

# Talk to Me

Conversation Strategies for  
**Parents** of Children on the  
**Autism Spectrum** or with  
**Speech and Language**  
**Impairments**



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## CHAPTER 2

# How to Get Your Child Talking

In 2004, when Jamie was ten, I was sitting in the car driving him from school. It was a common occurrence and we sat there in silence as the landscape passed us by. Again and again, I wondered what was going through his head. Again and again, I struggled with the idea – how could I connect with him?

That day I was sick – I'd come home early from work – and I was frustrated... Frustrated by not being able to talk with my son.

I am a writer of dozens of schoolbooks for learners of English as a Second Language. I have a post-graduate degree in English, have worked as a lecturer in Communication at university, and have learnt three languages other than English. My life is writing and my love is words.

Here I was with my dearest boy and I just couldn't talk to him. His answers, if they came at all, were monosyllabic. He just wasn't interested in talking. He laughed a lot and loved watching funny cartoons. He was often in trouble, mainly for throwing temper tantrums, but he was a caring boy. I knew he had a lovely soul, but I couldn't reach it.

I sat with my hands on the wheel, looking at the road ahead... Driving and feeling awful – physically and emotionally.

Suddenly I said loudly, 'Right, Jamie. You are going to speak. And we are going to have a conversation!'

He was quite alarmed. I never spoke with such force unless I was angry with him. He looked at me sharply.

‘We’ll start with this: Jamie, I was sick today.’

There was a pause. You see, to a child with Asperger’s or autism, a statement like that needs no follow up. It’s not a question, so it doesn’t require a reply. It’s not an instruction, so it doesn’t need any action from him. It’s simply a statement. It was only the tone I used that showed I wanted something from him. Something I’d never demanded before – a reply.

There was no response.

I spoke again: ‘I was sick today.’ Pause. ‘Now it’s your turn.’

He looked a bit pained and shuffled in his seat.

‘I was sick today. I came home from work,’ I said tightly.

There was another pause and then I heard the magical words: ‘Did you eat something?’

I laughed and laughed. I almost cried, there in the traffic in the middle of the busy road.

‘No, Jamie,’ I said, ‘I didn’t eat something bad. It wasn’t my tummy that was sick. I had a headache.’

‘Oh.’

‘That was very good, Jamie. Very good. I’m really pleased with you.’

Having seen this little glimpse of what Jamie could do, I ploughed on: ‘Now it’s your turn. I said I was sick. You asked if I’d eaten something. Now you’re the speaker again. It’s your turn.’ I looked at him expectantly. He waited. Then fidgeted, looked out of the window. But I went on: ‘Jamie. I’m waiting.’

After a pause, he said: ‘Are you sick now?’

‘Great work, Jamie!! No, I’m not sick any longer. I’m feeling much better. Thank you.’

Jamie smiled hesitantly. This mother who hungered for communication and demanded something in speech was a little strange to him. It was truly odd for him to be expected to volunteer anything. Before, I had been content with ‘Yes’, ‘No’, ‘Please’ and ‘Thank you’. Now I wanted more for some strange reason.

And this was the beginning of our experiments in conversation. And had we but known, it was the beginning of something else – the beginning of a lifetime of dialogue...

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## Tip

Be specific about what you want from your child. Say things like: 'It's your turn. I want to hear you say something now.' 'You're the speaker and I'm the listener.'

Most parents want to be listened to but we also need to be spoken to. And the first step is to make our demands clear and polite – we want our children to practise, experiment and eventually engage in a real conversation.

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## CHAPTER 3

# Demanding a Conversation with Your Child

When I started a real conversation with Jamie, I began with these words: ‘Jamie, we’re going to have a conversation.’

It was as simple as that. I was telling him what was going to happen. I was giving him the purpose of our exchange. I was the mummy. I was calling the shots.

I wondered afterwards if such a long word like ‘conversation’ could be meaningful to him and whether he’d have problems pronouncing it. After all, his vocabulary was painfully small and I doubted he could understand abstract nouns. And then I thought, well, he has no problem with ‘Reactivation’ and ‘Transformation’ from Dragonball-Z, so why should he balk at pronouncing ‘conversation’. It quickly became a keyword.

In fact, it soon became a term to be hated. Jamie went through a stage of resenting me saying, ‘Let’s have a conversation’. He turned his head away and sighed or said, ‘Oh, no, you always say “Conversation”.’ I sympathised with him – after all, it’s easy to say, ‘Let’s have a conversation’, but it’s so difficult to take part in one when you lack the vocabulary and comprehension. But he had to realise that there was an expectation of him to do something.

So stating what was necessary came first – he knew ‘conversation’ was ‘talking’ and, for some reason, his mother was expecting him to do just that. But how? Exactly what did I want?

I realised pretty quickly that Jamie had no idea how to start or continue a conversation in the regular way. When you're a mother in this situation, you begin by asking questions to involve your child in giving the answers. But if I asked, 'Do you like this?' he would just say 'Yes' or 'No'.

'Do you like pizza?'

'Yes,' he replied.

'Have you done this puzzle?'

'No.'

'Are you going to put that in the wash?'

'Yes.'

This is the classic and simple way to ask questions, but unless you have a practised interviewee, you get one-word answers. Conversation is made up of more than 'Yes' and 'No'. So, the next stage in getting Jamie to emulate a real conversation was to demand more of him.

First, I tried, 'Can you tell me more?' That just led to scowls and a curt 'No', which left us just where we started. So then I'd ask more specific questions, but ones starting with the 'Wh-' and 'How' question words. These lead to more fruitful exchanges.

'Did you play soccer today?'

'Yes.'

'Who was on your team?'

'Daniel and Nicholas.'

'Where did you play?'

'On the oval.'

'How did you do?'

'Do?'

'Did you win?'

'We wonned.'

That kind of exchange is much more useful and, what is more, I could then summarise the information in a meaningful whole that Jamie could use to tell someone else about the soccer game.

'So you played soccer today with Daniel and Nicholas on the oval and you won. Is that right?'

'Yes,' he would say, smiling.

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## Tips

Try to avoid 'Yes'/'No' questions when talking to your child. They give the child the opportunity to give monosyllabic answers. If you do ask 'Yes'/'No' questions, demand further explanation or expansion by your child. Ask them prompt questions which will give them some idea of what to say. 'Can you tell me why?' is a good leading question, or just 'Tell me about it'.

After you have gathered a certain amount of information from a section of conversation, repeat it back to your child so that they can learn how to piece together parts of an experience to make a conversational whole.

Set out what you expect from your child. Lay the ground rules for the conversation. Be explicit: 'Ask me a question.' 'It's your turn.' 'I'm not very interested in trains/cars/puzzles/*The Simpsons* today. Let's talk about school or what we'll do tonight.'

In the end you don't mind what they say, as long as it's meaningful and follows on from the previous remark. They can ask a question, repeat a word, make a joke, start their own conversation, whatever, but they have to take part in the game of conversation.

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## CHAPTER 4

# It's Never Too Late to Start Encouraging Conversation

When I first started working with Jamie in this way, I felt I'd missed so many of his fertile, receptive years – years when I could have been encouraging him, correcting him, opening him up to the method, means and purpose of communication.

I regretted the fact that the door had only opened to me when he was ten years old. What could we have achieved together if I'd started when he was six or four or even two? There was so much water already under the bridge.

But I comforted myself with this thought – my two girls developed their language abilities so quickly, there was barely time to register that they'd learnt how to conjugate verbs before they were generating complex sentences and writing discursive essays. They flew through their language learning. But with Jamie I've been able to mark the advent of each new step along the way. He's blossomed slowly and each new petal is remarkable and welcomed for the very reason that it's delayed and marked. It's so clear when he now knows that a pause in the conversation means he's required to supply an answer or make a contribution. I feel so triumphant when he makes a very ordinary rejoinder, like 'That's nice', which I know has come after months of reminders. And it's such a victory when he overcomes his anger or tells me proudly he's a 'person' now.



This victory has been a long time coming, but it's based to a large extent on the encouragers I have used to modify Jamie's behaviour since he was about 10 or 11. I always had it in my mind that it was better to encourage a child to behave well rather than to punish them for behaving badly.

And there are so many ways to encourage a child: to provide treats, such as food; to reward them with activities; to lavish them with your attention; to give them money or presents (I don't like to give food or money). The most effective one I have found is to give praise.

Jamie learnt the word 'mature' from the covers of DVDs he wasn't allowed to watch – MA For Mature Persons Only. He knew this meant that you had to be almost an adult and responsible. In fact, he used the word 'person' in a particular way, so that on his sister's fifteenth birthday card he wrote: 'You are a Person now.'

So whenever he did something good, by acting well or resisting the temptation to act up, I told him, 'You're being very mature'. He would swell with pride and say, 'Am I?' And I then used the points system (see Chapter 6 Finding a Reward System That Your Child Can Verbalise) to put it into numbers for him. 'You're an 11 today.' 'Am I?' 'Yes, you...', and then I would specifically list the things he'd done well. By choosing to make the reward a verbal one (praise), I was underlining the importance of language. It was words that would reward him; it was through communication that he could measure his achievements.

Starting conversational therapy with your child – at whatever age – means that there is simply a longer period of minor achievements and each one will be recognised, if not by the school or his friends, at least by you.

## Tips

Don't worry about when you start conversational therapy with your child. It's never too late, and however far behind they are, the greater the number of achievements that lie along the way ahead.

Use the Appendix at the back of the book to gauge where your child is in their language skills, and proudly enter the date for each passing milestone.

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