

CONVERSATIONAL RECIPROCITY

What is this developmental skill?

Conversational reciprocity is the ability to participate in the natural give-and-take of conversation. It includes taking turns, listening, responding appropriately, staying on topic, and showing interest in what another person is saying. These skills help children build relationships and feel connected to others.

How does this normally develop?

Children develop conversational reciprocity through repeated interactions with responsive caregivers. From infancy, adults respond to a baby's sounds, facial expressions, and gestures, teaching that communication is a shared experience. As children grow, they learn to wait their turn, ask questions, and recognize verbal and nonverbal social cues.

How can neglect interfere?

Neglect often means fewer warm, responsive conversations. When adults are emotionally unavailable or primarily give commands rather than engage in meaningful interaction, children have fewer opportunities to practice conversational skills. Chronic stress can also make it difficult to focus on social interactions.

What might this look like?

A child may:

- Interrupt frequently.
- Give very short answers.
- Talk at length without noticing others.
- Change topics unexpectedly.
- Rarely ask questions.
- Miss social cues.
- Avoid conversations altogether.

Parenting Implications

Build conversational skills through enjoyable everyday interactions. Follow the child's interests, take turns naturally, ask open-ended questions, and allow plenty of time for responses. The goal is connection, not perfect conversation.

From Understanding to Attunement

Instead of thinking: *"He's only interested in talking about himself."* Try thinking: *"He's still learning that conversation is a shared experience. Every positive interaction helps build this skill."*