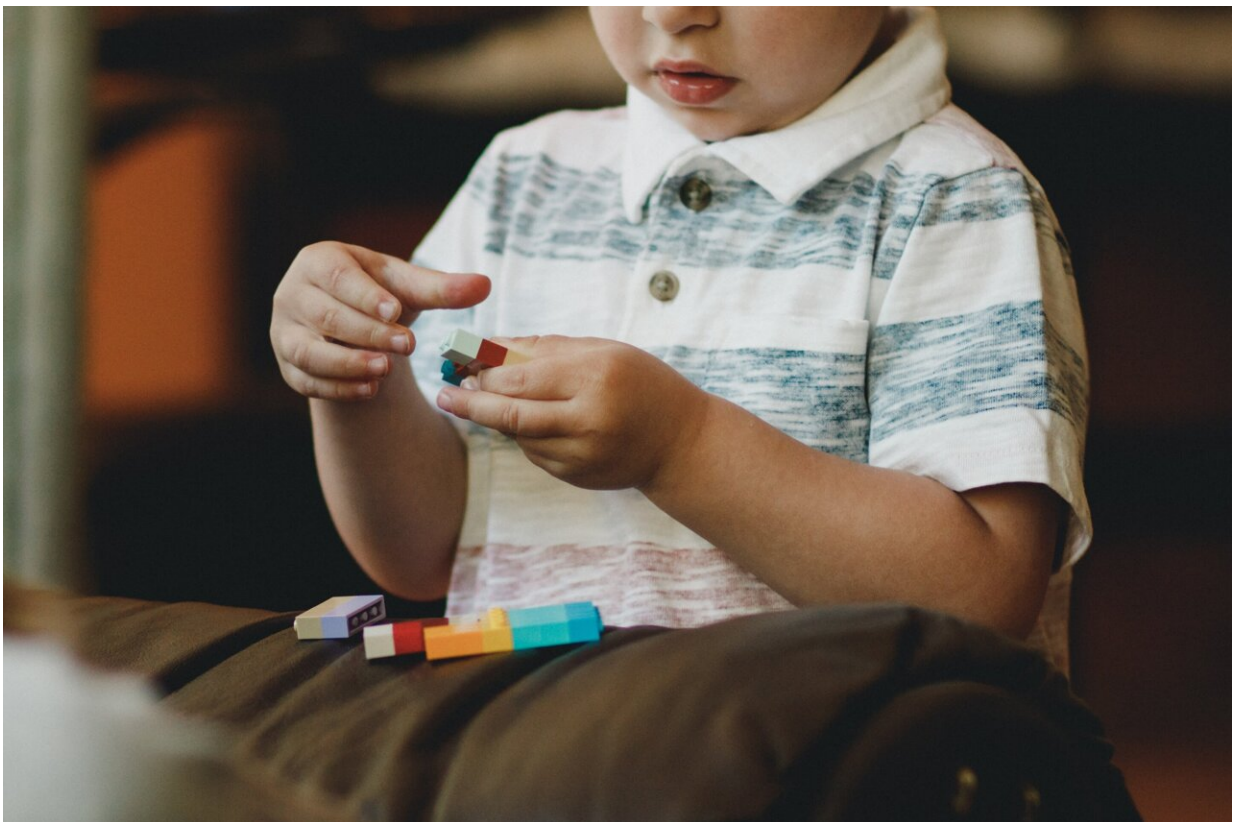


Using social cues to adjust conversational behavior may be challenging for autistic children and teens

March 15 2022



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

In successful conversations, people tend to adjust their language and talkativeness to reflect the behavior of the person they are speaking with.

However, these nuances of social communication can be difficult for individuals with autism. In a new study, researchers from the Center for Autism Research (CAR) at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) found that children and teens with autism did not adjust their own level of talkativeness to reflect quieter social partners as much as neurotypical peers did, which may lead to less successful social interactions. The findings were recently published in the journal *Autism Research*.

While social communication seems to come naturally for most people, it's a rather complex process that relies on continuously revising one's behavior to fit the needs of a particular conversation, social partner, and environmental context. Someone might become less talkative when conversing with a social partner who is quiet and become more talkative with a chattier partner. Prior research suggests that people with autism struggle to adapt their behavior across social contexts, which can contribute to suboptimal social outcomes.

"In our study, we measured talkativeness to see whether verbally fluent children and teens with autism differed from their neurotypical peers on this metric," said first author Meredith Cola, a research assistant at CAR and a clinical psychology graduate student at La Salle University. "By focusing on word count, we could objectively measure whether autistic and neurotypical peers adapted their behavior to fit their conversation partners."

The study included 98 participants between 7 and 17 years old, with 48 of the participants diagnosed with autism and 50 who were neurotypical. In the study, participants engaged in conversation with two novel social partners. The first one acted interested in the conversation and talked more, while the second one acted bored and talked less. As a group, neurotypical participants successfully emulated their conversation partner's behavior by being more talkative with the person acting more interested, and less talkative with the person acting bored. However, the

autism group remained consistently talkative in both conversations and did not adapt their communicative behaviors to reflect their social partners.

Based on these findings, the authors said that learning to adjust one's talkativeness could represent a growth opportunity for verbally fluent autistic individuals and could be a valuable target for interventions that support social communication.

"Adjusting how we communicate depending on the behavior of the person we are talking to is an important skill that facilitates rewarding social interactions," said senior study author Julia Parish-Morris, Ph.D., a research scientist at CAR and a faculty member in the Departments of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences and the Department of Biomedical & Health Informatics at CHOP.

"Conversations—by definition—go both ways. When both conversation partners adjust their behavior a little bit to improve the flow, everyone wins. Noticing differences in how talkative your partner is, and adjusting your own talkativeness accordingly, is a valuable communication skill to have in your toolbox."

More information: Meredith Cola et al, Conversational adaptation in children and teens with autism: Differences in talkativeness across contexts, *Autism Research* (2022). [DOI: 10.1002/aur.2693](https://doi.org/10.1002/aur.2693)

Provided by Children's Hospital of Philadelphia

Citation: Using social cues to adjust conversational behavior may be challenging for autistic children and teens (2022, March 15) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-03-social-cues-adjust-conversational-behavior.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.