

## PFA Tips

## Every Friendship Begins with a Conversation

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) affects social interactions and communication. Many people on the spectrum silently struggle in the social realm, particularly when it comes to dating, friendships and various other types of social relationships. One of the biggest challenges for many, but certainly not all people with ASD, is how to build a friendship. As most people know, every friendship begins with a conversation.

### What is a conversation?

Merriam-Webster defines the word “conversation” as: “Oral exchange of sentiments, observations, opinions or ideas.” But it is obviously much more complex than that or we would all be masters of conversation. The reality is that conversational skills are extremely intricate. Conversation is 80-85% non-verbal, meaning most of what is being conveyed is through body language and how we say things rather than what we say. The implication is that many with ASD are missing up to 85% of what is being conveyed in any given interaction. Think about this: the social media and text messaging world developed a vocabulary of emoji’s because the written word loses that important non-verbal component. The emoji library conveys the essential non-verbals needed to communicate effectively.

### What is non-verbal communication?

Non-verbal communication is eye contact, facial expressions, body language, body movements, posture, personal space, touch, physical appearance and tone of voice. Take

eye contact for instance. It is not simply staring at someone when you are talking with them – it’s purposeful. When speaking, we look at our listener to convey meaning and check for understanding. The listener uses eye contact to show understanding and to indicate if they want the speaker to continue or give them an opportunity to talk. If the listener disengages eye contact, it often means they are no longer interested in what is being said. If someone with ASD continually misses that important cue, others may avoid conversation with them. This could result in the person with ASD being confused and not knowing how to reengage if they thought previous conversations went well.

### How is a conversation structured?

Many with ASD may monologue about their interests. A monologue is one-way communication such as this article, a speech, a professor’s lecture, or an announcement. When having a conversation, there needs to be a back-and-forth exchange. Reciprocity is essential in successfully communicating



with someone. Therefore, a conversation must have components involving initiation, maintenance and termination.

- **Conversation Initiation:** This usually involves a greeting of some kind such as “Hello, how are you today?”
- **Conversation Maintenance:** One person is the speaker and the other is the active listener. The speaker talks for about a paragraph of information (5-7 sentences) and then checks in with the listener. The listener indicates whether the speaker should continue or if they would like to shift into the speaker role. The back and forth continues until someone desires to terminate the conversation.
- **Conversation Termination:** This is usually accomplished with a transition statement such as “Well, it was very

*continued on back*



nice speaking with you today, but I need to get going now. Have a great day!” When a termination statement is made, the listener is responsible for identifying it as such and responding with a similar termination statement to acknowledge and allow the conversation to successfully end. When this cue is missed repeatedly the person who wishes to terminate the conversation begins to feel uncomfortable and may avoid initiating or engaging in a conversation with this person in the future. It is preferable that you agree to terminate the conversation quickly.

### How do you interpret a conversation?

What most people understand intuitively is not necessarily immediately understood by someone with ASD. Tone and inflection in a person’s voice can completely change the meaning of a sentence. Putting emphasis on the first word in a sentence will convey a different meaning than if another word in the sentence is emphasized. For example, take the sentence “I’m not hungry.” If we put the emphasis on **“I’m”** then the sentence could mean “I am not hungry but perhaps someone else

is.” If the emphasis is on **“not”**, the sentence could mean “I am absolutely not hungry.” If we put the emphasis on **“hungry”** the sentence could mean “While not hungry I have another need, such as being thirsty, tired or lonely.” For someone with ASD who may not pick up on the emphasis, they may feel they are just spinning a roulette wheel and guessing the person’s intent. Sometimes they get it right and sometimes it can be a big misunderstanding. The same is true for someone with ASD who is randomly emphasizing words and doesn’t realize that emphasis changes the meaning of what they are trying to communicate. They might unintentionally come across as sounding sarcastic or rude.

### Let’s recap some conversation Tips and Strategies

- Seek out someone with whom you would like to converse
- Look for eye contact, a smile, a nod, or some other non-verbal indicator that they are willing to engage in conversation
- Decide what you would like to say before approaching the person
- Initiate a conversation with a greeting

- Keep that conversation going for a number of exchanges
- Be sure to speak for no more than 5-7 sentences and then check in with the listener
- Give the listener ample time to respond and speak about what is on their mind
- Watch for non-verbal cues that can indicate where to go next in the conversation
- Terminate or accept termination of the conversation from the person with whom you are interacting
- Continue on to new interactions and activities throughout your day
- Do not get frustrated if a number of people are not interested in interacting
- Only interact with those who are willing. Some people prefer to disengage or have other goals in mind for their day.
- Continue to practice and seek out input on your newfound skills!

### Additional Resources

Conversation Skills for Autistic Pre-teens and Teenagers

<https://raisingchildren.net.au/autism/communicating-relationships/communicating/conversation-skills-for-teens-with-asd>

How to improve conversational skills in children with autism?

<https://luxai.com/blog/how-to-improve-conversational-skills-in-children-with-autism/>

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