

Skill 1 Negation

What does negation mean?

Negation simply means to contradict or deny. In other words, negation is our ability to reject something or someone. We all use negation throughout our daily lives in some way. Some examples of negation include:

1. A child might use nonverbal communication to indicate no or stop by pushing an item or person away, shaking their head no to reject an item/activity/person, or even putting up their hands to indicate stop to something they do not like.
2. A child might say, “No,” in response to an item or activity being offered.
3. A child might use a denial such as, “I didn’t do it!” or “I’m not tired.”
4. A child might say, “Don’t touch my toy.”
5. A child might also say, “It’s not there.”

Why is this skill important to teach?

Being able to communicate any type of negation is a critical life skill. Think about all the times that you have used negation in your daily life. When a waiter comes to your table to refill your drink, you could simply say, “No, thank you” but you could also cover your glass with your hand while shaking your head no. Your boss might have asked if you completed a task yet and you might have replied, “I haven’t done that yet.” Or your child might have wanted to play with a special figurine and you might have said, “Don’t touch that, it’s not a toy.” Your spouse might have asked you if you had the car keys and you might have replied, “I don’t have the keys. I haven’t seen them.”

As you can see, some of the times we use negation are pretty simple, common, and daily occurrences in our lives. However, there are also other situations where using negation might be more critical and unique. For example, if you have to call 911, the emergency responders might ask you if you have taken any medication or if you have any life-threatening illnesses. At a hospital, you might need to say no or stop to a painful procedure.

There are also many other reasons why it is important to teach a child to communicate no or stop that have to do with consent and bodily autonomy. It is critical for a child to learn how to communicate no or stop when they feel uncomfortable or unsafe.

Being able to say NO or STOP is a skill that a child will use throughout their life and in many different situations and environments. It's important to understand that if a child does not have a way to communicate NO or STOP through verbal speech, sign language, or appropriate nonverbal communication, they will use interfering behavior. This might include screaming, kicking, pushing, biting, and more. A child might also use socially inappropriate means of communicating no or stop such as simply walking away from the item or activity. Or if a friend wanted to play with their toy, a child might grab the toy from their hands and run away. This might lead to difficulties with relationships with peers or even disrupting a classroom or group activity.

Why is negation difficult for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Negation is a type of social communication skill that includes understanding different concepts, understanding what others are saying or doing, and also knowing how and when and why to respond with different words and phrases. Think about all the skills that are used when someone asks you if you want an item or if you want to do something. There is a lot that goes into an interaction where something is offered and refused or a question is asked and then accepted or denied! Further, children also need to understand the social rules to politely declining or denying wrong information. These kinds of social communication skills can be very difficult for the child with ASD. Some children with ASD may have trouble with understanding what is being said and have difficulty labeling people, objects, or activities. Other children with ASD understand what is being said and know the names of things, but have difficulty interacting with others. Some children with ASD have a wide-ranging vocabulary yet struggle with the 'unwritten' rules of social interactions (such as knowing how to say no politely). All of these challenges can make understanding and using negation difficult!

What are some considerations for teaching negation?

Teaching negation will require a good understanding of your child's preferences. In other words, it will be important to know what items and experiences your child prefers and what items and activities your child definitely does NOT enjoy. Once you have a list of preferences and dislikes, families can set up different scenarios where a variety of items or activities that they know the child will not want will be offered. This allows your child to practice rejecting in different ways. An example might include presenting a snack that you know your child does not enjoy. The child can indicate no in different ways including shaking their head no, saying no, or using an Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) system such as sign language, picture exchange, or touching a button on a device that will speak for them. When the child indicates no, the caregiver can put away the item and offer a snack that is preferred.

Because learning to use negation is a complex skill, it will be important to remember that the child with ASD may need a lot of practice. It will also be important for the child to practice using negation in different environments with different people and practice with a wide variety of items, activities, and experiences.

What materials will I need?

Families might need the following items for teaching negation:

- Preferred and non-preferred items / activities / experiences / people
- White board
- Markers
- Pre-printed visual supports to include cue cards or sentence strips
- 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 Communicating No, I don't want that!

- For this activity, the child will have an opportunity to communicate, "No, I don't want that." Pick an activity that the child finds motivating but also allows the child to communicate preferences and dislikes. Some examples might include:
 - Playing with Play-Doh and the child has a preference for playing with blue over yellow Play-Doh.
 - Playing with toy cars and your child has a preference for the fire truck and does not like the van.
 - Playing with dolls and a dollhouse and your child likes one doll over another.
- Before starting, consider different appropriate ways to communicate no. Some appropriate ways to express negation in this activity might include:
 - Saying, "No" or No, not that one" or "No, I don't want that."
 - Using a more polite version such as, "No, thank you."
 - Simply shaking their head no
 - Pushing the item gently away while shaking their head no
 - Using an AAC system such as sign language, picture exchange, or a communication device to communicate
 - Using a combination of the above
- Now, tell your child "It's time for [fill in the blank with the activity you've chosen]."
- Let's use the example of playing with Play-Doh. Before you begin, tell your child you will be playing with different colors of Play-Doh. Tell them if they don't like a color, they can say, "No" [or No, thank you or No, I don't want that]. You can also model shaking your head no and / or gently pushing the Play-Doh away as well.
- If your child prefers blue Play-Doh, give them white first.
- Wait for the child's response.
- If the child uses an appropriate response, take away the white Play-Doh and then present them with a color they do prefer.

- If the child does not respond and does not appear to want the Play-Doh, model saying, “No” [or No, not that one, etc...]. You can also model shaking your head no and / or gently pushing the Play-Doh away.
- Wait for the child to respond.
- If the child does not respond, model saying No again and then present the child with a preferred color.
- Your child will need many, many opportunities to practice saying No when presented with an item they do not prefer. Be patient!
- Another option can be to use a visual support that says NO on it. This can be a piece of paper with No and a NO symbol on it, a small white board with the word NO written on it, or cue cards that have yes and no on them. Present the less preferred color and wait. If the child does not respond, prompt the child by pointing to the visual support you are using. Wait for the child to respond. Model pointing to the picture while saying No and shaking your head or gently pushing the item away.

Activity #2 Communicating STOP!

- For this activity, the child will get a chance to practice communicating, “STOP!” This activity includes starting a video / show / movie that you know the child does not prefer. An example of this might include starting a Sesame Street video when you know the child does not like the show and prefers another option such as Clifford the Big Red Dog.
- Utilize a time when the child typically sits down to watch a video. Pick out an option that is NOT your child’s favorite but have your child’s favorite handy / nearby.
- Tell your child, “Time to watch a video!” Before turning the show / movie on, tell your child, “If you don’t like this show, you can say stop!”
- Turn on the video that you know your child does NOT like.
- Wait at least 5 seconds for the child to respond.
- If the child says, “STOP!” immediately stop the video and start their preferred show.
- If the child does not respond and does not appear to enjoy the video, model saying, “Stop!” or pointing to a visual support of a STOP sign, or model using an AAC system such as sign language, picture exchange, or a communication device to communicate STOP.
- Wait for the child to respond.
- If the child does not respond, model saying, “Stop!” or point to the visual support of the STOP sign or model using the child’s AAC system. Turn the video off and switch to their preferred show.

Activity #3 Communicating “No, I don’t want that one!”

- For this activity, you will use the morning activity of getting dressed for the day. If it is warm out, pick out cold weather clothes. If it is cold out, you can use warm weather clothes. You can also use any item of clothing that you know the child does NOT prefer.
- Before you place the clothes on the bed tell the child, “If you don’t want this shirt [or pants or shorts or sweater, etc...] you can say, “No, I don’t want that one.”
- Say, “Ok, let’s get dressed!” and then place the unwanted clothing item on the bed.
- Wait for your child to respond.
- If the child responds, immediately give them the preferred clothing item.
- If the child does not respond and does not appear to enjoy the clothing item, model saying, “No, I don’t want that one.” or model pointing to a visual support of a NO sign, or model using an AAC system such as sign language, picture exchange, or a communication device to communicate NO, not that one.
- Wait for the child to respond.
- If the child does not respond, model saying, “No, not that one!” or point to the visual support of the NO sign or model using the child’s AAC system. Immediately provide the child with the preferred clothing item.

Social Skill Extension Activity

Now you can practice using the skills above in a more interactive social skill activity. Remember, using negation is a skill that can be used throughout a person’s lifespan and in a wide variety of environments. This is a skill that is used at home, at school, in the community, and at work. While the child may have learned the basics of saying no or not that one, there are other more subtle etiquette rules the child must also learn. For example, a person can NO, I DON’T WANT THAT ONE in a very angry or irritated tone of voice. While there are times when it is appropriate to be upset and use an angry voice, using the wrong tone of voice and body language could create a tense situation. If a child consistently uses this tone of voice every time they use any kind of negation, it might cause some difficulties with peers, teachers, and other adults. Families will want to practice different ways to say no that includes using a raised and angry tone of voice, angry face, and distressed body language (hands balled up into fists, etc...) but also includes using a more polite and calm tone of voice and neutral expression / body language. There is often a ‘just right’ zone in terms of knowing how to using negation in different situations. For example, in an emergency, it is absolutely appropriate to shout no or stop. However, shouting no to a book in a library is not.

Extension Activity #1

- For this activity, choose a mealtime where everyone can practice saying, “No, thank you.” Or your family can choose another more appropriate phrase such as, “I’m sorry, I don’t like ____” or even “I can’t eat that.” As you can imagine, foods at meals can sometimes elicit negative responses such as “Ewww, I hate that!” or even pretend gagging. While this might be ok when goofing around with friends, it would definitely be considered impolite in many situations. This activity allows your child to practice more appropriate ways to refuse foods during a meal. This can be done with food items, drinks that are offered during the meal, or different options for dessert. Practice with whatever is most appropriate for your family’s rules and expectations!
- One option includes passing bowls of different foods around and allowing each person to take a portion and put it on their plate or to refuse the food. Each person at the table can model saying, “No, thank you” [or whatever phrase your family uses] when a non-preferred item is passed to them. Place an item you know that your child doesn’t prefer in one of the bowls. When the bowl gets to your child, wait to see if the child responds with the appropriate phrase. If they respond appropriately, just keep passing the bowls around.
- If your child does not respond, you can model saying the phrase your family uses such as, “No, thank you.” You can also point to a visual support that has been created (such as a cue card, sentence strip, etc...) as a way to prompt the child. You can also model using the child’s AAC system such as sign language, picture exchange, or pushing a button on a communication device.
- Wait for the child to respond. If the child responds, just keep passing the bowls around. If the child does not respond, model saying the phrase again or model using the child’s AAC system. Immediately pass the bowl.

Extension Activity #2

- For this activity, you’ll roleplay different scenarios that will help the child know when and how to use different facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice when using negation. You can use different situations that are specific to your family and your child’s friends / school. Here are a few ideas:
 - **Scenario #1: Refusing something gross**
Practice refusing something gross when with friends versus when with a teacher or grandparent. There are many different ways to say no to something gross or yucky!
 - **Scenario #2: Refusing something on the playground**
Practice how to refuse playing a game with peers on the playground, how to say I don’t want to play that game anymore, or how to refuse something dangerous. There are many different ways to say no or stop while on the playground!
 - **Scenario #3: Refusing something in a library or a church**
Practice how to refuse saying no in a quiet environment. Many times, children with ASD use the same loud tone of voice whether they are out on the playground

or in a library. Practice using a loud tone of voice that would be used outside and a quiet tone of voice that would be used in settings like libraries or churches. This may take a lot of practice! Many times, we use a 5-point scale to help children understand what a loud voice is (5 is yelling!) and how a quiet voice sounds (2 is a whisper).

□ **Scenario #4: Refusing something painful or inappropriate**

Practice how to refuse something that hurts or is inappropriate. This might require the use of a social narrative. A social narrative is simply a story that helps explain something. For example, it might be necessary to write a social narrative about how to tell someone to stop because what they are doing hurts. This might be something as simple as playing a game with friends that is too rough or as complex as having a medical procedure. Or a social narrative might explain something like bad touches and when it is inappropriate for a person to touch a child in certain places. Then after the reading the social narrative, practice ways to say STOP, that hurts, or STOP, don't touch me. This requires using a forceful, loud voice that gets attention and is very different from refusing a non-preferred food at the dinner table!

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>