



**TALK WITH ME:**  
**A STEP-BY-STEP CONVERSATION FRAMEWORK**  
**FOR TEACHING CONVERSATIONAL**  
**BALANCE AND FLUENCY**  
**FOR HIGH-FUNCTIONING INDIVIDUALS**  
**WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS**

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**AN EVIDENCE-BASED STRATEGY**

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Conversation is everywhere – at the lunch table, at after-school activities, in the line for the water fountain, at overnight camp during downtime, at work with a coworker, or at a Thanksgiving gathering. Conversation requires effective communication and social interaction and is a requirement for developing or maintaining friendships. Conversation allows us to get information, give information, and to make others feel comfortable. Effective conversation skills may lead to successful relationships, independent living, and employment, whereas a lack of conversation skills may lead to failure in those areas.

Regardless of the setting, this critical skill – human conversation – is challenging for many individuals with high-functioning autism spectrum disorder (HF-ASD) – children and adults alike (Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, Hill, Raste, & Plumb 2001; Stichter et al., 2010). Specifically, research has shown that individuals with ASD often have difficulty understanding context (Vermeulen, 2012) and process details in a conversation rather than seeing the overall conversational theme (Church et al., 2010; Scherf, Luna, Kimchi, Minshew, & Behrman, 2008). Difficulties with communication may lead to social isolation, social vulnerability, and sometimes bullying (Sofronoff, Dark, & Stone, 2011).

For these reasons, it is essential to equip individuals with ASD with effective conversational skills. Traditionally, the teaching of social skills, including conversation skills, friendship skills, and perspective-taking abilities, takes place in a group setting. Indeed, research has shown the benefits of group participation for learning these skills (MacKay, Knott, & Dunlop, 2007). However, it is often difficult to find a useful lesson that applies to everyone in a given group. As a result, leaders of social skills groups often find themselves picking and choosing lessons based on the needs of students in the group. That is, one lesson might apply to one person in the group, but not apply to the needs of others. Further, many social skills programs do not take place in real-life settings, making it difficult to apply newly learned skills in naturally occurring circumstances.

This is where the Conversation Framework comes in! This unique strategy provides an approach to assessing and teaching conversation skills in a group setting that is effective for most students who have difficulty engaging in conversations, including students with HF-ASD.

In use since 2005, the Conversation Framework has helped hundreds of individuals with HF-ASD learn how to have meaningful conversations. Parents who have used the conversation rules at home have reported an increase in conversation around the dinner table, including an awareness of asking follow-up questions about others' lives.

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Teachers have reported success for their students, with greater acceptance from peers because of the increased reciprocal interactions with classmates. Teachers have also described an increase in listening skills, overall social awareness, and on-topic questions for students who have participated in groups using the Conversation Framework.

*I'm excited about the changes I plan to make since being in Birmingham last week to learn the Conversation Framework. I hope that'll give me more of a vision of what I can do to reach more of the children and teens I teach. I'm also thinking I might try to start a group for the younger children (under 12), which I haven't done in the past. I decided to scratch the lesson that was planned for my teen group last night and just do a "conversation group" and learn about "questions, stories, and comments." I was dismayed to see that my teens couldn't carry on an on-topic conversation for more than 1½ minutes without becoming silent or making a drastic change in topic.*

*They were interested in the change I made with the group and seemed excited to work on the new goals (although maybe a bit overwhelmed). One of them even said he couldn't believe that 50 minutes had already passed and we only have 10 minutes left. It's crazy to me that I had been following a curriculum, yet my teens were so unequipped. I look forward to seeing their progress because of what I learned from your group.*

*– Social Group Leader, Alabama*

The Conversation Framework breaks down the elements of a conversation we must master in order to be proficient at carrying out a conversation. The framework was developed and refined across many years based on a review of the relevant research along with close observation of how people talk to each other – what conversations really sound like. Many find it difficult to teach conversation skills, but the Conversation Framework provides a simple and easy-to-implement process for teaching effective conversational habits.

The conversation rules presented in this book are specific enough to equip a high-functioning individual with ASD with the tools necessary to acquire conversation skills, and simple enough to be used at any age. The beauty of the Conversation Framework is that it does not change over time. That is, although kindergarteners may need to start at Step 1, whereas older students may be able to start at Step 2 or 3, the process of learning conversation is the same – the rules that elementary school students learn are the same rules that they will need in adulthood. Learning these rules will help students be successful in conversation during the middle and high school years, when the hidden curriculum and use of slang become increasingly important, and during adulthood when mastery of conversation skills is necessary for participation in further education, employment, and the community.

To help readers use this curriculum, we have created a YouTube channel, Talk with Me: Conversation Framework, that contains a number of videos that show how to implement the process at [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCUAFBVAd-StObI9n6OIh\\_A](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCUAFBVAd-StObI9n6OIh_A)

In addition, forms used in this curriculum are available for downloading at <http://texasautism.com/blog/conversation-framework/>

Find Us On Instagram

[https://www.instagram.com/conversation\\_framework/?hl=en](https://www.instagram.com/conversation_framework/?hl=en)

## INTRODUCTION

Specifically, research from the *National Autism Indicators Report: Transition into Young Adulthood* by Roux, Shattuck, Rast, Rava, and Kristy (2015) showed that the better the conversation skills an individual with ASD has, the less likely they are to be disconnected from society. Figure I.1 shows this relationship.

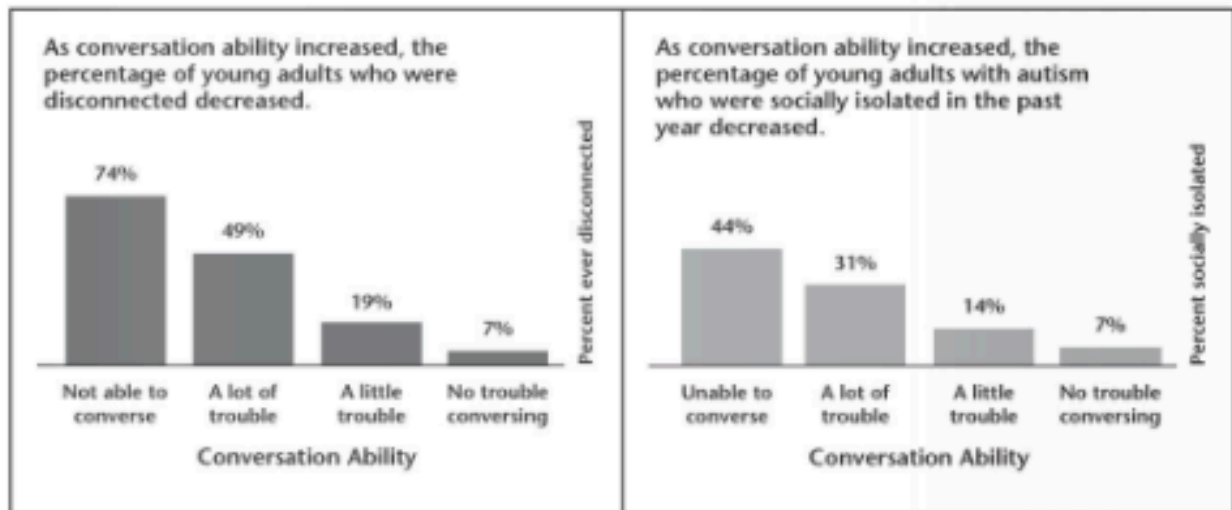


Figure I.1. Relationship between level of conversation skills and connection with society.

From Roux, A. M., Shattuck, P. T., Rast, J. E., Rava, J. A., & Anderson, K. A. (2015). *National autism indicators report: Transition into young adulthood* (p. 49). Philadelphia, PA: Life Course Outcomes Research Program, A.J. Drexel Autism Institute, Drexel University.

Similarly, employment is more likely for individuals with ASD in their 20s if they have conversation skills as shown below (Roux et al., 2015), as illustrated in Figure I.2.

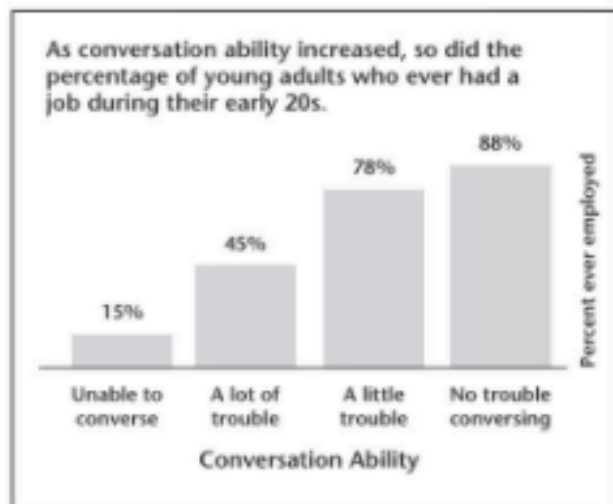


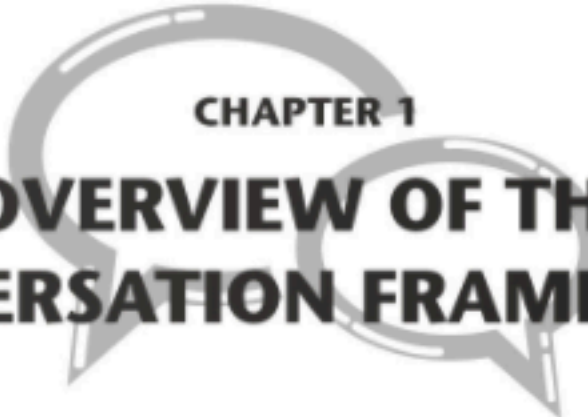
Figure I.2. Relationship between conversation skills and rate of employment.

From Roux, A. M., Shattuck, P. T., Rast, J. E., Rava, J. A., & Anderson, K. A. (2015). *National autism indicators report: Transition into young adulthood* (p. 58). Philadelphia, PA: Life Course Outcomes Research Program, A.J. Drexel Autism Institute, Drexel University.

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### **Note**

Several factors, including impaired language ability, history of bullying and teasing, anxiety, and difficulty participating in social situations, may impede an individual's success with the Conversation Framework. Although some of these issues will be improved through learning the Conversation Framework, other therapies or medical treatment may be necessary before the individual with ASD is able to fully benefit from the strategies used in the Conversation Framework approach.



## CHAPTER 1

# OVERVIEW OF THE CONVERSATION FRAMEWORK

Aside from basic greetings, goodbyes, and telephone etiquette, most conversation is unscripted. It is difficult to guess what people will be talking about, what they might ask, or where the conversation will go. This can make conversation challenging for everybody, but especially so for individuals with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) who function best when the world around them, including the social world, is predictable (Aspy & Grossman, 2011). While numerous programs and curricula have been developed to address social skills deficits, including conversational skills, most are lacking for a number of reasons, including failure to address the complexity of conversations and taking into consideration the underlying characteristics of ASD.

### WHY IS THE CONVERSATION FRAMEWORK NEEDED?

Table 1.1 lists behaviors that may indicate that someone has difficulty with conversation skills.

**Table 1.1**  
***Common Indicators of Deficits in Conversation Skills***

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Brain “going blank,” inability to think of anything to say</li><li>• Inability to think of categories of conversation topics</li><li>• Talking almost exclusively about self; one-sided conversations</li><li>• Failure to ask questions about others</li><li>• Asking too many questions</li><li>• Asking questions even when already knowing the answer</li><li>• Not wanting to listen or join conversations of non-interest</li><li>• Telling longwinded stories</li><li>• Difficulty telling relevant or key details of a story</li><li>• Starting at the beginning of a story and including every detail</li><li>• Giving one-word answers in response to a question</li><li>• Difficulty developing social reciprocity</li><li>• Waiting for others to initiate conversation</li><li>• Requiring others to keep the conversation going</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Preference for conversation with someone not one’s own age</li><li>• Failure to make comments in conversation</li><li>• Failure to use nonverbal gestures to show interest in conversation</li><li>• Lack of awareness that others may not be interested in what is being said</li><li>• Often feeling cut off or interrupted</li><li>• Often interrupting others</li><li>• Difficulty with timing in conversation</li><li>• Talking too loudly or too quietly</li><li>• Anxiety about talking to new people</li><li>• Anxiety about talking to someone of the opposite gender</li><li>• Anxiety about talking in large groups</li><li>• Anxiety about not knowing what to say</li><li>• Fear of saying something wrong</li></ul> |
|---|---|

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Learning to carry on a successful conversation requires a lot of practice for students with high-functioning ASD (HF-ASD). Knowing this, it is important to start teaching and practicing as soon as it is clear that a student has a deficit in conversation (see also Chapter 5 on assessment).

### **But Where to Start?**

Many professionals, including speech-language pathologists (SLPs), psychologists, counselors, special education teachers, autism specialists, and classroom teachers, teach conversation skills, often with the use of peer helpers. Aspects of conversation addressed through typical strategies generally include the following:

- Eye contact
- Equal turns
- Greeting others
- Starting a conversation
- Maintaining a conversation
- Ending a conversation
- Joining a conversation
- Showing interest
- Listening carefully
- Making the other person feel comfortable
- Allowing the other person time to think or speak

The problem with teaching conversation using this approach is that the rules for conversation are malleable and changing. Conversations do not always begin with a greeting. Good conversations do not always have an equal number of exchanges. And the nature of a conversation changes depending on characteristics of the conversation partners such as familiarity, age, and gender.

Further, if conversation skills are included in a student's individualized education program (IEP), the objectives are often written for a specific number of exchanges or a specific length of time (e.g., hold a 3-minute conversation with four exchanges). Although this is well intended, a student may master these objectives and still not be able to participate in a conversation in a socially functional way. Does an IEP objective to have a 3-minute conversation indicate which conversation skill is deficient? Does the number of minutes that a conversation lasts indicate the quality of the conversation? If the objective is written for five exchanges in a conversation, how long is the student really able to maintain a conversation? Is a higher number of exchanges necessarily an improvement? Would the family know how to generalize this skill to the home environment?

Another reason why many standard social skills programs are not effective is that difficulties with conversation are often considered to be caused by social skills deficits; however, in reality, they may also be related to deficits in executive functioning and underlying cognition challenges often present in those with HF-ASD, as described in Table 1.2. Thus, difficulty with organizing and processing social information can make conversation challenging. Therefore, strategies to improve conversation skills must address this broad range of interrelated underlying needs – social and cognitive.