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*Observations on conversations with young adults with DS*

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*Editor's note: MacDonald, a clinician and researcher with people with language disorders, was a professor of Speech-Language-Pathology and director of the parent-child communication clinic at the Nisonger Center at Ohio State University from 1971 to 1995. Since 1995, he has directed the Communicating Partners Center. MacDonald, a frequent speaker at NDSC Conventions, was a presenter at the 2002 NDSC Convention in Denver. He also made two presentations at the Youth and Adult Conference.*

While in Denver, I spoke to two groups of people with Down syndrome over 16 years of age; most were in their twenties and thirties.

Actually, what we did was have an audience-type talk show. I talked briefly about some keys to having a conversation, and then I asked them to tell about their best conversational partner. I bet over 70 percent of the hands went up furiously. I tried to have little conversations with many of the folks and in the three hours came back with a few observations.

- Most said that conversations were very important to them.
- Some seemed to think that a conversation simply meant talking and saying as much as is on their minds.
- Some knew that conversations mean to take turns and let others talk as well.
- Most of their favorite conversational partners were either friends they made at the convention or their "boyfriend" or "girlfriend."
- Many said they had been hurt in conversations by people who make fun of them.

I have several very tentative conclusions that may help parents think about the future:

- Young adults with DS do want to talk with people.
- They often talk in monologues rather than in back and forth conversations.
- They often ignore what their partner says and have a hard time responding to what others say.
- They often play a very passive role in conversations and need quite a bit of silent waiting to get them started.

- Some are afraid that others will make fun of them.
- They sometimes have difficulty staying on one topic for more than a few exchanges.
- They sometimes need help to find what to say.
- They sometimes need to be reminded to respond to what the other person talks about.

I had a wonderful time. And this experience makes me want to encourage all of you parents of young children to remember two absolutely important skills that make a huge difference as children age:

**1. Taking turns — unless a child takes turns, he will be unlikely to build friendships and learn from others.** I spoke with many young adults who knew that talking was much more than performing; they said one thing then waited for me to talk and they stayed in conversations on one topic for several turns. Some did not seem to take turns much and they seemed more isolated than the ones that did.

**2. Responding to what the conversation partner says** — it made such a difference to me when the person responded to what I said rather than just continue on with what they were saying. It is not enough for someone to learn to talk; they need to learn to talk about what their partners talk about. Otherwise, most people will lose interest and not build a relationship with them.

And, my point is that it is not too soon to teach your child these two critical skills: taking turns and responding to what you do and say. It saddens me to see so many wonderful people who have a great deal of language to seem so quiet and alone when they have not learned to take turns and talk about what others are interested in.