

Social Language Use (Pragmatics)

You have invited your friend over for dinner. Your child sees your friend reach for some cookies and says, "Better not take those, or you'll get even bigger." You're embarrassed that your child could speak so rudely. However, you should consider that your child may not know how to use language appropriately in social situations and did not mean harm by the comment.

An individual may say words clearly and use long, complex sentences with correct grammar, but still have a communication problem - if he or she has not mastered the rules for social language known as **pragmatics**. Adults may also have difficulty with pragmatics, for example, as a result of a brain injury or stroke.

Pragmatics involve three major communication skills:

Using language for different purposes, such as

- greeting (e.g., hello, goodbye)
- informing (e.g., I'm going to get a cookie)
- demanding (e.g., Give me a cookie)
- promising (e.g., I'm going to get you a cookie)
- requesting (e.g., I would like a cookie, please)

Changing language according to the needs of a 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

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

These rules may vary across cultures and within cultures. It is important to understand the rules of your communication partner.

An individual with pragmatic problems may:

- say inappropriate or unrelated things during conversations

- tell stories in a disorganized way
- have little variety in language use

It is not unusual for children to have pragmatic problems in only a few situations. However, if problems in social language use occur often and seem inappropriate considering the child's age, a pragmatic disorder may exist. Pragmatic disorders often coexist with other language problems such as vocabulary development or grammar. Pragmatic problems can lower social acceptance. Peers may avoid having conversations with an individual with a pragmatic disorder.

Learn more on this topic: [Pragmatic Language Tips](#)

If you have concerns about your loved one's social language use, visit [ASHA ProFind](#).