

How to talk to an autistic child

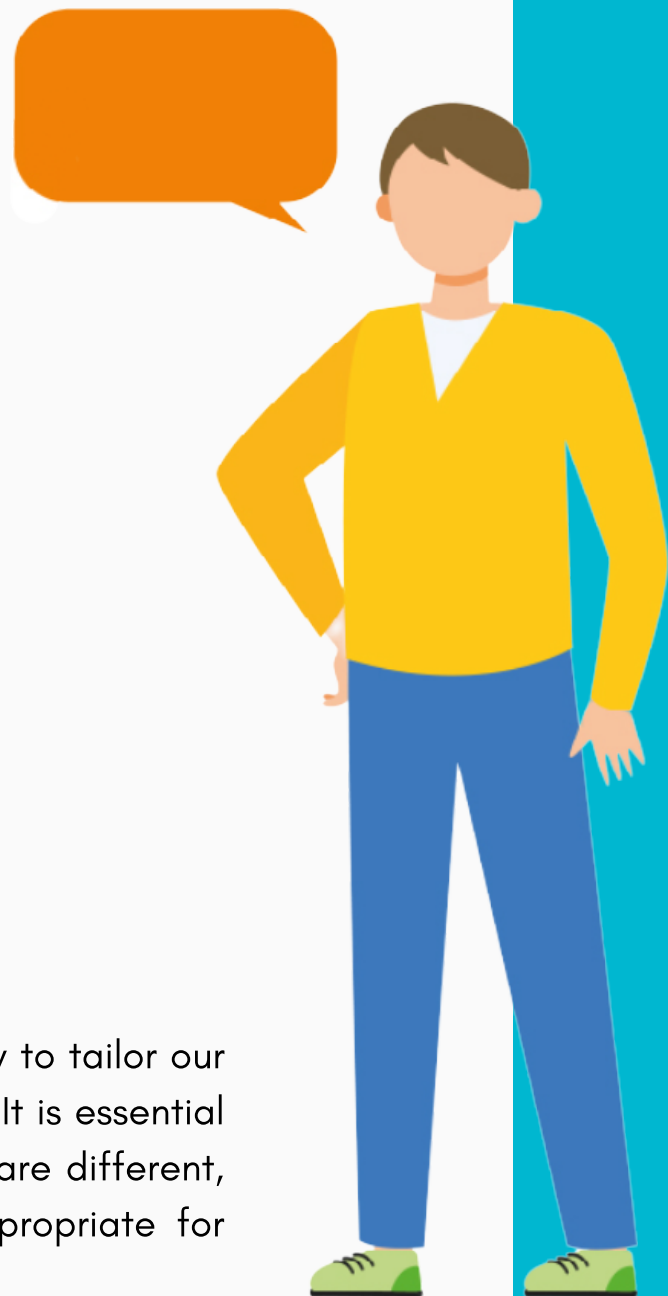


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Autistic children are different. Not better or worse than other children, simply different. Their brains work differently, and consequently they often communicate in different ways.

There are many resources available on helping autistic children to communicate and speak themselves, which is often an issue. But listening, in the wider sense of the word, is an equally important part of communication that autistic children may also do differently. This means that we should consider carefully how we speak to and communicate with autistic children to make our messages to them as clear and easy as possible for them to receive.

This resource gives some ideas for how to tailor our communications with autistic children. It is essential to remember that all autistic children are different, and different approaches will be appropriate for each individual child.



Not responding does not mean that they are not listening

We are used to communication, and particularly speaking, being a 2-way process. Even if we are doing all or most of the speaking, the person we are speaking to will often let us know that they are listening by nodding and other gestures, by making eye contact and perhaps by making affirmative or querying sounds as we continue to speak.

Autistic people may not do any of these when we speak to them, but that in no way means that they are not listening, so do not give up talking to autistic children if you do not get any immediate response or acknowledgement.

Eye contact and body language can be very difficult for autistic people. Many autistic adults would say that making eye contact while listening to someone else speak can be hugely distracting for them – they have to put so much effort into maintaining eye contact, which does not come at all naturally, that they may lose focus on what is actually being said. An autistic child may not even know that you expect eye contact when speaking to them



Autistic people, including children, are often deep thinkers. They frequently like time to think things over before responding, which is one reason that many autistic people prefer slower methods of communication such as email and text as it gives them more of a chance to consider their response. So if you speak to an autistic child who appears to give no sign at all that they are listening, do not be surprised if they respond to you about what you said a few minutes, hours or even days after you spoke to them.

Timing can be very important

One common trait in autistic people is the ability and even the need to focus intently on something for periods of time to the exclusion of everything else around them. If you try to speak or communicate with an autistic child while they are highly focused, you are unlikely to get much, if any, of their attention. If you do want to interact with them at one of these times, try to speak to them about the thing they are focused on. As well as focusing intently on their special interests, autistic people often love to share them with others. Show a genuine interest in an autistic child's area of focus, however strange or mundane it may seem to you, and you may find you make an instant connection. Having made this connection, you may find the autistic child much more open to you moving forward.



Alternatively, it may be best to leave the child to focus for a while – they may not respond well to being taken away from something that gives them great joy without any notice of the change. If it is important that you speak to them about something else in the near future, perhaps say to them that you need to speak to them in 10 minutes, for example, or using a measure that they will understand if they find telling the time difficult. This gives them time to adapt mentally to the change and you will likely get more of their attention a few minutes later having prepared them in this way.

Remember that while a young, autistic child may be highly knowledgeable about an area of their special interest, they will not have the same maturity of thought and comprehension about other topics. They are still a child!

Be clear and direct

Many autistic people, and indeed many children, struggle with things like analogies and figures of speech. Autistic people tend to interpret things very literally, and it can be very helpful to keep this in mind when talking to them. If you talk about having an idea as pulling a rabbit out of a hat, they may start looking for the rabbit and the hat!



Similarly, do not be offended if your autistic child speaks to you in what may seem a very blunt way – they are simply saying exactly what they mean rather than following social conventions to wrap it up and soften it in some way as they do not understand these.

Be very clear and specific with your language and remember too that autistic people may also struggle to interpret tone and body language. Convey as much of the message as you can in the words you are saying, not how you are saying them.

Be positive and supportive



Being autistic is difficult – being different is always hard at times. Many autistic children may have struggled at school or nursery, have trouble making friends and found the world generally very confusing. They can feel very isolated and welcome someone who is genuinely interested in them as they are. All children will react better to positive communication, and this may be even more so with autistic children.

They may need building up, praising and supporting after encountering a lot of negative responses from other children or adults that do not understand autism. Even if you do not understand what they are doing or why they are behaving in a certain way, understand that it makes sense to them to do so. Ask them about what they are doing without appearing to judge or denigrate it in any way and you may well make more of a connection.

There is more to communication than speaking

If you continue to have difficulty reaching an autistic child through speaking to them, there are a wide variety of other ways to communicate. If they love reading, try writing them a note or sending a text – there are more ways of communicating in writing using technology available today than ever before.

If the child cannot read, there are still lots of other communication options as an alternative to speech. You could use toys or pictures, sign language or a specialist communications app like App2Vox. Tell a story using their favourite toys and encourage them to join in.

Just because a child struggles with speech, it does not automatically follow that they do not want to communicate. Be creative and start with what the child is familiar with and enjoys doing to find your own unique way of communicating with each other.

Give it time

However you communicate with an autistic child, there is no substitute for building a loving and trusting relationship over time. Autistic people always find change difficult, so the more they get to know you the more likely they are to accept you and respond to you. Communicating with an autistic child may take a bit more effort, but it will be well worth it in the long run.



Speaking to an autistic child may not be easy but, like anything worthwhile, it is well worth the effort. Your care and thought in communicating with the child in a way that works for them will be appreciated and you will probably find yourself with a new and devoted friend. In a world that is so often superficial, taking some time to build a deeper relationship is becoming unfamiliar to many of us but it is the approach required to properly communicate with an autistic child. It will be hugely rewarding for both of you.

