

COMMUNICATION SPOT •

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This month's topic for COMMUNICATION SPOT is **turn-taking**, an important feature of adult communication. To begin, let's think about what happens when most people communicate; one person says something, the listener responds, then it's back to the first person...In other words, **we take turns when we communicate**. This happens whether you are buying milk, telling a story about the fish you caught or saying giddyay to someone in the street. In fact, turn-taking usually begins in the first months of life where babies as young as two months can be seen developing this awareness of turn-taking. A baby can be seen to make a noise or a gesture while looking at their

parent, wait for their parent to repond and then make a noise or gesture again.

Turn-taking is a precursor to two-way communication and an important social skill to learn.

Often, for children with autism, turn-taking does not come easily or naturally. The concept can be confusing and can even cause a great deal of stress. This is why it is good to **introduce the concept of turn-taking early in a child's life in a gentle, but very structured manner**. A child is autism ready to learn turn-taking as soon as they are able to tolerate another person "in their space". You should begin by introducing the concept in an activity where there is a very quick exchange of turns. For example, having a turn on a swing and then letting another child have a turn is not a good place to start, as each "turn" takes too long.

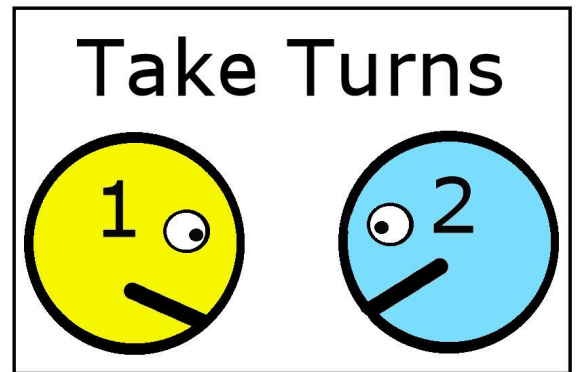
Turn-taking helps a child open their world to include others. It is vital for communication development.

To encourage very early turn-taking , you may try copying your child's actions. For example, if your child clapped, you could say "Dad's / Mum's turn" and clap yourself. Next say your child's name and see if they will continue the turn-taking "game". Over the page are some steps for introducing turn-taking in a more formal way...

Introducing turn-taking:

1. **Start with just two people;** your child and perhaps yourself. Your child must be comfortable with the other person involved. Let's use the example of a mother and child called Jo.
2. **Choose an activity that has obvious starts and ends to each turn.** It might be a jack-in-a-box, it might be building a tower of blocks where each person puts on one block, it might be blowing bubbles where each person has one turn. Make sure the activity chosen is one that your child can do easily and that they won't need help to complete their turn. (*Asking for help is another important part of communication that we will deal with separately in a separate article*). Sometimes it is good to introduce turn-taking with a totally new activity. If your child has already been accustomed having turn after turn of a jack-in-a-box, it may be better to use another activity or toy to introduce turn-taking.
3. **Often it is best for you, as the adult, to start with your turn.** Sometimes when the child gets a turn first, it becomes a battle for anyone else to get a turn!
4. When you have your turn, **it is important you use some words.** Children with autism can become confused with pronouns (me, you, my, your), so steer clear of these for now. Instead of using the words "My turn," use your name; "Mum's turn" and point to yourself. Next, use your child's name; "Jo's turn" and point to your child. For a child who grizzles (or even screams) for a turn, you might repeat: "Wait, it's Mum's turn." Put your hand up to gesture STOP as you say "wait" and then point to yourself as you say "Mum".
5. Sometimes, it helps to **write and draw a visual story** about taking turns. Go through this with your child when they are calm and focused. An example of a story would be: *Jo likes to build towers. Mum wants to build a tower too. Mum has a turn. Mum's turn. Mum puts a block down. Jo tries to wait and watch. Next Jo has a turn. Jo's turn. Jo puts a block on. Mum waits and watches. Next it's Mum's turn...* (and so on). This may seem like too much detail, but is an example of the explicit teaching that many children need. As an extra resource for teaching turn-taking, you could even use a digital camera to take photos of two children taking turns in an activity and write a story. If you are *really* computer savvy, you could make a PowerPoint presentation (slide show) using the photos and adding a narration.
6. After your child has mastered turn-taking with *one* person and a *specific activity*, you could either **introduce turn-taking with another activity** or you could introduce **a different person** so that your child is taking turns with someone else (eg. a sister or a friend). The next step is to take turns with two other people in the activity or to lengthen the time that each child spends at a turn. (Some parents find it useful to have a timer to set with really fun activities such as taking turns on a swing. Because these "turns" do not have defined ends, you may tell your child that each turn is five minutes long.
7. Remember to praise your child when they do great turn-taking. You could say something like "Great **taking turns** at the blocks."

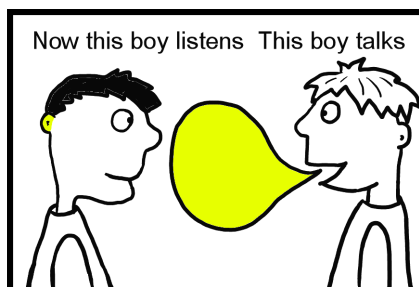
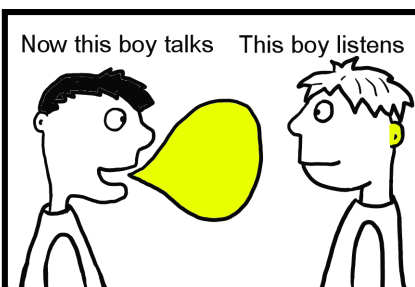
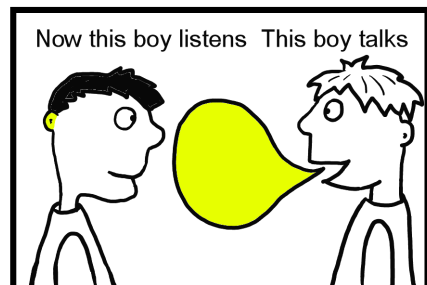
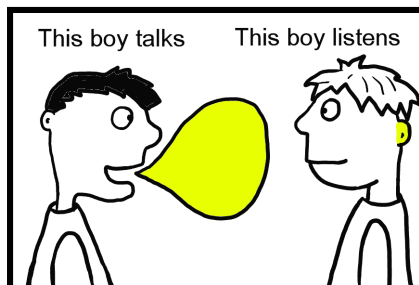
Above all, **keep your language as consistent as possible**. When starting different activities that require turn-taking, you might say “Let’s try to take turns”. Visual cues can also help some children generalise their skills to other settings. You might use the Auslan sign (sign language) or show a symbol that represents “taking turns”(see *right*). You could show this picture or do the sign whenever you talk about taking turns. . The first picture below is a symbol that you can use for turn-taking. If you are going to use it, use it when you practise turn-taking at home and then later when turn-taking in other situations. Stick it at the beginning of any turn-taking stories you write or insert it into the start of your slideshow.



Speaking with Others and Turn-taking.

Children with autism usually need practise at taking turns whether it be in activities or in speaking with others. In fact, *many* children, not just those on the spectrum, need encouragement to listen to others. The pictures below can be used to explain the nature of **turn-taking when talking to someone else**. Your child will be ready for this is they are verbal and attempting to talk with other people. With the help of pictures, the child sees how each person should try and take turns at talking and listening. In real-life, each person does not take strict turns in talking – Person One might say three sentences, Person Two may laugh and then Person One might start talking again – but for children with autism we need to simplify the nature of communication exchange when we first introduce it.

We try to take turns when we talk with someone.



These pictures and the symbol above are available free to download in a larger size. There are also variations that suit girls and pictures without words that can be used for adding your own child’s name.

See www.pellicantalk.com and follow the link to Autism