

Social Communication (Pragmatics)

What is social communication (pragmatics)?



Social communication or pragmatics refers to the way in which children use language within social situations.

It has three components including:

1. The ability to *use language* for different purposes (e.g. to greet, inform people about things, demand, command, request).
2. The ability to *adapt language* to meet the needs of the listener or situation (e.g. talking differently to a baby versus an adult, talking louder when there is lots of noise, being aware of the listener's knowledge and giving more information or less when needed).
3. *Following the often "unspoken" rules* of conversation and storytelling (e.g. taking turns in conversations, looking at the speaker, standing at an

appropriate distance from the speaker, using facial expressions and gestures). The rules of conversation are often different across cultures, within cultures and within different families. It is therefore important for a person to quickly understand the rules of the person with whom they are communicating.

Children with a diagnosis of an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD, including Asperger's Syndrome) and Pervasive Developmental Disorder (Not Otherwise Specified) have difficulties with social communication (pragmatic skills).

Why is social communication (pragmatics) important?

Social communication (pragmatics) is important in order to be able to build social relationships with other people. It is also important academically, as many curriculum based activities rely on working in groups and communication between peers.

What are the building blocks necessary to develop social communication (pragmatics)?

- **Receptive (understanding) language:** Comprehension of language.
- **Expressive (using) language:** The use of language through speech, sign or alternative forms of communication to communicate wants, needs, thoughts and ideas.
- **Pre-language skills:** The ways in which we communicate without using words and include things such as gestures, facial expressions, imitation, joint attention and eye-contact.
- **Executive functioning:** Higher order reasoning and thinking skills.
- **Self regulation:** The ability to *obtain, maintain* and *change* one's emotion, behaviour, attention and activity level appropriate for a task or situation in a socially acceptable manner.

The stages of development of social communication (pragmatics) are as follows:

AGE	SOCIAL COMMUNICATION SKILL
0-18 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brings objects to an adult to show them. • Tries to gain attention by using sounds, gestures, grabbing them by the hand. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Waves to say hello or goodbye or says the word “bye”. • Requests things using gestures, sounds or words (e.g. reaches for the biscuits in the cupboard). • Protests by shaking head, vocalising or pushing an object away. • Comments on an object or action by getting the adult’s attention, pointing, vocalising or saying a word (e.g. pointing to the dog and saying “woof woof” with the intention of showing the dog to the adult). • Looks at the speaker or responds with facial expression, vocalisation or word/s when someone speaks.
18 months - 2 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses words or short phrases for various language functions (e.g. greeting: “hello”, “bye bye”; protesting: “no”, “mine”; making a statement: “ball blue”; giving a direction: saying “ball” while pointing for you to get the ball). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses phrases like “What’s that?” to get attention. • Names things in front of other people. • Engages in verbal turn taking.
2 - 3.5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can take on the role of another person within play. • Engages in a greater number of turns within interactions with others. • Begins to recognise the needs of other people and will speak differently to a baby versus an adult. • Acknowledges their communication partner’s messages by saying things like “yeah”, “ok”, “mm”. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begins using language for fantasies and make believe. • Requests permission to do things (e.g. “Mummy, can I please go outside?”). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begins to correct others. • Is able to engage in simple story telling and is beginning to make guesses at what might happen in a story (inferencing).

4 - 5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can use terms correctly, such as 'this', 'that', 'here' and 'there'. • Uses language to discuss emotions and feelings more regularly. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses indirect requests (e.g. "I'm hungry" to request food). • Telling stories is developing and the child can describe a sequence of events (e.g. "The man is on the horse and he is going to jump over the fence and then he is going to go home").
5 - 6 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ability to tell stories develops and the child is now able to tell a story with a central character and a logical sequence of events, but still may have difficulties with the ending (e.g. "Once upon a time there was a little boy called Joe who has a sister and a brother and likes to go fishing. One day"). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beginning to make threats and can give insults. • May praise others ("Well done, you did it"). • Beginning to be able to make promises (e.g. "I promise I will do it tomorrow").

How can you tell if my child has problems with social communication (pragmatic skills)?

If a child has difficulties with social communication they might:

- Have difficulty remaining on topic in conversation.
- Not try to gain the attention of adults because they do not know how to or does so inappropriately.
- Tend to stand too close to the speaker and is unaware of personal space.
- Tell stories in a disorganised way.
- Have difficulty looking at the speaker or may look too intensely at the speaker.
- Dominate conversations and does not listen.
- Does not ask for clarification when they haven't understood.
- Be unable to interpret the tone of voice in others (e.g. does not recognise an angry versus a happy voice).
- Use language in a limited way (e.g. only gives directions or makes statements but doesn't greet or ask questions).
- Have difficulty understanding another person's point of view.
- Have difficulty making friends.

* It is not unusual for children to have pragmatic or social communication difficulties in a few situations. However, if they occur often or seem inappropriate for their age there may be reason for concern.

What other problems can occur when a child has social communication (pragmatics) difficulties?

When a child has social communication difficulties, they might also have difficulties with:

- **Behaviour:** The child's action, usually in relation to their environment (e.g. a child may engage in behaviour, such as refusing to go to social events including birthday parties or engage in inappropriate behaviour, such as tugging on a peer's hair or yelling at someone to get their attention).
- **Sensory processing:** Accurate registration, interpretation and response to sensory stimulation in the environment and one's own body.
- **Completing academic work** (e.g. the child may misinterpret verbal or written instructions for tasks and/or struggle with imaginative writing).
- **Planning and sequencing:** The sequential multi-step task or activity performance to achieve a well-defined result.
- **Working memory:** The ability to temporarily retain and manipulate information involved in language comprehension, reasoning, and learning new information; and to update this information as change occurs.
- **Receptive (understanding) language:** Comprehension of language.
- **Expressive (using) language:** The use of language through speech, sign or alternative forms of communication to communicate wants, needs, thoughts and ideas.
- **Articulation:** Clarity of speech sounds and spoken language.
- **Fluency:** The smoothness or flow with which sounds, syllables, words and phrases are produced when talking.
- **Play skills:** Voluntary engagement in self motivated activities that are normally associated with pleasure and enjoyment where the activities may be, but are not necessarily, goal oriented.

What can be done to improve social communication (pragmatics)?

- **Working collaboratively** with preschool or school staff to set up joint communication goals and develop strategies to help support the child within the classroom setting.
- **Play dates:** Setting up play dates with peers from school, preschool, child care and extra curricula groups to expose the child to appropriate ways to interact with their peers.
- **Social skill groups:** These are groups that run with the express purpose of teaching social interaction skills.

What activities can help improve social communication (pragmatics)?

- **Role play:** Engage in role play activities with adults and other children to simulate social situations (e.g. going shopping, going to the park, visiting grandparents).
- **Turn-taking games:** Engage in turn taking games, such as board games to teach the child that it is 'okay to lose'.
- **Facial expressions:** Look at facial expressions and discuss the feelings associated with the facial expressions.
- **Miming:** Practice through miming making faces that show different feelings.
- **Describing activities:** Look at pictures together to encourage descriptive language about a topic or thing, with the adult prompting to keep the child on topic.
- **Puppets:** Take part in role play or puppet shows after watching a modeled situation.
- **Comic strips:** Use appropriate comic strips that illustrate social situations (do's or don'ts) and talk explicitly about what is happening.
- **Social skills groups:** Work with the school to set up small structured groups where social skills can be practiced (e.g. turn taking, waiting, responding, staying on topic, questioning).
- **Social stories:** Develop social stories that depict how to behave and respond in certain social situations.

- **Greetings:** Encourage your child to say 'hello' and 'goodbye' in social interactions.

Why should I seek therapy if I notice difficulties with social communication (pragmatics)?

Therapeutic intervention to help a child with social communication skills is important to help the child:

- Learn how to engage appropriately with others during play, conversation and in interactions.
- Learn how to make friends at school and when accessing out of school activities (e.g. playing a sport, attending a group such as Scouts).
- Maintain friendships with peers.
- Learn how to respond appropriately during interactions with familiar people (e.g. parents, siblings, teachers, family friends) and unfamiliar individuals (e.g. adults and children they may need to engage with during excursions or when visiting places such as the park or swimming pool).
- Develop an understanding and awareness about social norms and to master specific social skills (e.g. taking turns in a conversation, using appropriate eye contact, verbal reasoning, understanding figurative language).
- Some children who have pragmatic skill difficulties require explicit teaching about how to interact and communicate with others as these skills do not come naturally to them.

If left untreated what can difficulties with social communication (pragmatics) lead to?

When children have difficulties with social communication, they might also have difficulties with:

- Making new friends.
- Maintaining friendships with peers.
- Engaging appropriately with unfamiliar individuals (e.g. shop owner) and

with professionals you need to see for appointments (e.g. doctor, dentist).

- Being perceived as 'rude' by others.
- Interacting with colleagues in the work environment.

What type of therapy is recommended for social communication (pragmatics) difficulties?

If your child has difficulties with social communication, it is recommended they consult a Speech Therapist.

If there are multiple areas of concern (i.e. beyond just social communication) both Occupational Therapy and Speech Therapy may well be recommended to address the functional areas of concern. This is the benefit of choosing Kid Sense which provides both Occupational Therapy and Speech Therapy.

Contact us today to make an initial enquiry or book an assessment for your child
on 1800 KID SENSE (1800 543 736)

