

General Suggestions for Improving Use of Conversational Rules (Pragmatics)

Generally when a child breaks a conversational rule you may have to tell them what they have done and model an appropriate way to converse.

Example: You are talking to someone else and the child interrupts. Use a hand signal, like raising your hand, to tell the child to wait. Then say "Now I'm through and this is the time to talk to me. You were interrupting." If you ignore the child, he/she may never know that they were talking out of turn.

Example: You are talking to a child about math homework and they suddenly say "Paul hit a home run." You say, "We aren't talking about that right now. Let's finish talking about math and then I will show you how and when to talk about Paul's homerun." When you are finished talking about math say "Now we're through talking about math.", and you could say, "Paul and I were playing baseball at recess and Paul hit a homerun" If you ignore the child's intrusion they will not learn how and when to bring up a topic that is important to them.

Talking off topic is a problem for many children. A very effective and powerful procedure that may be used at home and school is called "redirecting" (Lucas 1978). Instead of following the child's drifting and inappropriate shifts in conversation, the competent partner redirects inappropriate shifts.

Example:

Teacher: "Did you come to school on the bus?"
Child: "My mother has a new car."
Teacher: "Oh your mother bought a new car?"
Child: "Yes."
Teacher: "Now I think I understand. Let me ask you the question again. Did you come to school on the bus today? You say no, I came in my mother's new car."

Example:

Mom: "You look tired."
Child: "I went to K-mart."
Mom: "You confuse me. What does K-mart have to do with being tired."
Child: "Dad took me to K-mart last night while you were away and we bought 'Hungry Hippos.'
Mom: "Did you stay up late playing 'Hungry Hippos'"
Child: "Yes."
Mom: "So you could have said that you are tired. You and Dad went to K-mart and bought 'Hungry Hippos'. You got to bed late because you played the new game."

The modelling of appropriate response may be gradually faded as the child becomes familiar with the redirecting procedure.

If the problem is one of intermittent attention or lack of comprehension, redirecting will help.

Example:

Teacher: "Did you enjoy riding horses on your school trip to the farm?"
Child: "I saw chickens on the farm."
(Response suggests the child only processed main words such as "horses, school, trip, farm")
Teacher: "I'm not sure you understood. Let me ask again. Did you enjoy riding horses on your school trip to the farm?"

You may show the child how to open and close a conversation, when to take a turn and even what settings and tactics are appropriate for different topics and tasks. For example, you may have to tell a child that talking about the fight you had last night at home is not a good topic for conversation in church. As another example you may also have to tell the child that talking to Dad about raising his/her allowance just after Dad comes home from a hard day at work will not accomplish the task. You may need to instruct the child about how to stay in a conversation. You may do this through models.

Example: Mom: "I really like pizza."
Child: No response.
Mom: "I said, I really like pizza. You tell me that you like it."
Child: "I like pizza too."
Mom: "I like double cheese on my pizza."
Child: No response.
Mom: "Tell me what you like on your pizza."

You may have to explicitly tell the child to say something on topic and to do this by asking or telling.

Example: Teacher: "Have you always lived in London?"
Child: "Yes."
Teacher: "I was not born in London."
Child: No response.
Teacher: "You should ask me where I was born. Say, where were you born?"

The child's conversational partners are helping him/her "on the spot", which is very instructive. Learning to converse in a socially appropriate fashion takes many years.

Source: **GENERAL SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT OF ORAL AND WRITTEN LANGUAGE** by Dr. Genese Warr-Leeper, Western University, Ontario