet using a skill spontaneously
- You need to teach your child a new behavior to replace an inappropriate behavior such as hitting or having a tantrum. In this case, you should provide the prompt immediately.

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REPORT OF RESEARCH

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