

RESPONDING VERBALLY TO SOMEONE ELSE'S VERBAL COMMUNICATION

GOAL

Learn to teach your child to respond when communicating with others using the various types of responding including:

- Fill-ins
- Questions
- Conversations

BACKGROUND

Before teaching your child verbal responding, make sure he has some requesting, imitating and labeling skills. These skills are the building blocks for this more complex form of communication and will be needed for teaching. If you try to teach responding and your child struggles, go back to teaching some of the other skills and come back to this later.

For the sake of simplicity, in this lesson, rather than saying "responding to someone else's communication", we will use the phrase "verbal response" or even more simply "response."

Although we are using the term "verbal response," this includes whatever form of communication your child uses including sign language, PECS or a communication app.

TYPES OF RESPONDING

Fill-ins: Fill-in occurs when you start saying something and your child finishes what you are saying. This response can be from songs or common phrases.

Questions: Answering questions is an important part of communication. Some children require specific teaching to do this. Start with what, where, then who questions before introducing more complex questions.

Conversations: Conversations involve at least 2 people talking about the same topic in an exchange back and forth. These exchanges might include questions and answers or simple comments that volley back and forth .

RESPONDING TO FILL-INS

Fill-ins are usually the easiest verbal response to learn, and the most fun. A fill-in occurs when you start saying something and your child finishes what you are saying. This response can be from songs or common phrases. Teaching your child to verbally respond follows the same basic steps that you used to teach each of the other skills.

BASIC STEPS

Identify Targets and Reinforcers

Think about songs your child knows and likes. Does he know "Row row row your..." or "Twinkle twinkle little..."? When you leave off the last word, you create an opportunity for someone to fill-in the ending. If your child can label or imitate any of these words, these songs might be good targets for you to teach.



Collect Pictures for Prompting

Collect pictures of each of those targets. These will help you teach your child the correct response. If he doesn't yet label the target, try teaching him the label before teaching the verbal response. This makes teaching the response much easier.



Start the Phrase and Prompt

Go to where your child likes to play. Set the pictures and reinforcers you might want to use within easy reach. Start the phrase. Immediately present the picture that matches the target phrase and prompt him to use his alternative communication, if he uses one.



Reinforce Correct Responses

If he says the word or uses his alternative communication, immediately give praise and a reinforcer. You can also vary the reinforcers you give him to keep him motivated and excited.

TEACH ANSWERING QUESTIONS

Once your child begins to fill-in your statements more regularly, introduce some simple questions. Keep the questions concrete. Start with what, where, then who questions before introducing more complex questions.

What Questions

- ✓ What buzzes?
- ✓ What keeps food cold?
- ✓ What do you wear?
- ✓ What do you ride?
- ✓ What smells?

Where Questions

- ✓ Where do you sleep?
- ✓ Where does a bird fly?
- ✓ Where do you shop?
- ✓ Where do you cook?

Who Questions

- ✓ Who hops?
- ✓ Who barks?
- ✓ Who bakes cookies?
- ✓ Who cuts the grass?
- ✓ Who eats hay?

Choose targets that are familiar to your child or relate to something he enjoys. Try questions such as "what bounces?" Or "What flies?" Then introduce questions like "where do you sleep?" And "where do you jump?" Next add some questions such as "who hops?" And "who is your friend?"

Follow the same procedure as before, using pictures of the targets to help your child answer the questions correctly. Create opportunities for your child to practice communicating throughout his daily activities. This makes communication and learning much more natural. It's ideal to embed teaching when he's engaged in fun activities, as long as you can get his attention. Keep pictures and reinforcers nearby so you're always ready to teach.

MORE COMPLEX CONVERSATIONS

MAKE IT FUN

Turn conversations into a game

Don't start teaching conversation skills until your child readily responds to a variety of fill-ins and questions, including questions you didn't teach him to respond to. Teaching conversations is just a little different than teaching other responding in that you won't use pictures to help your child respond.

Many children still benefit from the use of some sort of visual. Try playing an "on-topic" game where each time one of you says something related to what the other person says, you lay down a green link. When someone says something off-topic, you lay down a red link in the opposite direction. See how long you can make the chain before changing directions.

Avoid pressuring your child. Show him that you sometimes make mistakes and say something off-topic. Be silly about it and show him that having conversations is fun.



REINFORCE!

Make it motivating

Conversations can be hard for some children so make sure to make this a motivating experience. Follow conversations with things your child enjoys that are easy for him.

Consider providing access to reinforcers periodically throughout a conversation, especially when you introduce new topics or try to engage him longer.

What items, activities or interactions are most motivating for him?

Parts of a conversation

Use this as an opportunity to teach your child how to gracefully switch topics. No conversation goes on forever. At some point, in every conversation, the topic shifts. Make sure your child knows that this is natural and perfectly ok.

This is also a good time to talk to your child about the interests of other people. He can absolutely talk about his topic of special interest, but remind him that his conversation partner might want to talk about his interests too.



PRACTICE

It may take many months or years to teach your child these responding skills. Stay patient. Your child will develop skills at his own rate. Continue to create opportunities for him to communicate. Make it fun and avoid pressuring him.

Images are of models for demonstration purposes and do not depict children with autism.