

C. Take a closer look at children's conversational styles

To provide children with an environment that promotes self-esteem and language learning, we need to tune in to their individual differences. We can learn a great deal about children's ability to interact with others by observing them more closely during their everyday interactions.

Picture yourself in an imaginary preschool classroom during free play and take a closer look at the children's communication – with you and with each other.



Patrice, who is always smiling and full of energy, runs up to you and shows you her new shoes. She says they are special because they glow in the dark. Then she calls to her friend and runs off to play with her.

Carlos, who is busy building a tower in the block centre, is playing alongside three other children. They are all engrossed in their constructions. Every now and then they comment to each other about some aspect of their creations.

In the dramatic play centre, a group of four children is playing "Doctor." They are having a heated discussion about what kind of treatment the "patient" needs. After much arguing and negotiation, they all agree that the patient needs both medicine and a needle.

Erin, a quiet, solitary child, is watching the group playing "Doctor" from a distance. After a while, she comes to sit beside you and shows you her doll.

Michael, who is developmentally delayed, stares into space, taking no notice of the other children. He doesn't respond when you greet him, but then he seldom responds when anyone talks to him.

Without realizing it, you are likely to interact differently with each of these children because of their different **conversational styles**, which have evolved from the time they were born. Each child is born with his or her own personality, and each parent or caregiver has his or her own way of relating to a child based on that unique personality. In time, child and caregiver develop a way of interacting with each other, like two dance partners coordinating their moves. Within these interactions, caregivers become the child's mirror, reflecting back their impressions of his ability to communicate. They give feedback on how well the child sent a message (When a parent says, "Oh, you want your bottle!" the crying baby knows that his message was picked up loud and clear) and on whether the message was well received (When a parent says, "What a big smile! You're so happy!" the baby knows that his smiles get smiles in return, as well as lots of animated noises!).

Children's conversational styles evolve as they see themselves through other people's eyes and – in later childhood – as they compare themselves to others. From the thousands

of interactions children have with their caregivers, siblings, and peers, they gather internal pictures of themselves, which they paste in an imaginary photo album in their heads. From these pictures, they form their own views of themselves as communicators.

Patrice and the group playing “Doctor” look like confident communicators and seem to have positive internal pictures of themselves. And while Carlos isn’t interactive when he’s engrossed in his construction, in general he seems to be a sociable, confident child.

However, Erin’s style may be telling you that her internal picture is of someone who doesn’t expect to get a positive response from others. And Michael’s style seems to tell you that he hardly pictures himself as a communicator at all.

Understanding children’s conversational styles gives us a better appreciation of why some children communicate so naturally and why others find it so difficult.

Identifying the four conversational styles

When identifying a child’s conversational style, consider two important aspects of his interactions with others:

- ◆ Does he spontaneously approach others and **initiate** interactions?
- ◆ Does he **respond** when others initiate interactions with him?

In general, you will notice that:

- ◆ Some children **initiate** interactions with ease – others don’t.
- ◆ Some children **respond** readily during interactions – others don’t.

By looking at how frequently children initiate and respond during interactions, we can identify four different conversational styles, each of which describes the way a child interacts most of the time. It is important to remember, however, that a child’s conversational style may vary depending on the situation and with whom he interacts.

Conversational styles are described below in terms of a child’s intentional, purposeful communication with others. However, typically developing, very young infants and some older children with severe delays in development have not yet learned to initiate or respond to others intentionally. In these cases, we can still get a sense of their future conversational styles by looking at how often they show interest in others or seem to try to get attention by making sounds, changing facial expressions, or performing actions. Although these sounds and actions are not performed with a clear purpose, they are still signs of the child’s awareness of and desire to interact with others, and they give us some clear insights into what the child’s conversational style is likely to become.

The Four Conversational Styles



1. *The Sociable Child*



2. *The Reluctant Child*



3. *The Child with His Own Agenda*



4. *The Passive Child*

1. The Sociable Child

The sociable child initiates interactions constantly and is very responsive to others' initiations.

Even in early infancy, sociable children initiate interactions to draw attention to themselves. Some sociable children interact freely in any situation, but others are more sociable with their peers than they are with their teachers, or vice versa.

If language delayed, the sociable child may be slow to talk or difficult to understand, but this doesn't deter him from interacting with others. However, he may be less socially mature than his peers.



2. The Reluctant Child

The reluctant child seldom initiates and is often on the outside of group activities and interactions. He may take a long time to “warm up” and respond to you when you approach him. Given time and opportunities, he will interact with you and other teachers, but peer interactions may be more difficult for him.

If language delayed, this child's reluctance to initiate may be related to his language difficulty. He may be reluctant to interact with others because he can't make himself understood or he may not yet have learned to communicate appropriately in social situations. However, a reluctant child usually responds when others make an effort to interact with him.



3. The Child with His Own Agenda

The child with his own agenda spends a lot of time playing alone, appearing uninterested in interaction with adults and peers. He may initiate when he needs something, but he frequently rejects or ignores your efforts to engage him. Typically developing children may go through this independent phase when they want to “do their own thing.” However, they still enjoy interacting with others in some social situations.



4. The Passive Child

The passive child seldom responds or initiates, demonstrating little interest in the objects or people around him. It can be very hard to elicit a smile from him or to engage him in any sort of playful interaction. If this is the child’s consistent style of interaction, it reflects a developmental delay.

