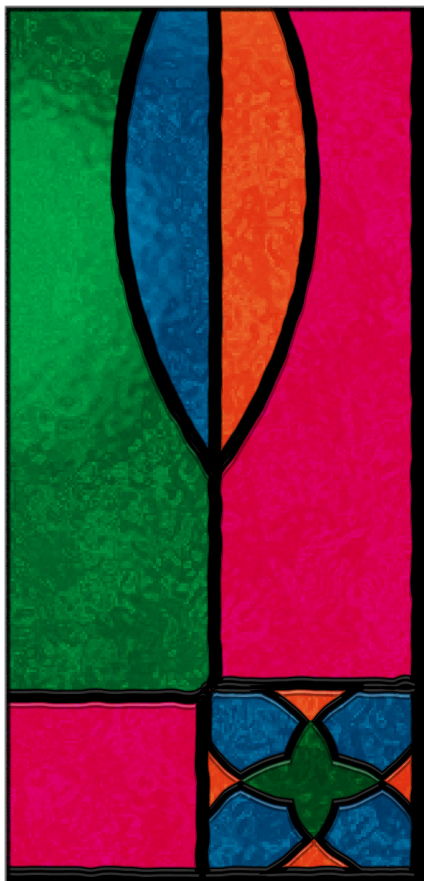


Simple ways to start a conversation

WITHIN



REACH



Within Reach

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Author: Maria Mirucka

Translation: Monika Dembinska

Consultants: dr Dominika Bulska, dr Katarzyna Kubin

Editing and proofreading: Mirosława Kostrzyńska

Layout, typesetting, and cover design: Helena Jabłonowska

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Otwarta Rzeczpospolita Stowarzyszenie przeciw Antysemityzmowi i Ksenofobii

Krakowskie Przedmieście 16/18, 00-325 Warszawa

e-mail: otwarta@otwarta.org

www.otwarta.org / www.zglosnienawisc.otwarta.org

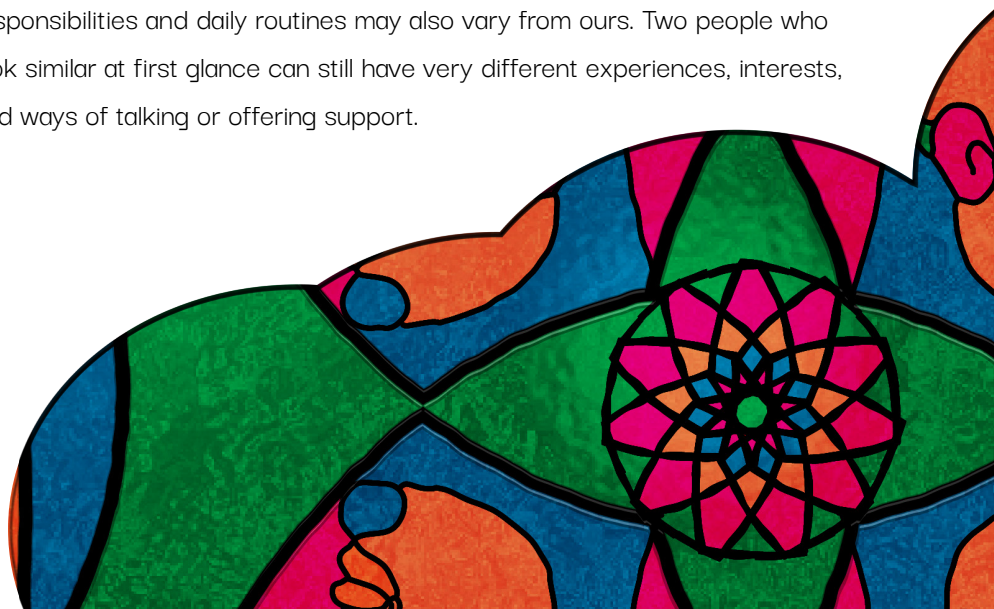
Within Reach

Simple ways to start a conversation

This handbook was designed to help start conversations with people from all kinds of backgrounds, no matter the differences in language, place of origin or life experience. In it, you will find simple tasks to get you started, safe topics, tips for handling awkwardness or uncertainty, as well as short exercises to help you reframe your beliefs so you can approach others with curiosity and openness. This handbook can be used in everyday situations: in public offices, at your child's school or preschool, at work, while waiting in a queue – everywhere you meet other people.

Different experiences, similar needs

Every day, we meet people who are different from us, for example in gender, age, language or place of origin. Their financial situation, health, responsibilities and daily routines may also vary from ours. Two people who look similar at first glance can still have very different experiences, interests, and ways of talking or offering support.



You can imagine each of us as a stained-glass window. We may be made up of the same colours, but they are arranged in our own unique patterns, so that light shines through differently for each person in a given situation.

For example:

At first glance, **a young, female programmer from India,**
who has just recently moved to a new city, and **a farmer from**
a village near Siedlce seem to be in very different situations.

In fact, they have at least one common need: **they both need simple, step-by-step instructions and clear infographics for using public services online.** This is because she isn't yet familiar with the local context, while he rarely uses these kinds of services.

A Polish single mother raising her child in Warsaw might be looking for free activities for kids, as well as childcare services. **A different mother, from Belarus,** who speaks good Polish, might need someone to introduce her to her neighbours. **They both look for help at their local community centre.** Though they have slightly different needs, they are both looking for services which will make their everyday lives easier.

A Polish builder with limited Internet access and **a Spanish exchange student, who is only starting to learn Polish,** have **similar needs when it comes to adverts and announcements such as job offers or university bulletins. Both of them prefer these texts to be short and simple** – he doesn't want to waste time reading long sentences on his phone screen while she prefers clear statements which can be easily translated.



Exercise

A closer look at stained-glass windows

Describe yourself using three categories of your choice.

These could include: gender, age, mother tongue, origin, physical appearance, financial situation, health or responsibilities.

How do these traits impact your everyday life?

Now think of someone you know, who you think is very different from you.

Think about the impact your differences might have on how you communicate with this person. Try to find at least one thing you have in common. In what way could this shared trait lead to similar experiences?

Sometimes, it can be hard for us to notice that **we share similar needs with another person** because we make assumptions instead of asking questions.

This is normal. Our brains like to work quickly, so they use patterns to help them organise the world around us.

However, these patterns can limit our interactions. Instead of getting to know another person, we base our behaviour on our own thoughts and assumptions. This can create distance and make it difficult to connect, even with someone we might actually get along with.

Interacting with people can be challenging, especially when we meet someone we consider very different to us, and therefore unpredictable. In such situations, we might worry more about how we are seen, rather than actually trying to get to know the other person. This is perfectly normal, but if we get stuck thinking this way, we might miss a chance to meet someone interesting or take part in community activities.

First impressions

When we first meet a new person, we usually have **an immediate emotional reaction to them**. Quite often this reaction may be based on our own ideas about who the person is; we might label them as members of a particular group.

These mental shortcuts come from two sources: our impressions of the new person – their appearance, accent, or the way they dress – and stories we may have heard before.

Like popular urban legends, these stories are very vague, and they make us see others **in a simplified or even wrong or unfair way**.



Exercise

How true is it?

Choose one group you identify with.

This could be based on nationality or ethnicity (Polish, Romani), profession (teacher, sales person, manager) or role in your family (mum, dad), etc.

On a piece of paper, **write down three opinions you often hear about this group**, whether positive, neutral or negative. Some examples include: "Poles are always complaining", "government officials are thorough", "parents of three-year-olds have a lot of responsibilities".

Now decide to what extent these statements apply to you.

Rate each sentence with a number from 0 to 5, where:

0 = doesn't apply to me at all

5 = fully applies to me

You might have noticed that a certain statement only slightly applies to you or doesn't apply to you at all. Think about the generalisations you make about other groups – maybe they aren't adequate either?

Now think about the kind of questions you'd like to be asked by someone who is getting to know you. What would you like to hear?

On the other hand, what would make you feel uncomfortable?

Sensitive topics

Sometimes, we're afraid of starting a conversation because we're scared of saying something wrong, especially when we don't know the other person's experiences or perspective. It's worth remembering that this is exactly what conversations are for – getting to know each other gradually.

Sometimes, we'll say something that sounds awkward. This is perfectly normal. What matters are your intentions and your reaction. The more you try, the more confident and satisfied you will feel. You will also have a better chance of meeting someone interesting.

Tips: how to avoid awkward moments?

Ask about preferences:

- "Should I call you Mr/Ms. ..., or would you prefer me to use your first name?"
- "How should I spell your name?"
- "Could you repeat your name, please? I want to learn to pronounce it correctly."
- "What are your pronouns?"

Don't guess – focus on specifics

- "Would you like me to explain step by step, or give a quick summary?"
- "What should I explain in more detail?"
- "How would you like to do this?"
- "Is there anything you would like me to clarify or repeat?"

Admit mistakes

- "I'm sorry, I didn't phrase that very well. How would you like me to talk about...?"
- "Thanks for correcting me."
- "I'm glad you pointed that out, thank you."

When getting to know someone, it's best to **avoid topics that may be too personal or divisive**, such as politics, reasons for leaving their home country, their financial situation or religious beliefs. These subjects could easily trigger emotions or difficult memories and generally require a stronger sense of security to discuss.

But if the person brings any of them up and seems willing to share, you can follow the conversation as long as you feel comfortable.

Remember, they might just want to tell you about themselves, not start a discussion. **If you don't feel comfortable**, you can acknowledge what they have said and suggest a different topic.



Exercise

Comfort mapping

If you want to make sense of which topics you feel comfortable discussing and which ones are more challenging to you, try this simple exercise.

On a piece of paper, **draw three circles**, each of which will represent a group of topics:

No problem – topics you don't mind discussing with most people.

Uncertain – topics you feel uncertain or not well informed about.

Don't ask – personal topics you prefer avoiding, especially with people you don't know well.

In the circles, write specific examples of topics. These could be **general** (food, travel, the weather), or **specific** (your child's name, favourite free time/leisure activities, commuting).

Remember, your map isn't set in stone – it can always be modified in the future.

Look at it from time to time and make changes according to how you feel.

Perhaps you can **move something towards your No problem topics**.

Maybe you've learned something new, and a topic you were previously **uncertain** about has become easier to discuss?

Or maybe you want to move a certain topic from **No problem** to **Don't ask**, because someone you spoke to indicated they'd rather not talk about it?

Curiosity is the first step

Sometimes, we feel uncomfortable before we've even met someone new. We might feel anxious about the idea of having a conversation, worried we'll run out of things to talk about or that we won't know how to react. Sometimes, we're curious about other people, but we don't know how to phrase our questions and we give in to our sense of uncertainty. This may stop us from initiating contact, even though we know a casual conversation might lead to a new friendship.

Fear was originally supposed to keep us safe, but nowadays, it often prevents us from entering potentially interesting and enjoyable encounters and conversations. How can we overcome it?



Exercise

Small steps

Name your feeling: "I feel anxious".

Pause and check whether you're anxious about something that's really putting you in danger. If your answer is:

Yes: do something to protect yourself.

No: tell yourself that you feel this way because you don't know what to expect or how to behave when someone or something is new or unknown to you.

Take a small step: smile, say hello, open with a kind, neutral sentence ("Nice weather for a bike ride").

We often think a conversation should be deep and special. Actually, the most satisfying conversations are often simple chats in which both parties are free to decide what they want to talk about.

The goal is an exchange, not an interrogation.

Among the best conversation starters are a smile or a neutral comment about something in the person's surroundings: an item of clothing, a book, a bag or a bicycle. It's best to avoid comments about someone's body (their appearance or figure), as this might be too personal or even embarrassing.

Focusing on objects or belongings is safer, and makes it easier to keep the conversation light and friendly.

It can be hard to take the first step

Tips: conversation starters

Friendly signals include:

a smile, a slight nod, a calm tone.

Share a neutral comment about the surroundings or situation:

"What a long queue."

"Your book has a nice cover."

"What a lively dog!"

"I see your child likes building blocks."

Ask a short, simple question related to the conversation topic,
based on your observations:

"Have you been waiting long?"

"Is that book interesting?"

"Is it a puppy?" albo "What is your dog called?"

"Does your child often play like that?"

You can also use open questions to invite a longer exchange:

"Do you have any tips for passing time in long queues?"

"What kind of books do you like best?"

"Where does your dog like going for walks?"

"What are your child's favourite games at preschool?"

If you feel at ease after a short exchange, share a little about yourself. This makes the conversation more natural – a two-way exchange, not just one person asking questions. Choose a small fact or a memory that relates to the topic and isn't too personal.

Examples:

"Sometimes I read the posters on the walls
– they often contain interesting information."

"I like those types of stories too."

"My dog was also very curious at that age,
he'd sniff everything around him."

"My daughter loves building blocks.

I can hardly get her away from them sometimes."

Remember – the person you're talking to might feel hesitant at first.

This is perfectly normal. If the conversation still isn't flowing after a few attempts, kindly let it go. They might be tired, having a bad day or simply might not feel like talking. That's okay too.

Sometimes, you might encounter a language barrier. The person you're talking to might not know Polish or English very well, or they might still be learning. In such situations, it's best not to insist on a long conversation.

What matters is that you noticed the other person and sent them a friendly signal. Even if you don't end up having a deep conversation, people are usually grateful when someone shows them interest, as this makes them feel more included.



Language techniques

When talking to someone who doesn't speak Polish or English, or when we simply want to avoid misunderstandings, we can use a few simple language techniques.

Simplify your message. Keep your sentences short and clear, without unnecessary jargon or abbreviations.
Remember, there's no need to speak loudly.

Instead of saying: "Applications must be submitted via the online portal",

try: "You can apply online".

Instead of saying: "Due to the upcoming celebration of National Education Day, we are raising funds for a symbolic gift for the teacher",

try: "We are collecting money to buy the teacher a present".

Use gestures or draw pictures.

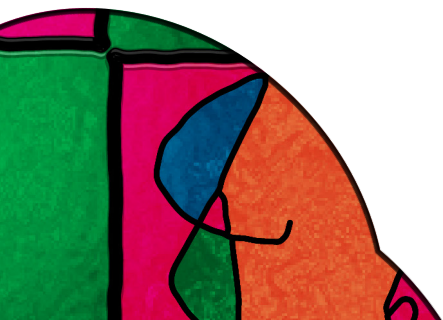
Point to an object or symbol, draw a map.

Example: **instead of explaining** the way to the entrance,

point in its direction or draw a simple map.

Paraphrase to make sure you understand each other.

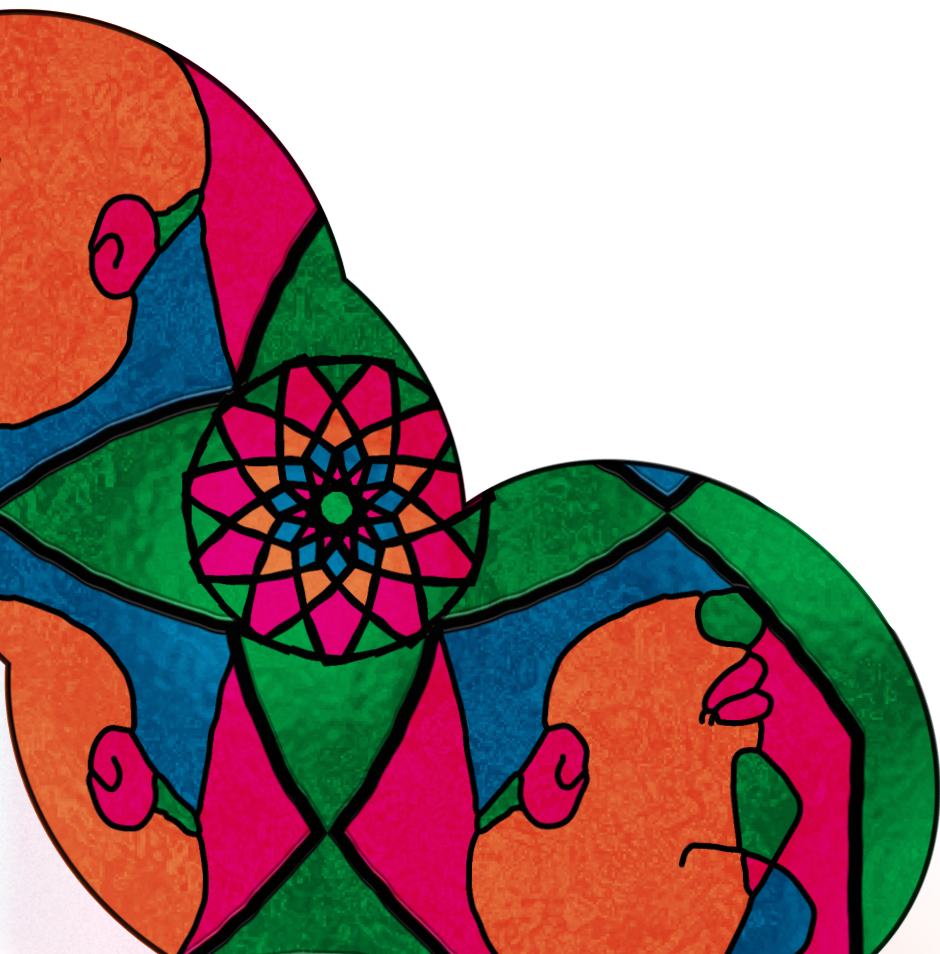
Say: "Do I understand correctly that...?" or "Do you want me to...?"



Break instructions down into steps. If you're explaining a complicated process, break it down into simple steps.

Example: "**First**, bring the signed document. **Then** submit it to the office. **Then** collect the confirmation. **Done**" or "**First** write your child's name on the list. **Then** make the payment. **Finally**, inform the teacher".

Use an app. You can use a translating app on your phone to quickly look up a word or even translate a whole sentence and show it to the person you're talking to.



Experts on ourselves – curiosity in conversation

We are all experts on our own “stained-glass windows” – the unique patterns of experiences, traits and stories that make us who we are. We know much more about ourselves than we do about others; quite often, we only know what others have shown or told us about themselves.

It's easy to create an image of a new person based on stories we've heard about the social group we think the person belongs to.

It's easy to be misled by mental shortcuts, which often give us false impressions of a particular person. In conversation, it's worth setting them aside and focusing on what the other person is actually saying about themselves, as well as their behaviours and non-verbal signals. Remember that just like you, the person you're talking to is an expert on their own life.

The key to starting a conversation and building a meaningful connection is curiosity. When our attitude is “I want to find out” rather than “I know better” or “there's nothing to talk about”, we can see and learn much more than we could ever expect or imagine. Isn't that beautiful?



Conversation topics

Despite our differences in language, culture, or life experience, many of our everyday experiences are similar. Below, you will find a list of topics with sample questions that can help you start a conversation in a relaxed and safe way.

Topic	Sample question
Weather	Why is it always so windy here? Don't you think it's hotter/colder than usual today?
Commuting	How do you usually get here? How long does it take? Do you prefer driving or using public transport?
Food	Do you have a favourite cafe/restaurant nearby? Do you usually cook at home or eat out? Is there a dish you're good at cooking?
Books/films	Have you recently seen/read anything interesting? What's your favourite type of films/books? Can you recommend anything light to read in the evening?
Animals	What is your cat/dog called? Do you prefer cats or dogs?
Children	What do you do to make your child eat? What are your child's favourite games?

Free time/leisure	<p>What do you like to do at the weekends?</p> <p>Do you have any hobbies you could recommend?</p> <p>What is your favourite way to relax after work?</p>
Events	<p>Did you go to [event]? What did you think about it?</p> <p>Are you going to [event]?</p>
Local spots	<p>What's your favourite place for a walk?</p> <p>Do you have any special places around here?</p>
Everyday tips and tricks	<p>What do you do to avoid traffic jams?</p> <p>Do you have a way to get your shopping done faster?</p>
Seasons	<p>I'm glad it's spring. How about you? Do you prefer winter?</p> <p>Do you have a favourite season? Which one?</p>
Language	<p>How do you find the Polish language?</p> <p>Is it easy/hard to speak?</p> <p>Do you have any favourite words in Polish?</p>
Places of origin	<p>What town/region are you from?</p> <p>What are your fondest memories from there?</p>
Food from around the world	<p>Is there a dish from your country that you miss?</p> <p>What should I try if I ever visit the place you are from?</p>
Everyday life	<p>Is there anything in Poland that seems very different to you than in your home country?</p> <p>What do you like best about everyday life in Poland?</p>

Stronger together!

Once you feel more confident making one-on-one connections, you can invite a few people to get together and eventually form a group.

Below, you'll find **simple ideas and short scripts to help you bring different people into a conversation**, whether colleagues, other parents from your child's school, or neighbours. When you're ready, you can organise a meeting yourself or ask for help – for example from someone in the HR department at work, a teacher at your child's school or a facilitator from your local community centre.

Sharing circle

Goal: to get to know each another better and to support one other in overcoming the challenges of meeting new people.

Opening round – each person completes a sentence, for example:

"What I like about meeting new people is..."

"I find it easier to talk to someone when..."

"When talking to someone, I always appreciate it if..."

Compare your answers and discuss what you have in common, as well as your differences.

In the second round, you can share the things you find difficult when having a conversation:

"I find it difficult when..."

"During a conversation, I don't like it when..."

"Sometimes I don't know how to deal with..."

The key to this exercise is not only to share your challenges, but also to look together for ways of dealing with them. The strength of a group lies in the fact that it can offer more ideas and solutions.

Diversity day

Goal: to get to know each other better and to develop openness to different perspectives and experiences.

Each person brings something that is important or special to them.

You can choose a theme or topic for the meeting, such as favourite foods, hobbies, holiday souvenirs or things that make everyday life easier.

At the beginning of the meeting, organise a round during which everyone can share what they brought and why. It's important that everyone has the chance to speak and to be heard.

Afterwards, participants can take a closer look at the items they've brought, talk about them informally, and, in the case of food, have a taste.

Go for it!

Although connecting with new people can seem challenging, anyone can do it. Just start with a few simple steps and be mindful and curious about the person you're getting to know. Every conversation is an opportunity to better understand each other and find something we have in common.

Good luck!



Mini-quiz

How are my conversation skills?

Read the sentences below and think about how often you do each thing when talking to someone you're getting to know. Write your answer as a number between 0 and 2, where:

0 – rarely; 1 – sometimes; 2 – almost always.

1. ***Rather than assuming or guessing, I try to ask and be curious.***
2. ***When I feel anxious around a new person, I take a small step (a kind gesture + one neutral question).***
3. ***I ask about preferences (such as how to pronounce someone's name).***
4. ***When something awkward happens, I am able to apologise and get back to the point of the conversation.***
5. ***I use simple language and find other ways to make people understand me.***

Now count your points.

0–3 pts.

You're only just starting to build your connection skills.

Remember, every conversation is a great opportunity to practice.

4–6 pts.

You consciously use communication techniques to build new relationships.

You're on the right track!

7–10 pts.

You're doing a lot to make others feel comfortable around you. Well done!