

CURRICULUM SPOTLIGHT:

The Conversation Train

A Visual Approach to Conversation for Children with Autism by Joel Shaul

Overview of the Book

Many children, especially those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), struggle with basic social conventions in conversation such as greeting, saying goodbye, taking turns, staying on a shared topic, and shifting topics smoothly.

The Conversation Train uses a train theme that many children with ASD find motivating and fascinating as a visual metaphor to teach these social rules. Through this familiar framework, children gain structure and clarity while learning how conversations work.

Concepts Taught in the Curriculum

The book introduces children to the “building blocks” of conversation through story, discussion, and practice. Using train elements as visual cues, children learn:

- Starting a Conversation (Engine): Learning how to greet and initiate interactions.
- Taking Turns (Freight Wagons): Practicing balanced conversational exchanges.
- Staying on Topic (Avoiding Derailment): Recognizing when a conversation drifts and maintaining focus.
- Changing Topics (Switch Points): Using transition phrases to move naturally to new subjects.
- Ending a Conversation (Guard’s Van): Learning polite ways to conclude interactions.

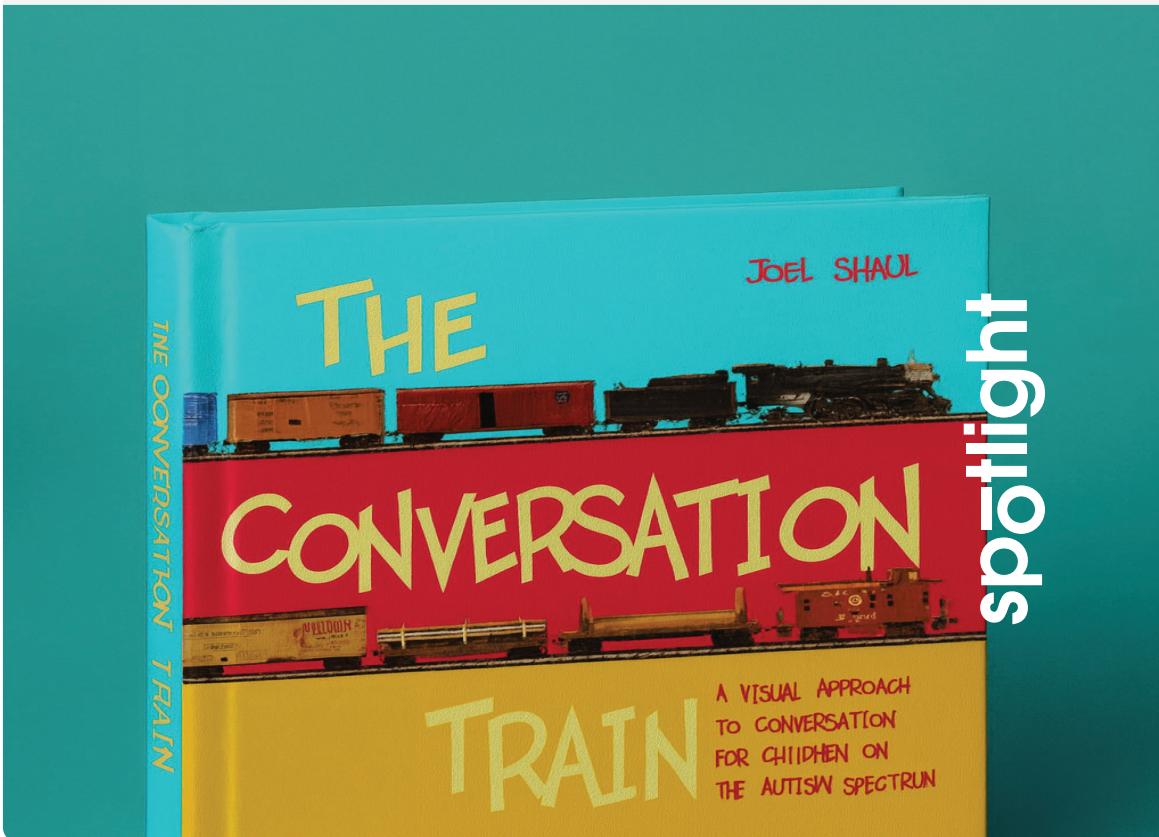
The book also provides hands-on worksheets and visual exercises that help children connect abstract social skills with concrete, motivating images, such as:

- Practicing greetings, “how are you”, switch-track, and goodbyes phrases and words
- Identifying personal “off-track” triggers (for ex. favorite toys, foods, or hobbies) and practicing strategies to stay on topic

Goals to Target Using This Curriculum

- Initiate conversation with peer/adult using appropriate greetings
- Will take turn during interactions/conversation
- Sustain conversation for a set number of exchanges
- Stay on topic during conversation
- Identify and self-monitor when going “off track.”
- Shift topics during conversation using transition phrases.
- End conversation using words such as “goodbye, talk to you later, nice speaking to you”

By framing conversations like train journeys with a beginning, middle, and end, children develop the structure, flexibility, and confidence to engage more successfully with peers and adults.



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