



The Play Plan

36 two-minute games for the 12 conversation skills

For parents of children ages 4 to 8

How to use this plan

1. Find your child's three skills from the quiz in the list on the next page.
2. Start with the first of the three. Each skill has its own section with three games.
3. Play one game three times this week. Two minutes is enough.

Your child's three skills:

1. Section ____
2. Section ____
3. Section ____

Rules for every game

- About two minutes.
- Stop while it's still fun.
- The same game three times beats three games once.
- Practice and play, never a test.

The 12 skills

1	Joining in Walking up to children who are already playing, and ending up part of it.	Section 1
2	Taking turns Waiting until you have finished, then answering the thing you actually said.	Section 2
3	Staying on one subject Keeping to the same topic for a few exchanges instead of hopping to a new one.	Section 3
4	Trying again a different way When nobody understood them, finding new words instead of repeating the old ones louder.	Section 4
5	Facing the person Turning toward whoever they are talking to, and standing close enough to count as part of it.	Section 5
6	Looking at faces Glancing at a face while someone talks to them. Not holding a stare.	Section 6
7	Reading faces Telling from your face that you are joking, or that you are hurt, before you say so.	Section 7
8	Changing how they talk Sounding different with a teacher than with a best friend.	Section 8
9	Hello and thank you The small polite bits arriving on their own, without a nudge from you.	Section 9
10	Starting at the beginning Telling you about something so that you, who were not there, can follow it.	Section 10
11	Reading between the lines Working out that "it's freezing in here" means please shut the window.	Section 11
12	Tone of voice A voice that rises and falls with what is meant, instead of staying flat.	Section 12

The skills are listed in the order children usually pick them up. If two of your three are far apart, start with the lower number.

Joining in

Walking up to children who are already playing, and ending up part of it.

Game 1: The Doorway

What it practices: getting into a game that has already started, without asking permission.

You need: any toy you can play with on the floor.

How to play:

1. **Parent:** sit on the floor and start playing alone. Don't invite the child.
2. **Parent:** tell the child their job: "Get into my game. The only rule: you can't ask 'can I play?'"
3. **Parent:** if the child hovers, show the move once: come close, do the same thing, and say one thing about it.
4. **Child:** joins the game the same way.

Example: the parent is building with blocks. The child sits down, picks up a block and says: "That one's tall."

Then swap: the child plays alone first, and the parent finds a way in.

Watch for: whether the child reaches for words first. Doing the same thing usually has to come before talking.

Game 2: Late to the Party

What it practices: finding a role inside a game that's already running.

You need: two stuffed animals or a sibling, and any pretend game (a café, a tower, a race).

How to play:

1. **Parent:** start the game with the stuffed animals or a sibling before the child joins.
2. **Parent:** tell the child the rule: "The game won't stop for you. Find a way in."
3. **Child:** joins in two moves. First, says one thing about what's happening. Second, offers to do a job.
4. **Parent:** lets the child in and keeps playing for a minute, so joining pays off.

Example:

- Child: "The tower's leaning."
- Child: "I can hold the bottom."
- Parent: "Great, hold it while I add the roof."

Then swap: the child runs the game, and the parent arrives late.

Watch for: the offer. A comment gets the child noticed; an offer gets them in.

Game 3: What's Missing?

What it practices: working out what a group game is and where there's room to join, before trying.

You need: a playground or park where other children are playing.

How to play:

1. **Parent and child:** sit together where you can watch other children's game.
2. **Parent:** asks: "What game are they playing?"
3. **Child:** names the game.
4. **Parent:** asks: "What does the game need that it doesn't have?" (a counter, a goalie, a second chaser)
5. **Child:** answers. That's the whole game. The parent doesn't send the child in.

Example:

- Parent: "What are they playing?"
- Child: "Tag."
- Parent: "What's missing?"
- Child: "Nobody's guarding the base."

Watch for: whether the child can name the game at all. A child who can't tell what's being played can't find a way in.

Taking turns

Waiting until you have finished, then answering the thing you actually said.

Game 4: One Thing Each

What it practices: saying one thing, then stopping so the other person can talk.

You need: a spoon.

How to play:

1. **Parent:** picks a boring topic on purpose, like what each of you ate today.
2. **Parent:** explains the rule: whoever holds the spoon talks; the other one stays quiet.
3. **Parent and child:** after one sentence, the talker hands the spoon over.
4. **Parent:** if the child keeps talking, doesn't explain or correct. Just holds out a hand for the spoon.

Example:

- Parent (holding the spoon): "I had toast." Passes the spoon.
- Child: "I had cereal with bananas." Passes it back.

Watch for: how quickly the child passes the spoon back without the parent reaching for it.

Game 5: The Story Chain

What it practices: building on what the other person said, instead of starting over.

You need: nothing. Works well in the car.

How to play:

1. **Parent:** starts a story with one sentence.
2. **Child:** adds the next sentence. Rule: it must use one word from the parent's sentence.
3. **Parent and child:** keep taking turns, same rule, for about ten sentences.

Example:

- Parent: "The dog found a shoe."
- Child: "The shoe belonged to a giant."
- Parent: "The giant was looking for his shoe."

Watch for: whether the child's sentence connects to the parent's or starts a brand new story. Connecting is the turn.

Game 6: Rally

What it practices: answering, then handing the conversation back with a question.

You need: nothing. Works at the table.

How to play:

1. **Parent:** asks a simple question.
2. **Child:** answers, then asks a question back. That's the rule for both: every answer ends with a question.
3. **Parent:** counts each answer out loud, like hits in a ping-pong rally.
4. **Parent and child:** when someone forgets the question, the rally ends. Try to beat the number tomorrow.

Example:

- Parent: "What did you have for lunch?"
- Child: "Pasta. What did you have?"
- Parent: "Soup. Was the pasta hot?"
- Child: "Yes. Was the soup hot?"

Watch for: the question back. Answering is half a turn; handing it back is the other half.

Staying on one subject

Keeping to the same topic for a few exchanges instead of hopping to a new one.

Game 7: Three More

What it practices: staying on a topic long enough before switching.

You need: fingers, to count.

How to play:

1. **Child:** picks a subject.
2. **Parent:** explains the rule: before anyone can change the subject, each of you says three things about it.
3. **Parent:** counts each one on fingers where the child can see.
4. **Parent:** then picks the next subject, and the child owes three things about it.

Example (subject "cats"):

- Child: "Cats have whiskers." (one)
- Child: "Cats sleep a lot." (two)
- Child: "Our neighbor's cat is orange." (three)

Watch for: the child's third one. Getting to two is easy.

Game 8: Drift!

What it practices: noticing when a conversation jumps to something unconnected.

You need: nothing.

How to play:

1. **Parent and child:** take turns saying one word each. Each word must connect to the word before it.
2. **Either one:** if the other says a word that doesn't connect, call "Drift!"
3. **Whoever drifted:** explains the connection out loud, or takes it back and picks a new word.

Example:

- Parent: "Dog." Child: "Leash." Parent: "Walk." Child: "Park." Parent: "Swings." Child: "Pizza."
- Parent: "Drift!"
- Child: "No! We had pizza at the park last week."

Watch for: the connections the child explains. Often there's a real link in their head that they never said out loud.

Game 9: Why and Then

What it practices: staying with one subject while someone asks about it.

You need: a clock or phone, to time it quietly.

How to play:

1. **Child:** talks about one thing they love: a toy, a show, an animal.
2. **Parent:** may only ask two questions: "Why?" and "And then?" Never anything new.
3. **Parent:** quietly times how long the child stays on the subject before changing it.
4. **Parent:** next time, tries to help the child beat that time.

Example:

- Child: "I like sharks."
- Parent: "Why?"
- Child: "They're fast."
- Parent: "And then?"
- Child: "They can smell blood from far away."

Watch for: the moment the child changes the subject. That's the edge you're slowly moving.

Trying again a different way

When nobody understood them, finding new words instead of repeating the old ones louder.

Game 10: The Bad Ear

What it practices: saying something a different way when the listener doesn't understand.

You need: nothing.

How to play:

1. **Child:** says something to the parent.
2. **Parent:** pretends not to understand. Makes a puzzled face and says "Hmm?"
3. **Parent:** never says "What did you say?" That makes the child repeat it louder, which is the habit you're replacing.
4. **Child:** finds different words.
5. **Parent:** uses "Hmm?" no more than twice, then understands. Every time.

Example:

- Child: "I want the red one."
- Parent: "Hmm?"
- Child: "The red cup, next to the sink."

Then swap: the child makes the puzzled face, and the parent finds different words.

Watch for: louder versus different. Louder doesn't work on a playground.

Game 11: Wrong Sandwich

What it practices: fixing an instruction that didn't work, instead of repeating it.

You need: something simple to make: a sandwich, a bowl of cereal, or shoes to put on.

How to play:

1. **Child:** tells the parent how to make it, one step at a time.
2. **Parent:** does exactly what the child says, word for word, and nothing more.
3. **Child:** when a step goes wrong, changes the instruction. Saying it again louder doesn't count.
4. **Parent:** allows two silly mistakes per round, then follows sensibly so it doesn't turn frustrating.

Example:

- Child: "Put the jam on the bread."
- Parent puts the whole jar on top of the loaf.
- Child: "No! Open the jar and spread the jam with a knife."

Watch for: a new instruction versus the same one again. The new one is the skill.

Game 12: Guess My Thing

What it practices: giving a second, different clue when the first one didn't work.

You need: a room with things in it.

How to play:

1. **Child:** describes something in the room without naming it.
2. **Parent:** guesses wrong once, on purpose.
3. **Child:** gives a new clue. Repeating the same clue doesn't count.
4. **Parent:** guesses right.

Example:

- Child: "It's soft."
- Parent: "The cat?"
- Child: "No, it's soft and you sleep on it."
- Parent: "The pillow!"

Then swap: the parent describes, and the child guesses.

Watch for: whether the child's second clue is new or the first clue again, said slower.

Facing the person

Turning toward whoever they are talking to, and standing close enough to count as part of it.

Game 13: Backs

What it practices: feeling the difference between talking to someone's back and to their face.

You need: nothing.

How to play:

1. **Parent and child:** sit back to back on the floor.
2. **Parent and child:** each talk about your day for 30 seconds.
3. **Parent and child:** turn around, face each other, and do it again.
4. **Parent:** asks: "Which was easier?"

Example:

- Parent: "Which was easier?"
- Child: "Facing!"

Watch for: nothing to fix here. The child feels the difference, which is why it sticks.

Game 14: Find Me First

What it practices: going to the person and facing them before speaking.

You need: someone else at home (the other parent, a grandparent, a sibling).

How to play:

1. **Parent:** gives the child a short message for the other person. "Tell Dad dinner's in five minutes."
2. **Parent:** tells the other person the rule ahead of time: if the message is shouted from another room, act as if you heard nothing.
3. **Child:** delivers the message. It only counts if they're in the same room and facing the person.
4. **Child:** if it didn't count, tries again until the message arrives.

Example: the child shouts from the hallway; Dad keeps reading. The child walks in, stands in front of him and says: "Dad, dinner's in five minutes."

Watch for: the shout from the next room. That's the habit this game slowly replaces.

Game 15: Mirror Talk

What it practices: keeping your body turned toward someone while talking.

You need: a little space to stand.

How to play:

1. **Parent and child:** stand facing each other.
2. **Parent:** leads with slow movements.
3. **Child:** copies every movement, like a mirror.
4. **Parent and child:** when that's easy, keep mirroring and start talking about your day at the same time.

Example: the parent slowly raises one arm and says: "Today I went to the store..." The child raises the same arm and answers: "I went to school..."

Then swap: the child leads, and the parent mirrors.

Watch for: the child's mirror falling apart as soon as they start talking. The body follows the words away.

Looking at faces

Glancing at a face while someone talks to them. Not holding a stare.

Game 16: Eye Color

What it practices: having a reason to look at someone's face.

You need: nothing. Works at the table.

How to play:

1. **Parent:** asks: "What color are my eyes?" The child must guess without looking.
2. **Child:** guesses, then looks and checks.
3. **Parent:** guesses the child's eye color the same way.
4. **Everyone at the table:** takes a turn.

Example:

- Child: "Brown?" (looks) "No, green!"

Watch for: nothing to correct. Nobody has to hold eye contact; the child just needs a reason to look. Play it three times this week and keep it easy.

Game 17: What Changed?

What it practices: studying a face closely.

You need: nothing (glasses or a hair clip help).

How to play:

1. **Child:** looks at the parent's face for ten seconds, then closes their eyes.
2. **Parent:** changes one thing: raised eyebrows, a smile, hair pushed back, glasses off.
3. **Child:** opens their eyes and finds what changed.

Example:

- Child: "Your eyebrows are up!"

Then swap: the child changes something, and the parent finds it.

Watch for: a quick glance versus really looking. By round two the child looks longer without being told.

Game 18: Copy My Face

What it practices: looking at every part of a face, not just the eyes.

You need: nothing.

How to play:

1. **Parent:** makes a face and holds it: surprised, grumpy, silly.
2. **Child:** copies it exactly: eyebrows, eyes, mouth.
3. **Parent:** checks and points out anything that doesn't match.

Example:

- Parent: "Your mouth is right, but my eyebrows were down, not up."

Then swap: the child makes the face, and the parent copies.

Watch for: the eyebrows. Children skip them first, and they carry a lot of the feeling.

Reading faces

Telling from your face that you are joking, or that you are hurt, before you say so.

Game 19: Sound Off

What it practices: reading a feeling from a face, not from the story.

You need: a TV show with people in it.

How to play:

1. **Parent:** mutes the TV for two minutes.
2. **Parent:** pauses on a face and asks: "What is that person feeling?"
3. **Child:** answers.
4. **Parent:** asks the important question: "How do you know?"
5. **Child:** points at the face itself: the eyebrows, the mouth.

Example:

- Child: "She's angry."
- Parent: "How do you know?"
- Child: "Her eyebrows are squished down."

Watch for: answers from what happened in the story instead of the face. Many children read the situation well and the person not at all.

Game 20: Face Charades

What it practices: showing and reading feelings using only the face.

You need: nothing.

How to play:

1. **Parent:** shows a feeling with the face only. No sounds, no hand movements.
2. **Child:** guesses the feeling.
3. **Child:** says which part of the parent's face gave it away.

Example: the parent opens their eyes wide and drops their jaw.

- Child: "Surprised! Your mouth is open."

Then swap: the child acts a feeling, and the parent guesses.

Watch for: guesses with no face clue behind them. Ask: "What did my mouth do?"

Game 21: Cover the Words

What it practices: reading feelings from faces in pictures.

You need: a picture book.

How to play:

1. **Parent:** opens the book and covers the words with a hand.
2. **Parent:** points at a character and asks: "How do they feel? How can you tell?"
3. **Child:** answers by pointing at the character's face.
4. **Parent:** uncovers the words and reads them together with the child to check.

Example:

- Child: "He's sad. His mouth is turned down."
- Parent reads: "Ben lost his kite."

Watch for: guessing from the last page instead of the face in front of the child.

Changing how they talk

Sounding different with a teacher than with a best friend.

Game 22: Same Sentence, Three People

What it practices: changing the way you say something depending on who you're talking to.

You need: nothing.

How to play:

1. **Parent:** gives the child one sentence. "I need the bathroom" works well.
2. **Child:** says it as if to their best friend.
3. **Child:** says it as if to their teacher.
4. **Child:** says it as if to a baby.

Example:

- Child, to a friend: "I gotta go!"
- Child, to the teacher: "Excuse me, may I use the bathroom?"
- Child, to a baby: "Bathroom time!"

Watch for: whether all three come out the same. The switching is the skill, and it's usually very funny.

Game 23: Explain It to an Alien

What it practices: giving more or less detail depending on what the listener already knows.

You need: nothing.

How to play:

1. **Parent:** picks something everyday, like brushing teeth.
2. **Child:** explains it to an alien who has never seen a toothbrush. The alien needs every step.
3. **Child:** explains it to a big kid who already knows. The big kid needs one sentence.

Example:

- Child, to the alien: "Take the stick with the hairs. Put the paste on the hairs. Rub it on your teeth..."
- Child, to the big kid: "Just brush your teeth."

Watch for: whether the two explanations are different lengths. If they're the same, the child hasn't changed anything for the listener yet.

Game 24: Voice Ladder

What it practices: choosing how loud to talk for the place you're in.

You need: nothing.

How to play:

1. **Parent:** explains five voice levels: 1 is a library whisper, 2 is a quiet room, 3 is the dinner table, 4 is a busy store, 5 is calling across a playground.
2. **Parent:** names a place.
3. **Child:** says one sentence at the right level for that place.

Example:

- Parent: "The doctor's waiting room."
- Child, at level 2: "When is it our turn?"

Watch for: levels 2, 3 and 4. Many children only use a 1 and a 5.

Hello and thank you

The small polite bits arriving on their own, without a nudge from you.

Game 25: The Shop

What it practices: the whole polite script: hello, asking, thank you, goodbye.

You need: any object to "sell".

How to play:

1. **Parent:** is the shopkeeper.
2. **Child:** is a customer buying one thing, and does the whole script: hello, ask for it, thank you, goodbye.
3. **Parent:** if a part is missing, waits without saying anything until the child adds it.

Example:

- Child: "Hello. Can I have an apple, please?"
- Parent: "Here you go."
- Child: "Thank you. Bye!"

Then swap: the child is the shopkeeper, and the parent is the customer.

Watch for: the goodbye. It's the part that goes missing most.

Game 26: Knock Knock

What it practices: greeting someone before getting to what they want.

You need: a door.

How to play:

1. **Parent:** knocks on the child's bedroom door, pretending to be a visitor the child knows: Grandma, the mail carrier, their teacher.
2. **Child:** opens the door and says hello first, then "What do you need?", then goodbye.

Example:

- Child: "Hello, Grandma! What do you need?"
- Parent (as Grandma): "I brought you a cake."
- Child: "Thank you! Bye!"

Then swap: the child knocks as the visitor, and the parent answers the door.

Watch for: whether the hello comes first. Most children open with "What?"

Game 27: Thank-You Spotters

What it practices: noticing when other people say thank you.

You need: a day out: the store, the bus, a café.

How to play:

1. **Parent and child:** are both detectives for the day.
2. **Parent and child:** each count every thank-you you hear other people say.
3. **Parent and child:** at home, compare numbers.

Example:

- Child: "I heard six! The man at the bakery said it twice."

Watch for: whether the child starts spotting the missing ones too. ("That lady didn't say thank you.")

Starting at the beginning

Telling you about something so that you, who were not there, can follow it.

Game 28: I Wasn't There

What it practices: giving the listener the names and background before the story.

You need: nothing.

How to play:

1. **Child:** tells the parent about something that happened when the parent wasn't there.
2. **Parent:** doesn't fill in any gaps.
3. **Parent:** each time a name the parent doesn't know comes up, or a "he" or "she" with no name, says "Who?"
4. **Parent:** "Who?" is the only thing the parent is allowed to say.

Example:

- Child: "He took my ball."
- Parent: "Who?"
- Child: "Leo, the boy in my class."

Watch for: how many "Who?"s the parent needs. The number drops fast, and watching it drop is the good part.

Game 29: Picture Strip

What it practices: telling events in the order they happened.

You need: paper and a pen (stick figures are fine).

How to play:

1. **Parent:** draws three or four quick pictures of something that happens in steps: planting a seed, making toast, giving a dog a bath.
2. **Parent:** mixes up the pictures.
3. **Child:** puts them in order.
4. **Child:** tells the story out loud, starting with "First".

Example:

- Child: "First you dig a hole. Then you put the seed in. Then you water it. Then it grows."

Watch for: the child starting in the middle, with the most exciting picture. That's exactly what happens when they tell you about their day.

Game 30: The New Kid

What it practices: introducing the people in a story before telling what happened.

You need: a stuffed animal.

How to play:

1. **Parent:** introduces the stuffed animal as "new". It has never met anyone in the family.
2. **Child:** tells the stuffed animal about something that happened.
3. **Rule for the child:** every person must be introduced before anything happens to them.
4. **Parent (as the stuffed animal):** looks confused whenever someone appears with no introduction.

Example:

- Child: "My cousin Sam is seven. He has a dog called Max. Yesterday Max ate Sam's sandwich."

Watch for: the first "he" or "she" with no one attached.

Reading between the lines

Working out that "it's freezing in here" means please shut the window.

Game 31: What I Really Mean

What it practices: understanding what someone wants when they don't say it directly.

You need: nothing.

How to play:

1. **Parent:** says something that hints at what the parent wants, without asking for it.
2. **Child:** works out what the parent really wants, and does it or says it.
3. **Child:** makes up a hint for the parent.
4. **Parent:** sometimes guesses the child's hint wrong on purpose, so the child gets to explain it.

Example:

- Parent (carrying bags): "My hands are full."
- Child opens the door.

Watch for: answers to the words instead of the meaning. If the child says "Yes, your hands are full," that's useful to find out.

Game 32: The Family Code

What it practices: learning the hidden meaning in everyday sayings.

You need: paper, a pen, and the fridge.

How to play:

1. **Parent and child:** think of things people in your family say that mean something else.
2. **Parent:** writes each one down with what it really means.
3. **Parent and child:** stick the list on the fridge and add to it all week.

Example:

- "Is that your coat on the floor?" = "Please pick up your coat."
- "We'll see." = "Probably not."

Watch for: how much the child already knows. Many children decode these perfectly and just never say so.

Game 33: Hint Hunt

What it practices: working out the meaning behind a hint.

You need: a small object to hide.

How to play:

1. **Parent:** hides the object while the child covers their eyes.
2. **Parent:** gives hints that only make sense if the child thinks about what they mean. No directions like "left" or "warmer".
3. **Child:** searches using the hints.

Example:

- Parent: "It's somewhere I'd go if I was cold."
- Child goes to the blanket on the couch.

Then swap: the child hides it and gives the parent hints.

Watch for: hints taken word for word. "But you're not cold" is a real answer and shows you where the child is.

Tone of voice

A voice that rises and falls with what is meant, instead of staying flat.

Game 34: Six Ways

What it practices: hearing how the same words change with the voice.

You need: nothing. Works well in the car.

How to play:

1. **Parent:** picks one short sentence: "I'm going to bed."
2. **Parent:** says it six ways: bored, angry, excited, sneaky, tired, scared.
3. **Child:** guesses the feeling each time.

Example:

- Parent (yawning, slow): "I'm going to bed."
- Child: "Tired!"

Then swap: the child says it six ways, and the parent guesses.

Watch for: all six of the child's sounding the same. That's the thing to keep playing, not a problem.

Game 35: Robot or Real

What it practices: putting feeling into the voice.

You need: nothing.

How to play:

1. **Parent:** says a sentence flat, like a robot.
2. **Parent:** says the same sentence like a real person who means it.
3. **Child:** says which was the robot and what changed.
4. **Parent:** gives the child a new robot sentence; the child turns it into a real one.

Example:

- Parent, robot: "I. Love. Ice. Cream."
- Parent, real: "I LOVE ice cream!"
- Child: "The second one. Your voice went up."

Watch for: whether the child's "real" voice goes up and down at all. At first, flat and real can sound the same.

Game 36: Which Word?

What it practices: hearing how the stressed word changes the meaning. Best for ages 6 to 8.

You need: nothing.

How to play:

1. **Parent:** says one sentence: "I didn't eat the cookie."
2. **Parent:** says it again several times, stressing a different word each time.
3. **Parent:** after each one, asks: "What does that one mean?"
4. **Child:** explains the meaning.

Example:

- Parent: "I didn't eat the cookie." Child: "Someone else ate it."
- Parent: "I didn't **eat** the cookie." Child: "You did something else to it."
- Parent: "I didn't eat the **cookie**." Child: "You ate something else."

Watch for: whether the child hears which word was pushed. That's the whole skill, and it's hard.

These are reps, not lessons. Nobody sits down, nothing gets marked, and when it stops being fun, you stop.

Start with the first of your child's three skills. Play one of its games three times this week.

This plan is play and practice. It is not an assessment, a diagnosis or therapy. If you are worried about your child's speech or language, talk to a speech and language therapist.

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