

Skill 13 Understanding and Communicating Wait

What does understanding and communicating wait mean?

Waiting is a necessary part of life. Sometimes, we need others to wait on us. This might include situations where:

- We need extra time to think or process information
- We need extra time to complete a school / work task or chore
- We need extra time for leisure and recreation

We might communicate this need by:

- Holding up a hand as if to say stop
- Holding up a finger as if to say just a second
- “Wait, I need a second!”
- “Hold up!”
- “Let me think!”

At other times, we need to wait on others. This can include a wide range of activities such as:

- Waiting in line
- Waiting our turn
- Waiting for something to be completed
- Waiting for someone or something to arrive

We might communicate our impatience or needs during these situations by:

- Sighing heavily
- Placing our hands on our hips and tapping our feet
- Tapping a finger on a table quickly
- “Who is going next?”
- “What is taking so long?”
- “Why isn’t this ready yet?”
- “When will this get here?”

Why is this skill important to teach?

Imagine how frustrating life would be if you didn’t understand the concept of waiting. On one hand, you might feel as if something would never occur! For example, if you were waiting on a pizza to be

made, it might feel as if you will never get to eat! On the other hand, think about how rushed you might feel if you couldn't communicate, "Hold on, I need a second!" Your daily emotions could run from impatience to frustration if you didn't understand waiting and turn-taking or couldn't communicate, "I need a second!"

Why is this skill difficult for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)?

Due to the characteristics of ASD, some children may have trouble with understanding waiting or communicating wait. Some children with ASD have difficulty with receptive communication, or understanding what is being said. If you didn't understand what 5 minutes means, waiting for your favorite snack might feel like it will never happen! Some children with ASD can struggle with expressive communication, or the ability to use verbal language and nonverbal communication such as body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice. This child might struggle to say stop, hold on, or wait a second and will experience significant frustration if not provided with an alternative form of communication to communicate. Other children with ASD can speak quite clearly and have large vocabularies, but struggle greatly with both social skills and executive functioning skills. Executive functioning skills are all those processes which help us to learn including attending, planning, organizing, making choices, making decisions, setting goals, and problem solving. This child might struggle with anticipating what happens next, time management (how long is too long), delayed gratification, and impulse control all of which can make waiting very difficult!

What are some considerations for teaching this skill?

Waiting is a difficult skill to teach because of the challenges with receptive communication, expressive communication, and executive functioning. After all, time is an abstract concept and can mean very little to some children. As an adult, you may know that something won't take that long but children with ASD may not have that same knowledge or experience. But there are some things we can do to help make time more concrete including:

- Using a visual timer that shows a child what 5 minutes looks like. This can include a kitchen timer, a countdown clock, or any visual timer that shows how much time is left including an hourglass.
- Using a First / Then schedule that shows a child first we'll go outside to play and then we'll go inside and have a snack can help a child understand the order of what happens next.
- A visual schedule is longer and shows what happens throughout the day and throughout the week.
- A token board can help a child who is working hard on a skill but not provided immediate reinforcement such as access to a preferred item like an iPad. In this situation, the child must work for longer periods of time or complete multiple activities before earning access to the iPad. However, this is something that is gradually introduced and a child with ASD cannot go from immediately having an access to having to wait for an entire week.

What materials will I need?

Families might need the following for teaching a child how to ask information:

- Social narrative, or short story, that tells a child with ASD what to do, how to do it, and why it is important. A social narrative about waiting would include different examples of when a child has to wait for something and different examples of when they need others to wait on them. A social narrative should also include how to handle feelings such as impatience and frustration.
- A visual timer to help make time a more concrete concept for the child. This can include a kitchen timer, a timer app, or even an hourglass!
- A token board for children who are learning to wait for longer stretches of time for access to a motivating item such as a favorite toy, activity, game, or food
- Games for turn-taking
- White board
- Markers
- Pre-printed visual supports to include cue cards or sentence strips
- Choice board with a variety of options to use during a conversation such as My turn, Stop!, Can I have 1 minute, etc...
- For Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) users, be sure the child has access to the vocabulary needed to participate including sign language, picture exchange items, or a communication device that is programmed with the appropriate pictures and words.

Activity #1 Turn Taking

- Turn-taking is a great way to introduce waiting. Turn-taking can be short such as when playing a game between two players or can be longer when playing a video game but sharing the same controller.
- You can start by reading a social narrative together about turn taking.
- Next, choose a game that the child enjoys and will be motivated to play and take turns. For a very young child, this might be as simple as taking turns pushing a car down a racing ramp. For an older child, this might be a game like Connect 4 or even Uno. When just starting out, use a game that has a very short time between turns or with only two players to keep the turns moving quickly. Let's take Connect 4 as our example.
- When getting all the supplies out for Connect 4, keep all the chips on your side (perhaps just under the table or on your lap).
- Start the game by holding up your red chip and saying, "My turn."
- Quickly place the chip in the slot.
- Now hold out a black chip in front of the child.
- If the child takes the chip and places it in the slot, quickly bring your chip out and do the same.
- If the child does not respond, move the chip closer to the child.
- If the child responds, move quickly to your turn.

- If the child does not respond, you can:
 - Say, “Your turn!”
 - Tap on the chip
- When the child responds, quickly move to your turn.
- To create more advanced variations of this, move to a game like Uno but start with 3 players. To support a child’s understanding of waiting their turn, you can use an hourglass timer to show them how long each person has during their turn. When the child succeeds at taking turns with 3 players, move up to 4 or 5 players so you can increase the wait time. While using other games that take much longer in between turns, you may also want to incorporate a ‘Wait’ card. You can create a visual support for this with red paper that has the word WAIT on it that can be used in conjunction with the timer.

Activity #2 Using a First / Then Visual Support

- A First/Then visual support is way of helping children understand that first they must complete something and then they can have access to something they want. This helps motivate a child to a task they may not enjoy because it is quickly followed by getting to do something they enjoy. For example, if a child wants to play on an iPad but also has to pick up their toys, a caregiver can use a First/Then visual support to say, “First, clean up. Then, you can play.” By the nature of the activity, the child is learning to wait for the activity they enjoy.
- First / Then visual supports can be used throughout the day with regular activities such as getting dressed and then going to out to play.
- Make a list of activities that your child does not enjoy that much such as cleaning up, getting dressed, or taking the trash out.
- Then make a list of activities that your child does really enjoy such as playing with a video game, watching TV, or playing outside.
- Then pair up these different activities in ways that make sense for your family and are motivating for the child. For example, if your family routine is to get dressed and watch a little TV in the morning, make sure the child FIRST must get dressed and THEN turn on the TV.
- You’ll want to include some type of representation with your First / Then rather than just saying the words out loud or writing the words on a piece of paper. This means that you’ll either need the actual object involved in the First / Then such as shoes and then a toy that is played with outside, a photograph of these two objects, or an illustration or drawing of shoes and outside. It depends on your child’s level of understanding. Just remember that the actual object is the most concrete representation and the illustration or drawing is the most abstract. Using both the words and the visual representation helps the child process and understand what is being said.
- When making a First / Then support, the First activity is on the left side of the paper and the Then activity is the on the right side.
- Once you have a First/Then visual support ready, show the child the visual support, and say, “First, wash your hands and THEN we’ll eat a snack.”
- Take the child to the sink and point to the First side of the visual support before beginning.

- Because handwashing may not be a preferred activity and may seem like a long time for a child, you can use a kitchen timer or any countdown clock to show them how long to wash.
- When the child is done, show the child the visual support, point to the Then side and say, “Now we can eat a snack!”
- Be sure that you choose a snack the child really enjoys as a way to motivate them through this activity.
- Also, remember that using a First/Then support is a promise. Immediately follow through with what you have promised in the Then section every single time!

Activity #3 Waiting Longer Stretches

- Sometimes we need to wait longer for the things we want and need. A child with ASD will require support as they learn this skill. This builds on the skill the child has learned from the First / Then visual support by increasing the time between what they are required to do and access to the item they prefer. For example, rather than cleaning up and then immediately going out to play, a child might be working on completing two or three tasks before going outside. Or a child may be ready to complete a chore every day for a week before earning something bigger such as buying a game or going to a movie. In order to support a child as they learn this skill, you may need to create:
 - A social narrative that explains what to do, how to do it, and why it is important
 - A visual schedule that shows all the things that will happen throughout the day including chores and access to a video game or one that shows the days of the week, the days the chore must be completed, and the day when the child will receive the item or activity they really enjoy
 - A token board which shows the child they have earned a token each time they complete the chore or activity and when they have the required amount, then they receive access to the item or activity.
- Start by reading the social narrative to the child about the chore that needs completed and include how to complete the chore, how often to complete the chore, how the child will earn a token or check mark every time the chore is completed, and what item or activity the child earns at the end of the day or week.
- Next, show the child the visual schedule that demonstrates what will happen throughout the day or week.
- Once the child completes the first activity for the day or week, give the child a token they can put on a board (use velcro to make it stick) or provide the child with a checkmark that shows they completed the activity.
- When the child completes the last activity for the day or week, provide the child with access to the motivating item or activity that they prefer.
- Remember, start small. This may be something that starts with just an hour or two in a child’s morning and then later moves to earning access to a toy or item at the end of the day. As the child learns the skill, you can push the waiting time out for a day or two and finally to a week. Also, make sure the item that the child is working for is motivating enough. The same item that a child waits an hour for may not be motivating enough to stretch out over a week. The longer the wait, the greater the reward!

Activity #4 Communicating Wait

- As a child understands the concept of waiting, they will also want to communicate, “Wait! I need more time!” to others. This might be something as simple as needing more time to tie their shoes when a caregiver is saying, “Hurry up or we’ll be late!” Or, it might be as complicated as saying, “Wait, let me figure this out on my own” while working on homework together.
- In order to teach this skill, you may need to create:
 - A social narrative explaining different situations when a person needs more time (such as more time to tie my shoes, to finish dinner, or to play a video game). Be sure to include how to ask for more time such as holding up a finger as if to say one more minute or the words, “Wait! I need more time!” You can also include different ways to say wait when in different situations. For example, if I’m with my friends, I might say, “Yo, hold up!” But when I’m with my co-workers, I would say, “I’m sorry, I just need another minute.”
 - A visual support in the form of a wait card. This can be a red piece of paper in the shape of a playing card with the word WAIT on it.
- Find a time during the day when you are not in a hurry to do something else or go somewhere.
- Choose an activity that has multiple steps such as making cookies. Include a sibling or another caregiver into this activity.
- Hand over the ingredients to the sibling or caregiver and the child. The sibling or caregiver can help start the process of combining all the ingredients.
- When it comes time to stir the dough, hand the bowl to the child. After just a few seconds of stirring, ask, “Are you done yet?”
- Wait to see if the child responds.
- If the child responds with some variation of, “Wait a minute!” then wait patiently.
- If the child does not respond, the sibling or other caregiver can push the WAIT card close to the child.
- If the child responds with some variation of “Wait a minute!” then wait patiently for the child to finish stirring.
- If the child does not respond, the sibling or other caregiver can tap on the WAIT card and can model saying some variation of “Wait a minute!”
- You can do try this with other routines such as eating breakfast, getting ready for school, or finishing a chore. Remember to be patient in these types of activities. The child is likely engaged in the activity and may also be concentrating on using fine or gross motor skills and need to balance doing and thinking and communicating all at once.
- Be sure to model telling others to wait and that you need more time in different ways throughout the day!

Social Skill Extension Activity:

- Waiting and communicating to others to wait are skills that also include nonverbal communication. Nonverbal communication includes body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice. When we are waiting on something or on other people, we can express impatience in a variety of ways without saying a single word! If I'm in a hurry and waiting on something I really want or need, I might sigh loudly, cross my arms, and tap my foot quickly. If someone is rushing me and I'm not ready yet, I might scrunch up my eyebrows and reply with a terse, "Give me a second!" All of these things can make interactions with others a bit tricky. After all, my loud sigh and crossed arms can make someone else frustrated or my terse, "Give me a second!" might start an argument. Some children with ASD may not always use the right body language, facial expression, and tone of voice for the right situation. In this case, it will be important to practice different ways to handle waiting and different ways to communicate, "Hold on, I need a second."
- Start this activity by reviewing different facial expressions and body language.
- Identify and review ones that are angry, frustrated, and irritated. Discuss different details such as how the eyebrows look, if the person is puckering their lips, hands in a fist, or hands on the hips.
- Practice different ways to make these facial expressions and use body language.
- Now role-play different scenarios where one person has to wait on something they really want but the other person can't control how fast something happens. For example, role-play being in a long line at the grocery store.
- Practice different ways to handle impatience and frustration and making your body or facial expressions match the situation.
- Next, role-play different situations where one person is being rushed and practice different ways to say, "Just a minute!" After all, I can use a chipper voice to say "Just a minute!" or I can use a terse, irritated voice to say, "JUST A MINUTE!" Use this as a teachable moment to show the child that sometimes arguments can start just because of tone of voice!

Links to resources on our website!

- View Video - VCU Autism Center for Excellence -- https://vcuautismcenter.org/te/how_to/simpleVideo.cfm?video=27
- Autism Q&A: Providing Choices -- <https://vcuautismcenter.org/resources/factsheets/printView.cfm/1194>
- Autism Q&A: Introduction to Teaching Young Children with Autism -- <https://vcuautismcenter.org/resources/factsheets/printView.cfm/1077>
- Functions of Communication - VCU Autism Center for Excellence -- <https://vcuautismcenter.org/ta/vagoals/communication/...to.../functions.cfm>
- How To Video Series - VCU Autism Center for Excellence -- https://vcuautismcenter.org/te/how_to/
- Evidence-Based Practices - VCU Autism Center for Excellence -- <https://vcuautismcenter.org/te/topics/evidence.cfm>
- Communication - VCU Autism Center for Excellence -- <https://vcuautismcenter.org/resources/communication.cfm>



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