

Pragmatic Language Skills

Pragmatics are the rules that people use for social language. Sometimes you will hear pragmatic skills referred to as “social skills”. If your child demonstrates difficulty understanding appropriate rules for social language in order to interact with other peers and/or adults, speech therapy can help to address these challenges by teaching and practicing specific social language rules in a safe non-threatening environment.

How Can Speech Therapy Help?

A speech-language pathologist is trained to provide speech therapy services that specifically target those language areas that a child is having the most difficulty in, including difficulties understanding and/or using pragmatic language skills. Activities such as providing visuals to assist in understanding, role-play of social situations, and video feedback are just a few of the methods that may be used in speech therapy. If you are interested in therapy or just want more information about pragmatic skills, please contact us at Play to Grow, (503) 563-5438, so that we may assist you further.

What are Pragmatic Skills?

Judy invited her friend over for dinner. Judy’s 5-year old son sees Judy’s friend reach for some cookies and says, “Better not take those, or you’ll get even bigger.” Judy is embarrassed that her son could speak so rudely to her friend.

This is just one example of a child not understanding how to use language appropriately in a particular social situation. He probably was not trying to be “rude”, he just did not understand that using those words was inappropriate in this situation. Sometimes an individual may say words clearly and use long, complex sentences with correct grammar, but may still have not mastered the rules for social language.

Pragmatics involves three major communication areas:

1. **Using language** for different purposes, such as:
 - Greeting, informing, demanding, promising, requesting
2. **Changing language** according to the needs of the listener or situation, such as:
 - Talking differently to a baby than to an adult
 - Giving background information to an unfamiliar listener
 - Speaking differently in a classroom than on a playground
3. **Following rules** for conversations and storytelling, such as:
 - Taking turns in conversation
 - Introducing topics of conversation
 - Staying on topic
 - Rephrasing when misunderstood
 - How to use verbal and nonverbal signals
 - How close to stand to someone when speaking
 - How to use facial expressions and eye contact

Pragmatic communication skills develop with age. Young children often exhibit *physical* communication difficulties very early, while *verbal* difficulties appear later as children begin to talk. In addition to difficulties with verbal communication, these children also have trouble *thinking* through social situations. A child with pragmatic communication difficulties tends to display the following characteristics:

1. Physical Difficulties:

- Poor eye contact
- Cannot maintain appropriate conversational distance
- Body language does not match speech (e.g., stares into space, emotions are too strong or too unenthusiastic for the situation, no body language to reinforce emotion)
- Facial expressions do not match the topic or situation (forgets to smile, does not nod to show understanding)

2. Verbal Difficulties

- Talks constantly about random topic or may not speak at all; interrupts conversations of others; does not know when/how to interrupt someone; shares too much information in conversation
- Poor turn-taking or does not acknowledge that it's someone else's turn; consistently interrupts without regret; insists on being first when playing games, or on having another turn if he/she has not been successful
- Speaks too softly or too loudly without regard for others feelings; speaks in a monotone voice
- Does not know how to give or receive a compliment and may insult someone unintentionally
- Does not know how to introduce himself/herself to individuals or groups; avoids groups and gatherings; does not like to shake hands, give hugs, or show affection; does not acknowledge others when entering a room

3. Thinking Difficulties

- Does not consider someone else's emotional state before speaking
- Takes jokes, sarcasm, and irony literally; laughs or talks at inappropriate times and in inappropriate places
- Forgets to take his/her turn in conversation; does not pick up on cues to continue a conversation
- Does not consider his/her words before speaking and how it may impact someone's feelings

Why are Pragmatic Skills So Important?

Understanding what the rules for social language are and how to use them appropriately are important throughout our lives. Difficulties with social behaviors may interfere with learning, acceptance by peer and social groups, and/or exclusion from school and other social activities. The foundations for understanding pragmatic skills are built at a very young age and continue to develop throughout our entire lives. Our ability to understand and use pragmatic skills appropriately directly impacts our success in social relationships with others.