

Skill 5 Commenting

What does commenting mean?

Commenting is when a child contributes to a conversation by saying something about the topic but can also include asking questions about the subject matter. Commenting can be used in a wide variety of situations. Here are a few examples of commenting:

1. To share information you know about the topic (“I read that...”)
2. To ask about a topic of conversation (“Which one is your favorite?”)
3. To state an opinion about something (“I liked the pizza.”)
4. To disagree (“I would not want to go to Alaska for vacation.”)
5. To get clarification (“I don’t understand what you just said.”)
6. To support and encourage (“That’s great!”)
7. To provide comfort (“I’m sorry to hear that.”)

Why is commenting so important?

There are many different types of social communication skills that children use including greeting others, asking wh- questions, and commenting. Imagine a conversation with someone else where the other person only said hello and then asked a series of questions. The conversation might feel more like a pop quiz than a sharing of thoughts and ideas. Commenting is an important part of our conversations with others. Sometimes the comments we use in conversations include small talk such as commenting on the weather. We also use comments that encourage or support what the other person is saying by responding with, “That’s great!” or “Oh, I’m so sorry to hear that.” Other times, comments are more personal and relevant to what is being shared. For example, if my friend shares that she is going to the movies this weekend, my first response would be a question such as, “Oh, what movie are you going to see?” When my friend replies with the name of a movie I’ve already seen, I can comment with, “You are going to love that movie! I saw it last weekend and thought it was amazing!” Do you see how comments help share information between two people

but also keep a conversation going? Conversations would be very short and to the point without comments!

While commenting might seem very simple, it is actually a very complex skill. As a child grows, they learn to understand what is being said around them and begin to identify and label people, objects, and activities in their environment. A child will then use the words that they have learned to say, “Look at that dog!” and share a moment with someone else. Children will also use the names of things to request what they want and need. As the child masters labeling and requesting, their world of communication broadens and children learn more sophisticated ways to interact with others. As the child participates in conversations with others, they are able to listen to what is being said and reply with either questions or comments about the information being shared.

Why is commenting difficult for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder?

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. This can include difficulty with sharing an experience as if to say, “Look at that dog!” but can also include difficulty requesting the everyday things they want and need. Some children with ASD have a wide-ranging vocabulary yet struggle with the ‘unwritten’ rules of social interactions (such as knowing when to use a little white lie). All of these challenges can make understanding and using appropriate comments during a conversation difficult!

What are some considerations for teaching commenting?

As you can see, using comments during a conversation requires a lot of different skills. It’s important to understand that commenting is a more sophisticated social communication skill and a child must have the language abilities to understand what is being said and have the ability to communicate through either verbal speech or through Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) such as sign language, picture exchange, or a communication device. Once a child has learned to label and request, the child can move on to goals related to commenting.

When a child is ready to work on commenting, the first step might be helping the child understand why commenting is so important. A child will also need to know what types of comments to make for different conversations. For example, if my friend says her dog just died, I would need to respond with a comforting comment such as, “Oh no, I’m so sorry to hear that.” Some children may need to use scripts that help them practice making appropriate comments. Another step includes knowing when to comment in a conversation. Conversations often have a flow to them and knowing when to comment on what information may be hard at first!

Because learning to comment 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 commenting in different environments with different people and about different topics.

What materials will I need?

Families might need the following items for teaching “asking for more”:

- White board
- Markers
- Pre-printed visual supports to include cue cards or sentence strips
- Choice board (list of activities or example comments for the child to pick)
- Items the child prefers
- 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 Using Basic Comments

- For this activity, you may want to consider the following:
 - For children who use AAC consider the signs that the child will need to know in order to comment appropriately. Does the child know these signs? Consider what pictures the child will need to use a picture exchange system to comment. Finally, consider what buttons are available on the child’s communication device and if the child knows where to find the vocabulary needed to comment.
 - Some children who use verbal speech may still need a visual support in the form of a choice board, written sample comments on a whiteboard, cue cards, or sentence strips (little strips of paper with a single sentence comment).
- Find two items / toys the child enjoys.
- Hold up the first item. Start by asking a question such as, “What color is this?” or “What shape is it?”
- Hand the item to the child.
- Wait for the child to comment.
- If the child does not comment, consider the following:
 - If the child uses AAC, you can model the signs for colors or shapes, or point to the pictures used for picture exchange systems, or model pushing the appropriate buttons on a communication device.
 - If the child is using a white board, cue cards, or sentence strips, simply point to the strip as a prompt to reply.
- Wait for the child to respond.
- If the child responds appropriately, provide reinforcement. An example might be a simple praise such as great comment!
- If the child does not respond take the first item away after a minute and repeat the process with the second item.

- Other ways to do this activity might be to hold up the first item and model a very simple comment such as, “This is soft.”
- Hand the item to the child.
- Wait for the child to comment.
- If the child does not comment, consider the following:
 - If the child uses AAC, you can model the sign for a basic comment such as soft, fuzzy, etc..., or point to the pictures used for picture exchange systems, or model pushing the appropriate buttons on a communication device.
 - If the child is using a white board, cue cards, or sentence strips, simply point to the strip as a prompt to reply.
- Wait for the child to respond.
- If the child responds appropriately, provide reinforcement. An example might be a simple praise such as great comment!
- If the child does not respond take the first item away after a minute and repeat the process with the second item.
- Keep in mind that the goal is to fade away from using the white boards, cue cards, and sentence strips as soon as the child has mastered particular comments. This will increase the likelihood of spontaneous commenting. AAC users will continue to need access to sign language, picture exchange, and communication devices.

Activity #2 Sentence Strips

- Create or find preprinted examples of “sentence strips.” These sentences can say things like:
 - I like that.
 - I don’t like that.
 - That is my favorite!
 - Ewwwww. That flavor is gross.
 - Wow! That’s so cool!
- These can be laminated and put on a key ring so that comments are within easy reach during a variety of daily routines and activities at home and in the community.
- Consider different opportunities where your child can practice using these comments. A good time to practice some of these might be while grocery shopping together. Pick up an item you know the child DOES NOT enjoy. If the child does not respond, prompt the child to use “I don’t like that.” Practice with different flavors of snacks, items in the store, or with things that are happening as you walk around.

Activity #3 Group Conversation

- Practice opportunities for commenting in a group conversation. A good place to start is with family mealtime conversations!
- Begin by creating a choice board with different comments on it. This can include positive and negative comments such as, “This is really good!” and “I don’t like this!”
- Prepare family members such as spouses and siblings to make an appropriate comment on the meal.
- Wait for the child to comment.
- If the child does not respond, you can:
 - Model using sign language, picture exchange, or a communication device to comment.
 - Prompt the child by pointing to the choice board.
- If the child responds appropriately, provide reinforcement such as a simple good job!
- Other ways to do this activity might be to have a family member talk about events that have happened in the day. Plan ahead and have different family members talk about different topics that allow the child to comment using their choice board. Be sure to provide lots of practice with a wide variety of other topics and with different family members!
- You can also expand this activity to family get togethers or holiday dinners. Plan ahead and ask a sibling, cousin, or family friend to approach the child with an item, such as a toy, ball, or book and begin talking about the item. Prompt the child to provide a comment in response using their choice board.

Social Skill Extension Activity:

Now you can practice using the skills above in a more interactive social skill activity. Before you start, you’ll want to:

1. Create a list of positive and encouraging comments such as:
 - I like that!
 - Way to go!
 - That’s cool!
 - I’m happy for you!
2. Create a list of supportive comments such as:
 - I’m sorry.
 - Are you ok?
 - That’s terrible.
 - Oh no!
3. Create a list of conversation starters such as:
 - I was really sick and had to go to the doctor.
 - My friend just moved away.
 - My dog died today.

- I ate at my favorite pizza place last night!
- I got exactly what I wanted for my birthday!
- I watched the new ____ movie this weekend.

Extension Activity #1

Begin the conversation with one of the conversation starters you have created. Wait for your child to choose an appropriate comment in response. The child will have to choose between a positive / encouraging comment and a supportive comment. If the child does not respond, start by pointing to the appropriate group of comments and wait for the child to respond. Praise the child when they use an appropriate comment!

Extension Activity #2

Expand your conversation starters to include statements such as, “We had spaghetti last night.” or “Look what my dad got me.” Expand your potential positive and supportive comments to match the statements. Practice saying the conversation starters in different ways and with various facial expressions or body language so the child can use nonverbal clues to determine what type of comment to use. For example, using a bored voice and a disgusted facial expression say, “We had spaghetti last night.” Wait for the child to respond. Then say, “We had spaghetti last night!” in an excited voice with an exaggerated happy face. Wait for the child to respond with a different comment. This helps the child understand that they can use the clues in a person’s tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language to determine the most appropriate comment to use.

Links to resources on our website!

- https://vcuautismcenter.org/ta/vagoals/communication/what_to_teach/functions.cfm
- <https://vcuautismcenter.org/ta/vagoals/communication/expressiveReceptiveCommunication.cfm>
- <https://vcuautismcenter.org/te/seminars/details.cfm?id=35>

References for this Lesson Plan

- Groskreutz MP, Peters A, Groskreutz NC, Higbee TS. Increasing play-based commenting in children with autism spectrum disorder using a novel script-frame procedure. *J Appl Behav Anal.* 2015 Summer;48(2):442-7. doi: 10.1002/jaba.194. Epub 2015 Apr 17. PMID: 25891090.
- <https://autismclassroomresources.com/increase-spontaneous-commenting/>

