

VERBAL STRATEGIES

This section includes the following concepts:

Unit 8: Thought Bubble

Unit 9: Talk Balloon

Unit 10: Topic Circle

Introduction

The strategies in these units pertain to verbal communication. You will be introduced to simple and effective ways to promote socialization through communication. The social use of language is often referred to as pragmatics. According to *Ramsden & Botting (2004)*, children with poor pragmatic language skills may have long-term social difficulties. Even at the most basic level, communication is the primary way we indicate our needs, wants, and ideas. Children who are as young as 4 years of age can participate in conversations (Peterson & Johnson, 1989) and can use communication to extend their play.

Some children are able to express their thoughts but have difficulty exchanging ideas with others. Expressing ideas, listening to those of others, and exchanging information on a topic are all necessary during a conversation. The complexity of a conversation requires various social strategies that include turn-taking when speaking, remaining on topic, making appropriate comments, and withholding inappropriate ideas, topics, or thoughts. Learning these verbal conversational skills will provide the foundation for taking part in increasingly complex, interesting conversations.



THE CONCEPT

What is a thought bubble?

Thought bubbles are often used in cartoons to portray what a character is thinking. In this program, we use this concept to indicate where a thought goes when it is not shared with others. To do this requires controlling the impulse to say something. The thought bubble is introduced to help children be more successful with conversation. It helps children monitor what they say before they speak. The accompanying DVD demonstrates how we instruct children in the use of the thought bubble.

Why is the concept of the thought bubble important?

We communicate our feelings, thoughts and ideas during conversation with others. However, not everything we think needs to be said. In fact,

SOMETIMES EXPRESSING THOUGHTS OUT LOUD CAN BE INAPPROPRIATE, UNINTERESTING, OR HURTFUL TO OTHERS.

sometimes expressing thoughts out loud can be inappropriate, uninteresting, or hurtful to others. We have all heard, "Out of the

mouths of babes," which means that children say what comes to their minds, whether appropriate or not. We can teach children to keep thoughts privately and safely in the thought bubble when words are not appropriate for a conversation. The thought bubble is one way to help individuals with social challenges learn the strategy of rehearsal.

Everyone benefits from thinking about what to say aloud and what to keep in a thought bubble. Children with limited language can learn to put inappropriate scripting, noises, and sounds in a thought bubble instead of voicing these things. Children with language skills can use the thought bubble to monitor how much and what they say

out loud. Adults may find that using the thought bubble when engaging with their families and co-workers makes it easier to get along with people.

The thought bubble can be used to 'practice in your head' what you need to do or say. We commonly think through our plans for the day, presentations, notes for a test, and ways to say something. Children need this strategy, too.

What kinds of difficulties are associated with inappropriately expressing thoughts?

Children who have difficulty with social skills are typically challenged by conversation. They may make inappropriate or offensive comments (Williamson & Dorman 2002). Their statements can relate to almost anything, including weight, age, hairstyle, facial features, odors, and clothing. A variety of difficulties is associated with a tendency to inappropriately verbalize thoughts, including:

- Perseveration on preferred topics or activities that cause children to 'get stuck' talking about things in detail, even though the listener or play partner is not interested
- A tendency to think out loud or repeat things that have already been said
- Impulsivity that leads to speaking without thinking first
- Lack of ability to read cues that would help others know what is appropriate to say
- A limited repertoire of ideas to share
- Difficulty understanding that some thoughts might be hurtful or insulting

UNIT 8: THOUGHT BUBBLE

Social consequences of speaking out inappropriately

Although we expect children to be less inhibited than adults about what they say, we also expect them to learn that some things are not acceptable or nice to say. Children who are not careful about what they say to other people are at risk for social difficulties. They may say what is on their minds, even if it is boring, insulting, insensitive, or rude to others.

Peers may be offended by their comments and then avoid them or become angry or aggressive. When children are unaware of the effect of their inappropriate comments, they may be confused by other's reactions to them. They may try even harder to interact and inadvertently make matters worse by continuing to say things that are unwelcome. As they get older, inappropriate comments can lead to socially awkward, confusing, and even dangerous situations.

TEACHING THE CONCEPT OF THE THOUGHT BUBBLE

Children will relate best to the concept of a thought bubble by showing them a cartoon strip. The visual representation of a thought that is not expressed may be familiar to them from reading comics or, if not, the drawing will be helpful in introducing the concept. In the Appendix section of this workbook, you will find drawings of a thought bubble and the accompanying DVD will help illustrate the idea as well.

Start by helping the child *understand the concept of a thought bubble*:

- A thought bubble is a place where ideas that are not shared with others are kept.
- Words not appropriate for the conversation can stay in our heads, safely in the thought bubble.
- We can use the ideas kept in our thought bubble to practice what we want to say.

Once the child understands the concept of a thought bubble, present some *rules about thought bubbles*:

- Think before your speak.
- Not everything we think needs to be said: Consider the other person's feelings and interests.
- If we are not sure if something is right to say aloud, we need to keep it in our thought bubble.
- If we think about something that is not related to the conversation (for example, thinking about dinosaurs when everyone is talking about television shows) we keep that in a thought bubble.

See Appendix A for more information on developing the ability to think about what to say before saying it.

QUICK TIPS

- ◆ During play, keep a dry-erase board handy to write down statements that the child says that should go in a thought bubble .
- ◆ Place a thought bubble on the refrigerator, on the bathroom mirror, or on the dining room table to remind the child to use it.
- ◆ Talk with the child and together come up with a simple gesture that serves as a reminder to use the thought bubble. It is more subtle in public than a graphic cue.

INTRODUCTORY LESSON

Use this instructional session to reinforce the concept and rules of using a thought bubble:

MATERIALS

- Six copies of the large thought bubble (see Appendix B)
- Markers
- Toys that are motivating (Avoid toys that are over-stimulating or may cause children to perseverate, such as Thomas the Train™.)

SETUP

- Explain what the thought bubble is. Simplify the language if needed.
- Distribute the thought bubbles.

ACTIVITY

- Point to the inside of the bubble. "This is where we put our words that we THINK IN OUR HEADS but do not say with our mouths."
- "We cannot say everything we think and must put some of our words in here."
- Write or draw on the paper an example to which the child can relate.
- "Sometimes you talk too much about _____. It is okay to talk about _____ for a little while. When it is too much, I will remind you to put some of what you were going to say into your thought bubble instead."
- "Remember that the thought bubble is for something that you think but do not say."
- Participate in play with the child. If the child begins to recite a learned script from a movie or commercial, jot it quickly in a blank thought bubble and bring it to the child's attention. Point to the bubble and say, "This stays in your head." Continue to play with the child, looking for opportunities to help the child learn what to put in his or her thought bubble.



UNIT 8: THOUGHT BUBBLE



FACILITATOR CHECKLIST: THOUGHT BUBBLE

Use the following questions to individualize the concept of the thought bubble for each child in the group.

- ◆ Does the child say things that drive peers away?
- ◆ Can the child identify words likely to be hurtful or bothersome to another person?
- ◆ Does the child talk repetitively about certain objects, events or movies?
- ◆ Does the child respond well to visual cues?
- ◆ Can the child understand the concept of thinking but not saying?
- ◆ Does the child need additional practice?
- ◆ Are there opportunities for the child to practice throughout the day? Where? When? With whom?



THOUGHT BUBBLE: PRACTICE ACTIVITIES

SELF-MONITORING

MATERIALS

- Thought-bubble cards. (see Appendix B)
- Dry-erase board and markers

SETUP

- Copy and cut out the thought-bubble cards.

ACTIVITY

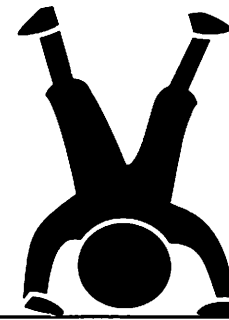
- Have a discussion about the use of the thought bubble.
- Ask the children to identify some things they have learned that go into the thought bubble.
- Using the dry-erase board to write information, identify how the children have successfully used the thought bubble.
- Using the dry-erase board, identify situations in which the children need to practice using the thought bubble.
- Tell the children, "You need to think about what you are going to say at _____ (school, scouts, the party) today. Listen to yourself as you talk. Ask yourself, 'is this something that is better to put in my thought bubble?'"
- Instruct the adults who are with the child often to quietly and subtly pass a thought bubble card to the child so that he or she can be more appropriate. Remember that it is important to catch the child 'in the moment' to shape the behavior. Try to provide the cue as quickly as possible so the child knows what is inappropriate to say out loud.

The cards work well for teachers in the classroom. It is effective to walk by and nonchalantly place one on the desk of a child who is interrupting, talking out of turn, or making inappropriate comments. It alerts the child to maintain what is being said without bringing unnecessary attention to it.

UNIT 8: THOUGHT BUBBLE

THOUGHT BUBBLE: PRACTICE ACTIVITIES

IMAGINARY CHARACTERS



MATERIALS

- Action figures, dolls, puppets or character toys
- Several copies of the large thought bubble, one with each child's name, one with your name
- Markers

SETUP

- Show the children the thought bubble and the ones with their names on it.
- Tell the children that you have to keep things in your thought bubble, too.
- Review how the thought bubble is used and how we will use it as we play.
- Place toys in front of the children.



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ACTIVITY

- Sit within the play area and allow the children to play with the toys, giving little direction.
- Model talking and playing at the same time.
- Talk for the character by changing your voice to a different pitch while moving the character.
- Create an opportunity to use the thought bubble by imitating something you have seen the child do. For example, if the child frequently says, "You are not my friend," say it as if it is coming from the character.
- Immediately react by saying, "Oops! That goes in my thought bubble. It is something I keep in my head but do not say with my mouth." Use visual cues with this statement by pointing to your head and then to your mouth.
- Continue modeling what goes in the thought bubble, making sure to write the words or draw a related picture every time it occurs.
- Continue playing with the child, looking for opportunities to help the child learn what to put in his thought bubble.
- When the play activity ends, give the children their thought bubbles that include the words that they have used. Based on the child's level of understanding and attention, review what was said and why some things are not said aloud.

The goal of this activity is to teach the child to refrain from saying offensive and inappropriate things. Practice this exercise with different toys, different peers, and in a variety of locations. Give the child an opportunity to play with a variety of children, especially ones with whom conflict frequently occurs. The best way to shape the behavior is to "catch them in the moment" and provide strategies for a better outcome.

UNIT 8: THOUGHT BUBBLE

TAKING IT HOME AND TO THE COMMUNITY

Day-to-day use of the thought bubble

Using the small thought-bubble cards from the Appendix is a subtle way to remind children to filter what they are saying when they are in the community, at home with friends or in school. For older children, it may be more appropriate to develop a signal or gesture as a reminder to use their thought bubble.

You can also use the cards in the community in the following ways:

- Copy and laminate the thought-bubble cards found in the Appendix of this workbook.
- Review the purpose of the cards with the child as in the self-monitoring practice activity.
- If you are a teacher, try quietly dropping a card on the desk of a child who is speaking out of turn or too much.
- In a community setting, the cards can be given subtly to a child as a nonverbal cue.

Using strategies to help children remember to use the thought bubble may also be effective, such as:

- Help children develop a simple gesture that will remind them to use their thought bubbles.
- Ask for ways to say “thought bubble” with our hands and without using words.
- Once a gesture is developed, try initially pairing the gesture with a verbal cue and eventually move to the gesture alone when the child is comfortable with the cue. Gestures can be as simple as touching yo



THE CONCEPT

What is a talk balloon?

The talk balloon is a verbal strategy to help children realize how much to say when holding a conversation. It helps children monitor when to speak during a conversation and how to be neither too brief nor too talkative. Like the thought bubble, the talk-balloon concept is also used in cartoons, with the graphic used to illustrate what a character is saying. In this program, we use the concept to indicate when it is an individual's turn to talk and how much verbal information is appropriately shared within that turn. Examples of the use of the talk balloon are demonstrated in the accompanying DVD.

Why is the concept of the talk balloon important?

It is natural for a person to self monitor their volume, rate, intonation, articulation, sentence structure, content and turn-taking during conversation (Williamson & Dorman 2002). These factors change based on the conversational partner. When an adult speaks to a child, the sentence

THE RECIPROCAL EXCHANGE OF STATEMENTS, QUESTIONS, AND RESPONSES MAKES A CONVERSATION COMFORTABLE AND ENJOYABLE.

structure is simple, rate reduces, and intonation increases. When an adult speaks professionally to another adult, the articulation becomes more precise, the sentence structure more complex, and

the amount of intonation is decreased. These features vary based on the environment in which the conversation occurs, as well. When talking in the library, vocal volume is low; however, while speaking on a school playground, volume is increased. Rate also changes based on the event, with a slower rate usually used for a serious event like a professional meeting and a faster rate for a fun event like being at a party or amusement park.

During conversation we learn about other people by giving them a chance to share their feelings, thoughts, and ideas. Two primary features of conversation covered in this unit are speaking in turn and the amount of content shared. Speaking in turn is the natural, reciprocal exchange of verbal information in a conversation that includes comments, questions, and responses. Many of us can talk about a favorite topic much longer than we actually do; however, we limit how much is said to keep the flow of conversation smooth and even. When children have difficulty self-monitoring speaking in turn, it is called interrupting. Difficulty self-monitoring the amount of information to share is perceived as dominating the conversation.

Although the other features, including volume, rate, intonation, articulation, and sentence structure, are essential parts of conversation, speaking in turn and amount of content shared are two of the most noticeable.

The talk balloon is a good way to pass a turn to someone else and not fill the balloon so full that it 'pops.' Since a conversation is shared thoughts and ideas, all participants share an equal amount of time to talk without intruding into someone else's communication time. The reciprocal exchange of statements, questions, and responses makes a conversation comfortable and enjoyable. Sharing a thought or idea when it is the appropriate time within the conversation results from internalizing the use of the talk balloon.

UNIT 9: TALK BALLOON

What kinds of difficulties are associated with inadequate self-monitoring during conversations?

Typical peer conversations allow for reciprocal verbal exchanges. Conversation is a process of imitating and maintaining social communication. When children dominate or say too much or too little, their peers tend to lose interest and communication may breakdown. (Prizant, Wetherby & Rydell in Wetherby & Pizant, 2000)

A variety of difficulties is associated with inadequate self-monitoring during conversation, including:

- Thinking so hard about what to say that it is difficult to listen to another person
- Interrupting others
- Difficulty inhibiting thoughts that come to mind, even when unrelated to the topic
- Poor understanding that the other person is not as interested in a topic of personal interest
- Limited awareness of time, leading to talking for extended periods without allowing the conversational partner to respond
- Lack of ability reading nonverbal cues from the conversational partner
- Difficulty understanding that conversation is reciprocal
- Tending to talk in a monologue instead of a dialogue

Conversation is a complex motor-planning skill that requires multi-tasking. The speaker must attempt to not only self-monitor the features of language but must also be aware of nonverbal information communicated through gestures and body language.

Social consequences of inadequate self-monitoring during conversations

People who speak out of turn and say too much during a conversation are likely to have difficulties forming relationships. When children cannot balance the amount they speak with the amount they listen during a conversation, they may encounter difficulties maintaining relationships. When children say too much or talk for too long, they may be perceived as overwhelming, demanding, and self-centered.

Children who are talking when it is someone else's turn may be perceived as rude, disinterested, and impulsive. Although it is natural for children to interrupt others and talk too long on a specific topic, as they grow and develop skills they are expected to increase their self-monitoring skills.

Many children with social-skill challenges are not able to read what the listener's body language is saying and will continue to talk, unaware of offending someone. When the conversation is not enjoyable for everyone participating, it will not continue. When children are confused by the reaction they are causing, they may increase their rate and volume to maintain the interaction, inadvertently making matters worse. In these cases, children can benefit from strategies that will help them self-monitor how much they are saying and when they are saying it.

TEACHING THE CONCEPT OF A TALK BALLOON

Children will most likely be able to relate to a talk balloon like they did with the thought bubble: by showing them a cartoon strip. The visual representation of comments, questions and responses may be familiar from the comics. This is a good way to show that others have the same amount of time to talk in a conversation. The Tools section of this workbook includes an illustration of a talk balloon and the accompanying DVD demonstrates how to teach this concept.

Start by helping the child *understand the concept of a talk balloon:*

- A talk balloon is something we use to take turns when talking.
- The talk balloon goes back and forth between the people who are in the conversation.
- The talk balloon can hold a comment, question, or response to a question.

Once the child understands the concept of a talk balloon, present some *rules about the talk balloon:*

- Everyone in the conversation gets to use the talk balloon.
- Everyone takes about the same number of turns. This is called turn-taking.
- If more than one person is talking at the same time, the talk balloon pops.
- The talk balloon can hold a comment, question, or an answer to someone's question. If someone says too much, the talk balloon will pop.

See Appendix A for more information on developing the ability to sustain a conversation.

UNIT 9: TALK BALLOON

INTRODUCTORY LESSON

Use this instructional session to reinforce the concept and rules of using a talk balloon.

MATERIALS

- Several copies of large talk balloon (see Appendix B)
- Markers
- Comic strips that show a conversation between two people

SETUP

- Make several copies of the large talk balloon

ACTIVITY

- Explain the talk balloon. Simplify the language if needed, e.g., "We are going to learn about the talk balloon." Show handout.
- Point to the inside of the balloon. "This is a place that holds the words that you say with your mouth."
- Ask the group "What do you think would happen if we all talked at once?"
- Reinforce their responses with "It would 'pop' just like a balloon." Emphasize the word 'pop' by saying it louder.
- Encourage using the talk balloon: "Let's practice taking turns talking. That's what people do in a conversation. We are going to use this balloon (point to talk balloon) to remind us to take turns talking. Whoever has the talk balloon is the speaker."
- Pass the talk balloon around the circle, giving each child the same number of turns.
- Start the conversation by asking a question.
- Lead the conversation with a common topic, like a new movie or fun place to go.
- Reinforce good turn-taking with positive comments and high-fives.





FACILITATOR CHECKLIST: TALK BALLOON

Use the following questions to individualize the concept of the talk balloon for each child in the group.

- ◆ Does the child know how to take turns with toys?
- ◆ Can the child identify when it is someone else's turn to talk?
- ◆ Does the child say too much?
- ◆ Do peers avoid conversations with the child?
- ◆ Can this child understand the concept of talking too much?
- ◆ Does the child need additional practice?
- ◆ Are there opportunities for the child to practice throughout the day? Where? When? With whom?

UNIT 9: TALK BALLOON

TALK BALLOON: PRACTICE ACTIVITIES

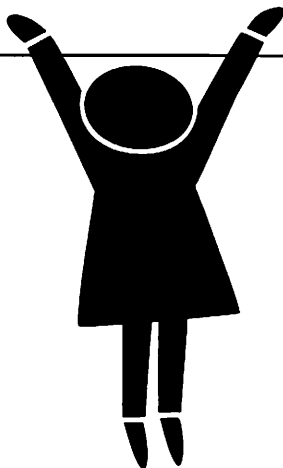
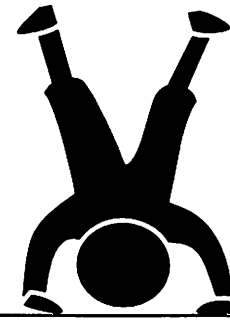
PASS THE TALK BALLOON

MATERIALS

- Several copies of large talk balloon
- Markers
- Small arrows taped to the floor to show the direction in which the talk balloon is to be passed. This is helpful in keeping the conversation flowing.

SETUP

- Gather two or three children who are familiar with the concept of the talk balloon.
- Show the children the talk balloon.
- Tell the children that there is only one balloon because only one person talks at a time.
- Tell the children that when they have the talk balloon, it is their turn. When it is their turn, they share a comment about the topic. When they are done sharing a comment, they pass it to the person next to them. Allow the children to choose a topic and help them start a conversation on that topic if needed.



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ACTIVITY

- Step approximately three feet away from the children and allow the conversation to develop. Give ample wait time to allow a child to respond. You may need to give the child a fill-in-the-blank sentence to help the child generate a response. For example, whisper, "The movie I like the best is _____" and then step away to encourage independence.
- Look for opportunities to reinforce the child for taking turns and sharing an appropriate amount of information.
- If a child speaks out of turn, put a positive spin on it. Praise the child who is holding the talk balloon. You may say, "Nice job taking your turn when you have the talk balloon in your hand. That is good turn taking"
- If the children continue to talk when it is not their turn, bend to their level and quietly ask, "Do you have the talk balloon in your hand?" Confirm it is the other child's turn and that everyone will get a turn soon.
- Reinforce the importance of staying seated and waiting for others to take their turn.
- If the child is saying too much on his turn, point to the talk balloon and say, "You can say one more sentence and then the talk balloon will be filled. Remember that it will pop if it gets too full and the conversation will be over."
- Continue to provide positive and playful feedback to reinforce use of the talk-balloon concept. If the child has difficulty self-monitoring, the adult provides feedback so the child can modify his or her behavior.
- Allow the interaction and conversation to flow as long as the children are interested and successful.
- At the end of the conversation, reinforce their efforts with positive statements about what they did correctly, including how they modified their behavior. For example, "You did great sharing of information without making the talk balloon pop."

UNIT 9: TALK BALLOON

TALK BALLOON: PRACTICE ACTIVITIES

SELF-MONITORING WITH THE TALK BALLOON



Materials

- Talk balloon cards (See Appendix B)
- Dry-erase board and markers

Setup

- Copy and cut out the talk-balloon cards.

Activity

- Review the concept of using a talk balloon.
- Ask the child to identify some things that go into the talk balloon.
- Using the dry-erase board to write information, identify how the child has successfully used the talk balloon.
- Using the dry-erase board, write down the situations in which the child needs practice using the talk balloon.
- Tell the child, "You need to think about how much you are going to say and when you are saying it."
- Instruct the person who will be with the child to quietly and subtly pass a talk balloon card when appropriate for the child to use it. Remember that it is important to "catch the child in the moment" to shape the behavior. Try to provide the cue as quickly as possible so the child knows what he or she is saying is inappropriate.

Like the thought-bubble cards, the talk balloon cards work well for teachers in the classroom. It can be effective to walk by and nonchalantly place one on the desk of a child who is interrupting, speaking out of turn, or making inappropriate comments. The cards help alert children about what they are doing without bringing negative attention to it.



**REAL-
WORLD
STRATEGIES**

TAKING IT HOME AND TO THE COMMUNITY

Use of the thought bubble in daily life

Using the talk-balloon cards from the Tools section is a subtle way to remind children to filter what they are saying when they are in the community, at home with friends, or in school. For an older child, it may be more appropriate to develop, with the child, a signal or gesture to remind the child to use his or her talk balloon.

Try using cards at home and in the community in the following ways:

- Copy and laminate the talk-balloon cards found in the Tools section of the workbook.
- Review the purpose of the cards with the child as in the Self-Monitoring practice activity.
- Teachers can quietly drop the card on the desk of a child who is speaking out of turn or talking too much during a turn.
- In a community setting, these cards can be subtly passed.

The following strategies can also be used at home and in the community:

- Discuss the importance of the talk balloon with the child.
- Help children develop a simple gesture that will remind them to use their talk balloons.
- Once a gesture is developed, try initially pairing it with a verbal cue and eventually move to just a gesture when the child is comfortable with the cue. Gestures can be as simple as touching your head.

**THE
CONCEPT**

What is the topic circle?

The topic circle is a tool to help children remember what is being discussed and decide which related subjects are appropriate during a specific conversation. The topic circle helps children stay on topic and monitor themselves in a conversation.

Why is the topic circle important?

Conversation, for children who are old enough and skilled enough to speak, is the primary form of communicating and exchanging ideas and meanings with other children and adults (Twachtman-Cullen, in Wetherby & Prizant, 2000).

The topic circle allows children to be part of the conversation by talking about the same thing as the other participants. There are a few key components to a good conversation. They include speaking in turn, non-verbal communication, and staying on topic. For a casual conversation, speaking in turn refers to each person alternating turns in a conversation, both listening and speaking equally. Non-verbal communication (such as body talk presented in Unit 3) is an important aspect of dynamic and mutual conversation, conveying interest, caring, and understanding.

STAYING ON TOPIC IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTORS FOR SUSTAINING AN INTERACTION.

Topic maintenance or talking about the same subject allows children to share ideas about a subject of mutual interest and to learn about each other's ideas. It is one of the most important factors for sustaining an interaction. Being able to participate in a conversation is the foundation to building and sustaining increasingly complex relationships, especially as children reach adolescence at the middle- and high-school levels.

Problems that underlie difficulties staying on topic

A variety of issues underlie a child's inability to remain on topic during conversations, including:

- Poor receptive language or auditory processing skills that interfere with a child's ability to understand the topic under discussion
- Poor expressive language skills that limit a child's ability to plan and express ideas verbally
- Poor attention span or impulsivity that leads a child to jump from one topic to another
- Difficulty reading social cues that help a child to understand the flow of the conversation

Social consequences of talking off topic

Children may switch topics merely because they do not know how to stay involved in the subject of the conversation. If they cannot talk about things that others are talking about they may be misunderstood and will find positive social interactions challenging. They may be misperceived as rude, bored, or selfish. These children may talk about what is on their minds, shifting to a recent experience (a movie or birthday party), something they know a lot about (trains, airplanes, DVD games), or something that just comes to mind (something occurring in his environment, like a bird flying by) rather than pursuing a common topic. Other children may feel these children are not interested in playing or engaging with them.

UNIT 10: THE TOPIC CIRCLE

TEACHING THE CONCEPT OF THE TOPIC CIRCLE

The topic circle uses the support of visual information to help children refer to the topic at hand. It is helpful to record the children's comments to remind them of what was already said. This prevents them from repeating the same information about the topic.

Start by explaining the *concept of the topic circle*:

- A topic circle helps us talk about a similar area of interest so we can have conversations.
- Having conversations on the same topic helps us make and keep friends.
- When we talk about things not in the topic circle, the conversation is likely to stop.
- If we think about something off topic we will want to get that thought far away. We can use the idea of a space shuttle to take that idea away from the conversation and out of our head.

Once the child understands the concept of the topic circle, present some *rules about the topic circle*:

- When participating in a conversation, listen to what is said so you can figure out the topic.
- Before you join in, ask yourself if what you want to say is on topic.
- While you are waiting for your turn to talk, put what you want to say in your thought bubble.

See Appendix A for more information on developing the ability to stay on topic, including attention and visual and auditory processing.

QUICK TIPS

- ◆ Use a dry-erase marker and laminated topic circle to remind children of the group's focus in the conversation.
- ◆ Take time to learn about popular, age-appropriate toys, television shows, and movies. It will help when choosing common topics.
- ◆ Have the children sit on pillows or carpet squares to define their personal space.
- ◆ Keep the tone of your voice positive and fun.
- ◆ Watch and wait before prompting the children. Give them time to get started and sort out their own ideas before providing cues.
- ◆ Help the children begin the conversation only when it is apparent that prompting is needed.



FACILITATOR CHECKLIST: TOPIC CIRCLE

Consider the following questions when observing the child's conversational skills

- ◆ What is the child's language level?
- ◆ Is he ready to communicate at a basic conversational level?
- ◆ Is he motivated to communicate verbally with others?
- ◆ Does the child do better with pictures or words?
- ◆ Does he demonstrate the understanding of turn-taking?
- ◆ Has he been introduced to other verbal strategies?
 - Thought Bubble?
 - Talk Balloon?
- ◆ Are there opportunities for this child to practice throughout his day?
 - Where?
 - When?
 - With whom?

UNIT 10: THE TOPIC CIRCLE

INTRODUCTORY LESSON

MATERIALS

- Dry-erase board and markers
- Three or four pre-cut space shuttles (see Appendix B)

SETUP

- Seat the children in a circle with the dry-erase board in the middle
- Draw a circle on the dry-erase board



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ACTIVITY

- Tell the children, "We are going to have a conversation. A conversation is when two or more people talk to share ideas."
- "When we are in a conversation, we take turns talking, just like taking turns when we play a game. We also must stay on topic. We can only talk about what is in this circle."
- Choose a common topic to write in the circle. For non-readers, use a photo, a magazine ad, or draw a picture.
- Point to the inside of the circle and say, "Let's talk about _____." Name a child to start.
- Give each child a turn to say a related phrase. Reinforce the child by drawing a line from the topic circle and writing the word or phrase at the line.
- Show some acknowledgment by nodding your head, smiling, or making a positive comment. We want to increase the amount of time the child is on topic and providing positive feedback helps them know they are on the right track.
- When a child is off topic, quickly jot the word or phrase in the space shuttle. Bring it to the child's attention in a fun and positive way. You may say, "_____ is not from the topic circle. _____ is too far out and needs to go away. Bye-bye, _____."
- Encourage the child to say something related to the topic. Provide hints if necessary so the child can feel success.
- Give every child at least two turns to talk about the topic.
- Keep the initial introduction of the topic circle simple. Add time and complexity as the child becomes more proficient.

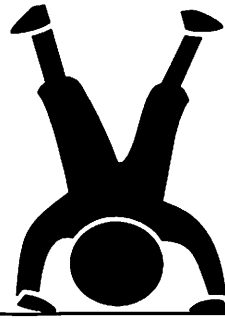
Common topics for the topic circle are:

- | | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| • Movies | • Popular toys |
| • Television shows or cartoons | • School |
| • Recent event shared by participants
(a party, trick-or-treating, a trip etc.) | • Favorite places to go |
| | • Favorite places to eat |

UNIT 10: THE TOPIC CIRCLE

TOPIC CIRCLE: PRACTICE ACTIVITIES

SPACE SHUTTLE



MATERIALS

- Topic circle (see Appendix B)
- Three or four pre-cut space shuttles (see Appendix B)

SETUP

- Place the children in a circle.

ACTIVITY

- Say, "You are going to have a conversation. Remember that you need to talk about what is in the topic circle. Try to stay away from the space shuttles."
- Ask the children for conversation ideas. Pick a topic everyone can talk about.
- Write the topic in the circle and place the circle in the center of the children.
- Say, "Okay, you can go ahead and have a conversation about _____."
- Stay present, but wait. Give the children a little time to organize their thoughts. If the conversation does not start within a short time, help it along by asking a specific child to begin, or you can start it by making a related statement.
- Walk away from the conversation and allow it to happen naturally. It is recommended that you be at least 10 feet away and look occupied with another task.
- During the conversation, listen for turn-taking and topic maintenance. Think of ways you can reinforce the children after the activity is completed.
- If the conversation stops before completion, jump-start it by making a suggestion or comment, then walk away again. We are working on independence and the less the children depend on you, the better.
- When the conversation ends, briefly review what you heard.
- Provide comments to make the children feel positive about the conversation. You can say things like, "I like the way you said _____," "I like the way you stayed on topic," "When you said something that was too far out, you came back to topic. Great job!"



TOPIC CIRCLE: PRACTICE ACTIVITIES

CHANGING TOPICS

MATERIALS

- Large piece of butcher paper (3–4 feet long)
- Markers

SETUP

- Place the children in a circle around the butcher paper

ACTIVITY

- Ask the children to decide on a topic together.
- Write the topic on the butcher paper and circle the word or phrase, emphasizing that they will be talking only about this subject.
- Encourage the children to discuss the topic with as little adult assistance as needed, suggesting that everyone contribute at least one comment on the topic.
- After all the children have contributed to the conversation, the facilitating adult should listen for a new topic that is related to the original topic. (For example, if the group decides to discuss places they have gone for vacation, the conversation may naturally transition to flying on airplanes.)
- If a new and related topic is brought up by a child, the adult should write the new topic on the butcher paper near the original topic, circle it, and draw a line from the original topic to the new topic.
- If the children do not bring up a different topic, then the adult should ask a leading question to generate a new topic. (For example, the leader might ask one of the children, "When you went to Florida, how did you get there?")
- Reinforce that the new topic came from the first topic and that when friends run out of things to say about one topic, they often move on to another topic that is related to their original conversation.
- At the end of the activity, remember to compliment the children for staying on topic before moving on to another, related topic.

UNIT 10: THE TOPIC CIRCLE

TAKING IT HOME AND TO THE COMMUNITY

Generalizing use of the topic circle in daily life

It is often helpful to discuss and plan for an upcoming event such as having a friend over to play. To maximize the child's opportunity for a fun experience, review topics of mutual interest. If the child is meeting an unfamiliar relative or friend, pertinent conversation might revolve around photographs organized in a small album showing them in a variety of activities.

Family meal times are great opportunities for facilitating conversation and reinforcing the idea of a topic circle. Consider strategies such as:

- Suggest that the family get together and for conversation time during dinner.
- Ask family members to come to the table with ideas for topics of conversation.
- Following these suggestions, choose a topic and write it in the middle of the circle. Topics may be a recent family event, a family vacation, or holiday.
- Have the circle in the center of the table, visible to everyone.
- Limit environmental distracters. Turn the television off!
- Ask someone to start the conversation by making a statement or by asking a question related to the topic.
- Give family members the opportunity to answer.
- Use yourself as the facilitator, by:
 - Asking a question to keep the conversation going (e.g., "What did you like best about that vacation?")
 - Prompting for turns (e.g., "You probably have something to add to that.")
 - Providing wait time and visual prompts (e.g., looking at family members with a friendly and interested look without saying anything)

- If needed, use the index cards to draw on or write down key words or phrases that could trigger additional conversation. For example, if the topic is a family vacation like camping, you could write "fishing hole," "eating smores," or "hiking on the trail." Lay the cards out on the table next to the circle. Let family members know that these cards might help them keep the conversation going.
- All conversations naturally end. If the topic has been discussed for at least 10 minutes and all family members have had three or four turns, it may be an appropriate time to end the conversation. You can say, "That was a great conversation about the _____. Let's choose another topic to discuss."
- Allow the flow of conversation to proceed, prompting only when needed.

Start a topic board by leaving a piece of paper and pen attached to a clipboard near the dining room table. Encourage family members to jot down topic ideas when they think of them and take turns choosing a different topic for mealtime conversation.

