



# LET'S TALK



... FOR PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL COMMUNICATION NEEDS

## Pragmatics: Social Language Use

By Diane Paul-Brown, PhD, CCC-SLP

You have invited your old college roommate for dinner. She has never met your family. Your child sees your friend reach for some potatoes and says, "Better not take those, or you'll get even bigger." Your embarrassment makes it difficult for you to believe that your child did not intend to be rude. Rather, your child may have a problem knowing how to use language appropriately in social situations.

A child may pronounce words clearly, have a large vocabulary, use long, complex sentences and correct grammar, and still have a communication problem—if he or she has not mastered the rules for appropriate social language known as pragmatics.

### Pragmatics involves three major communication skills

- **Using language for different purposes**—such as greeting, informing, demanding, promising, and requesting;
- **Adapting or changing language according to the needs or expectations of a listener or situation**—such as talking differently to a baby than to an adult, giving enough background information to an unfamiliar listener, talking differently in a classroom than on a playground;
- **Following rules for conversations and narratives** (e.g., telling stories, giving book reports, recounting events of the day); there are rules for taking turns in conversation, introducing topics of conversation, staying on the topic, rephrasing when misunderstood, and telling a story. There are also rules for appropriate use of nonverbal signals in conver-

sation: distance between speaker and listener, facial expressions, and eye contact. Rules may vary depending on language and culture.

In the dinner table example, the child made a suggestion and gave a reason. The child also followed conversational rules of taking turns and not interrupting. However, the child did not adapt language to the speaking situation. Perhaps the child did not know that certain topics are socially inappropriate and that it is usually improper for children to tell adults or guests what to do.

A child with pragmatic problems also may have little variety in language use, may say inappropriate or unrelated things during conversations, or may tell stories in a disorganized way. For example, parents know how frustrating it can be to ask a child, "What did you do today?" and hear the response, "Nothing." Maybe the child can make demands, ask questions, and greet people, but has trouble organizing language to talk about what happened in the past. During conversation, this same

child may appear to pull topics out of the air and may not use statements that signal a change in topic, such as "That reminds me. . . ." Peers may avoid having conversations with such a child. Pragmatic problems can thus lower social acceptance.

It is not unusual for children to have pragmatic problems occasionally or in a few situations. However, if problems in social language use occur often and seem inappropriate considering the child's age, a pragmatic disorder may exist. Frequently, pragmatic disorders co-exist with other language problems such as vocabulary/concept development or grammar.

*Diane Paul-Brown is ASHA's director of Clinical Issues in Speech-Language Pathology.*



If you have concerns about your child's speech or language development, please contact an ASHA-certified speech-language pathologist. Go to ASHA's website at [www.asha.org](http://www.asha.org) for information and referrals or call 800-638-8255.

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