

Mothers' Conversational Patterns: A Comparison Between
Typically Developing Children and Young Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders

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Abstract

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) are a group of developmental disabilities that cause mild to severe deficits in language, verbal and nonverbal communication, and social skills (Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, 2004). Given the social nature of conversation and the deficits in social skills seen in ASD, one might expect the development of conversation to be more delayed than other language deficits. Previous research on typically developing children has shown that differences in maternal utterances and conversational structure alter the nature of interactions in ways that appear to affect children's acquisition of language. The present study investigates the maternal pragmatic and conversational input to children with ASD, particularly the types of utterances (i.e., questions and commands) and the conversational structure produced. The children's responses to the mothers' questions and commands were also examined. Mothers of children with ASD produced significantly more commands than mothers of typically developing children matched by age or language level. The structure of mothers' conversational input also varied by group: mothers of children with ASD produced significantly more topic continuations than mothers of age-matched children. The results contribute to our knowledge of maternal language input to children with ASD.