Autism and knowing when it's their turn

Knowing when it's their turn to speak or engage in a conversation can be challenging for autistic individuals due to difficulties with social cues and turn-taking. Here are some points to consider regarding autism and knowing when it's their turn:

Explicit Instruction: Providing explicit instruction on turn-taking rules and expectations can help them to understand when it's their turn to speak or participate in a conversation. This can include teaching specific verbal or nonverbal cues that indicate when it's appropriate to take a turn.

Social Stories: Social stories can be beneficial in explaining and demonstrating the concept of turn-taking in social situations. These stories use written or visual narratives to describe the expectations and steps involved in taking turns, helping autistic individuals understand the process and apply it in real-life situations.

Structured Practice: Engaging autistic individuals in structured practice activities that involve turn-taking can help them develop the skills necessary for knowing when it's their turn. This can include role-playing conversations, participating in group discussions with clear guidelines, or playing turn-based games that reinforce the concept of taking turns.

Visual or Verbal Prompts: Providing visual or verbal prompts can support them in recognising when it's their turn. These prompts can be as simple as saying their name or using a specific gesture to indicate that it's their time to speak or contribute to the conversation.

Scaffolding and Modelling: Scaffolding involves gradually reducing support as individuals become more proficient in turn-taking. Initially, providing more explicit prompts and modelling appropriate turn-taking behaviour can help them to understand the concept. As they gain confidence, the level of support can be gradually reduced.

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Peer Support: Engaging in conversations or activities with peers who understand the importance of turn-taking can be beneficial for autistic individuals. Peers can provide cues or reminders, model appropriate turn-taking behaviour, and create a supportive environment that encourages everyone to take turns.

Patience and Wait Time: Allowing extra time for autistic individuals to process and respond can be important. Some individuals may need more time to understand that it's their turn and formulate a response. Being patient and allowing for longer pauses can help individuals feel more comfortable and confident in taking their turn.

Visual Timers: Using visual timers can help them to better understand the duration of a turn and manage their time in a conversation or activity. Visual timers provide a clear visual representation of how much time is remaining, helping individuals anticipate when it will be their turn.

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Social Skills Training: Participating in social skills training programs that focus on turn-taking and conversational skills can be beneficial for them. These programs provide structured opportunities to practise turn-taking and develop the necessary social skills for engaging in conversations effectively.

Individualised Support: Recognising that autistic individuals have unique strengths and challenges, it's important to provide individualised support based on their specific needs. Understanding their communication style, preferences, and any sensory sensitivity can help tailor support and strategies for promoting turn-taking skills.

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Use Visual or Physical Cues: Utilising visual or physical cues can help autistic individuals recognise when it's their turn to speak or engage in an activity. For example, using a designated object that individuals pass to each other when it's their turn can provide a clear visual cue.

Simplify Turn-Taking Rules: Breaking down turn-taking rules into simple and explicit steps can make it easier for them to understand and follow. Providing clear guidelines, such as "We take turns speaking one person at a time" or "Wait for a pause before speaking," can help clarify expectations.

Practise Active Listening: Teaching active listening skills can help autistic individuals recognise when someone has finished speaking and it's their turn to respond. Encouraging them to maintain eye contact, nodding or using other appropriate nonverbal cues to show engagement, and responding appropriately when it's their turn can enhance their understanding of turn-taking.

Reinforce Positive Turn-Taking Behaviours: Providing positive reinforcement, such as verbal praise or rewards, for autistic individuals when they successfully demonstrate appropriate turn-taking behaviours can motivate and reinforce their understanding of when it's their turn. Celebrating their efforts and progress can also boost their confidence in engaging in conversations.

Use Social Scripts: Social scripts can be useful in teaching autistic individuals how to recognise cues that indicate when it's their turn in a conversation. These scripts can include phrases or visual prompts that signal when to speak or wait for their turn.

Allow for Visual Supports During Conversations: Allowing them to use visual supports, such as communication boards or visual schedules, during conversations can help them navigate and remember when it's their turn. These supports can serve as a reference to remind them of the rules and expectations of turn-taking.

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Develop Predictable Routines: Establishing predictable routines and structures for conversations or group activities can assist autistic individuals in understanding when it's their turn. Clearly defining the order of turns and using consistent cues or signals can provide a sense of predictability and aid their comprehension.

Provide Clarification and Feedback: Offering clear and specific feedback can help autistic individuals understand when they've missed their turn or need to adjust their behaviour. Providing gentle reminders or redirections can help them recognise when it's appropriate to take a turn and learn from their experiences.

Visual Schedules and Timelines: Using visual schedules or timelines can provide autistic individuals a clear visual representation of the order of turns in a conversation or activity. These visual supports can help them anticipate when it will be their turn and understand the overall structure of the interaction.

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Utilise Technology: Technology can be a helpful tool in supporting autistic individuals in recognising when it's their turn. Apps or software programs can provide visual cues or prompts to indicate when it's their turn to speak or participate in an activity. These technological supports can be customised to fit individual needs and preferences.

Practice Turn-Taking in Various Contexts: Encouraging them to practise turn-taking in different social contexts can help generalise the skill. This can include practising turn-taking in one-on-one conversations, small group discussions, or larger social settings to develop flexibility in recognising when it's their turn.

Peer Modelling and Peer Feedback: Peer modelling and peer feedback can be effective in helping them to learn and internalise turn-taking skills. Peers who are skilled in turn-taking can serve as role models and provide supportive feedback to encourage and reinforce appropriate turn-taking behaviour.

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Social Skills Groups: Participating in social skills groups specifically focused on turn-taking and conversation skills can provide structured opportunities for them to practise and develop their understanding of when it's their turn. These groups can offer guidance, feedback, and a supportive environment for learning and growth.

Break down Complex Interactions: Complex social interactions, such as group discussions or debates, can be challenging for autistic individuals to navigate in terms of turn-taking. Breaking down these interactions into smaller, manageable steps can help them better understand when it's their turn and how to appropriately contribute to the conversation.

Use Visual Countdowns: Using visual countdowns, such as a set of numbered cards or a progress bar, can help them track the order of turns and anticipate when it will be their turn. This visual representation of time passing can aid in their comprehension and readiness to take their turn.

Sensory Supports: Autistic people may have sensory sensitivities that can impact their ability to recognise when it's their turn. Providing sensory support, such as a quiet space or sensory tools, can help them regulate their sensory experiences and improve their focus and attention during social interactions.

Consider Individual Processing Time: They may need more time to process information and formulate their response. Allowing for additional processing time and avoiding rushing them can support their understanding of when it's their turn and provide them with a comfortable environment to participate in conversations.

Collaborate with a Multidisciplinary Team: Collaborating with a multidisciplinary team, which may include professionals such as speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, and psychologists, can provide comprehensive support for them in developing turn-taking skills. These professionals can work together to address the specific challenges and tailor interventions to the individual's needs. It is very important to stress here though that it is essential to ask the autistic individuals themselves what support they think is best for them if any.

Each autistic individual is unique, and strategies that work for one person may not work for another. It's essential to observe and understand the specific strengths, challenges, and learning style of the individual to provide targeted support in improving their understanding of when it's their turn. With consistent practice, patience, and a supportive environment, they can enhance their turn-taking skills and actively engage in social interactions.

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