

## **Tackling Social Skills for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder during Social Distancing**

It is a scary time for all of us right now. However, for those with autism spectrum disorder this is an especially difficult time. Family routines have been disrupted, social outlets have been removed, and professional supports have been decreased or eliminated. Below are some activities to target social skills and keep children busy and engaged.

### **Conversation Skills**

Research has suggested that teaching active listening skills is a critical step in promoting good conversational skills in children with social difficulties (Frankel & Myatt, 2003).

- *Clapping Game.* Pick a target word or have your child pick a target word. You will say the target word along with distractor words (words either related in theme or similar sounds). Every time you say the target word have your child clap. You can make the task more challenging by increasing the rate at which you say the words.
- *Simon Says.* An adult takes the role of "Simon" and gives instructions, such as put your hands on your head, to the other players. The players will only follow the instructions when prefaced with the phrase "Simon says." If you follow the command when not prefaced by "Simon Says" the player is out.
- *The Telephone Game.* The first player will come up with a single word or phrase and whisper it in the ear of the second person in the line. The second player will repeat it to the next player and so on. When the last player is reached they announce the message that they heard. You can make the game harder by saying a longer phrase.
- *Freeze Dance.* Encourage your child to dance or move to music. When the music stops they need to freeze.
- Traditional board games such as Zingo and Guess Who can also be used to promote listening.

Some language research suggests that up to 70% of communication occurs through nonverbal modalities, making nonverbal communication a critical social skill to target for children with ASD. Below are some activities to practice nonverbal communication.

- *Follow My Eyes to the Prize/Follow my Face to the Prize* (Gutstein, S. E. & Sheely, R. K., 2002). Hide 3-5 objects around the house, room. Use only your eyes & facial expressions to provide information on the location of the objects. It is recommended that you hide desirable objects, such as stickers or snacks.
- *Simon Does*. This is a variant of Simon Says. In this game, direct your child to watch & do what you do, and ignore what you say.
- *Charades*. You can print pictures from your computer using clipart, draw pictures, or write down words on pieces of paper. Each person will take turns selecting a piece of paper and acting out what is on the paper using their facial expression, arms, and bodies. For younger children, start with animals. For older children, you can think about emotion words.

Children with ASD often have difficulty initiating and maintaining conversation topics. Here are some activities that you can do to promote conversations

- *Candy Game*. This is a Seaver Autism Center favorite. This game is played with any multi-colored food, such as M & M's, Mike and Ikes, fruit snacks, or Fruit Loops. Prior to playing write out specific prompts for each color. For example, red: tell us one thing you learned today, yellow: tell us one thing you would like to do this summer. Each person will close his/her eyes and pick one food item. After they share something based on the color they have chosen, they get to eat the food item. As they activity is mastered you can encourage family members to ask questions or make comments.
- *Conversation Ball Game*. You can purchase a thumbball such as <https://www.amazon.com/Thumbball-Ice-Breaker-6-inch/dp/B0016ZCCD6> or get a medium sized ball and write down different topics/prompts on it. You throw the ball to someone and they respond to the question or topic where their thumb lands. A variation of this is conversation dice. Again you can purchase conversation dice <https://www.amazon.com/Learning-Resources-LER7300-Conversation-Cubes/dp/B001SH7SS6> or make your own using a tissue box and markers.
- *Conversation Jenga*. Write down questions on each jenga piece. As you play jenga, players have to answer the question written on the piece that they remove.
- *Phone Calls and Face Time*. During this time of social distancing making phone calls and having face time chats with friends and relatives is critical. Before making a call you can role play with your child and identify some conversation starters and topics that they might discuss given the other person's interests.

## Theory of Mind

Theory of Mind (ToM) or perspective taking is the ability to attribute mental states—beliefs, intents, desires, pretending, knowledge, etc.—to oneself and others and to understand that others have beliefs, desires and intentions that are different from one's own (Premack & Woodruff, 1978). Deficits in theory of mind are a core feature of Autism Spectrum Disorders. Below are some activities to work on theory of mind.

- *Movies without Words.* Watch an unfamiliar television show or movie clip. First watch the clip on mute. Encourage your child to think about what is happening in the clip, the characters' facial expressions and body language to determine the story line. Then unmute the clip and rewatch it to see how accurate you were and what you missed. Hint, shows like Mr. Bean and I Love Lucy are great as the actors are very animated.
- *Books.* For younger children, you can pause while reading a book and ask them to identify the character's feelings. Encourage them to look at the character's facial expression and body language. Once they have identified the character's feelings you can ask them what the character is thinking. If they get stuck you can prompt them by saying "What would you be thinking if you were that character in that situation?"

We hope you find these tips helpful.