

# In the Beginning...was the Conversation!

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Successful conversations require two persons to be meaningfully connecting with each other.

**Not the word?** Think again. True, we usually regard conversation as something kids work up to after years of learning the “building blocks” - the sounds, the words, the sentences, and finally taking turns with sentences. But that’s just verbal conversation. Actually, we were using conversation long before we used words. But it was nonverbal conversation then.

Think about the fact that we understood and used facial expressions, gestures, vocal calls, and eye gaze to communicate long before we learned to talk. We engaged in the give-and-take of asking and responding, giving and receiving, showing and appreciating, doubting and reassuring, demanding and placating long before we knew there were words for such expressions. And even after the words came, if they were out-of-sync with the nonverbals, the words never “rang true,” and the nonverbals still did the communicating.

So what is the structure of a conversation, nonverbal or verbal? It’s a circle. In fact, the “circle of communication” between sender and receiver of a message is the basic unit of measure of social reciprocity. Stanley Greenspan’s Floortime model, for example, is built around creating circles of communication, first nonverbal, then verbal.

James MacDonald’s Communicating Partners (CP) program provides a useful step-by-step protocol, helping parents become part of playful, communicative dyads with their children. Parents learn to follow children’s lead, and respond to what their children can do and want to do. In our clinic, too, we find this to be the key to successful conversational interactions.

Let’s go back to the beginnings of reciprocity to see why this should be so. Each baby’s initial intention to nurse is a beginning point. It is his first intention: to seek nurturance from

his mother. Possessing both the need to survive and faith in his mother, the infant’s intent is to reconnect with the source of his support. Once life-giving nurturance is given, the circle is complete, and the child/parent dance of reciprocity begins. This infant’s communicative “turn” begins the first of many nonverbal conversations of his life. And, beautifully, this first circle leads seamlessly to other conversations: nonverbal and verbal.

In the beginning was the intent to create a circle. In the beginning was the conversation. It started with the child. The mother “followed her child’s lead” and reciprocity was born. Yes, many of our children are delayed in motor behaviors, suckling and otherwise. And, yes, we often need to jump-start the system, and to support fulfilling that intention. But that doesn’t change the basic order of things: the child takes the first turn.

We do not pretend that it’s easy for our kids... or for you, their parents, friends, and advocates. But, let’s return here to the experience of James MacDonald and the evidence he and his colleagues have amassed over the years. “Our ultimate goal is that children enjoy turn-taking with any behaviors they can do so that they have the freedom to build relationships when they wish... We have found that when we join into the child’s world of sensation and action and respond nonjudgmentally, most children do enjoy the connection and will communicate with whatever behavior they can do.” (p. 115)

Our experience is the same. And I would add that in our clinic, there are two concepts we have found to be crucial for the connections to happen: safety and sincerity. It must feel safe to a child to put himself “out there”, and know that what will come back will be kind and thoughtful. Our kids are sensitive and vulnerable, with

motor systems that are often too rough around the edges to communicate nuance effectively. Thus, our kids are often misunderstood, and, unfortunately, learn that not all situations are safe for trying.

If a child's attempt at creating a circle comes back *at* him rather than *to* him, he may not try again. If a child's hug feels more like a slug, we have to remind ourselves that "it's the thought that counts," and match the intention with a smile and the deep pressure hug the child intended. If a child's attempt to stroke our hair ends up in a tangled strangle hold, we have to remember to "be the adult", and not yell. Rather, we need to gently remove the hand now attached to our hair, and simultaneously provide the smooth touch we know the child was seeking.

Even if these situations happen only rarely, and the bulk of a child's communicative attempts (smiles, laughs, body hugs) are successful, any botched conversations should be followed by a disclaimer. Something like, "I know you didn't mean to grab me so hard; I love your touch, and we are still a team" can sooth ruffled feathers and provide the safety net to try again.

Sincerity is the other crucial concept. We have to really mean it for conversations to be successful. You know the adage that "90% of effort is just showing up"? Well, the same is true of conversation. We have to show up, and actually be there! Sincerely be there...and not on the way somewhere else, and not just to log another tick mark on a data sheet. We have to truly care, and have the time to wait for the next turn to come around.

What this means is that conversations must be real. They are the main events on the stage of life, and the participants must really participate. They must be connected, committed, and provide the stability and honesty that comprise true relationships. Nothing less will work, not really. Think of all the dead-ends. We ask our neurotypical kids what they did at school, and the conversation screeches to a grinding halt with, "Nothing." We hear our child ask for a favorite book to be read for the zillionth night in a row. We say, "Not tonight. We did that one last night." Child cries, conversation ends.

James MacDonald said it well, "Successful conversations require two persons to be meaningfully connecting with each other," and describes those conversations as "matched, balanced, and enjoyable." (p. 195) In our clinic, we find that taking a few minutes at the beginning of each play-time to "tune in" with the child helps us match him. "The first step is to convince your child that he can be himself with you. First, join your child by doing parallel activities and not making any demands. Take time to see where the child is in terms of his emotions, interests, and availability...be still...be alert...be accepting...be responsive." (pp. 83, 84)

From our experience, the following protocol will help you develop early conversations with your child.

1. Take stock of your nonverbal conversations to date. How has your child taken turns with you? (Feeding? Hugging? Tickling?

Laughing? Making faces? They all count!) Which conversations did he start? How many turns did your child take?

2. Look more closely at your successes. What were your child's initial intentions? How did you "read" your child? What kind of turns "kept the conversation going"?
3. Which conversations have the potential to expand - to be more fun or more creative or be useful in other situations? How can you take turns that will help this expansion take place?
4. Has your child communicated other intentions that might lead to conversations if you responded in just the right way? What would "the right way" look like?
5. How can you keep track of these ideas during the next two weeks, so you can evaluate your successes?

Yes, there's plenty more to do after this, but, believe me, developing a repertoire of nonverbal conversations is so powerful that you will find some of the next steps emerging before your very eyes! In the beginning was the intent, the reaching out to someone who was already there, that grew into the reciprocity of all our relationships! ■■

#### References

MacDonald, J.D. (2004). *Communicating Partners*. Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley.