

# *What is nonverbal autism?*



Autistic children are different from other children. Not better or worse, just different. One of the most worrying things for parents of autistic children can be a lack of verbal skills and development at a young age.

A lot of parents worry that if their child is not speaking by the age of 4, they will never be able to speak, but this is not the case. Remember too, there are many other ways of communicating as well as talking, particularly with all the technology we now have available - think how often you use alternative forms of communication every day such as email, text and other non-verbal methods!

If you are worried that your autistic child is non-verbal, there are many things that you can do to help your child to communicate. This resource aims to provide a range of information, support and ideas about how to help a child with autism.



## **An overview of autism**

To know how to help a child with autism, we first need to know what autism is. Autism is a spectrum condition, meaning that every autistic person experiences its affects in a different and unique way. There are not different “types” of autism - autistic people are all different, like everyone else!

In very simple terms, autistic brains are wired differently, and therefore autistic people react differently to situations and knowledge. While all autistic people are different, there are a number of common issues which affect many of them, though none are present in all with the condition.

There are very often links between autism and difficulties with communication skills, including speech. In addition, many autistic people have difficulty with social interactions, may be hyper-sensitive to certain stimuli like light or particular noises, and may have repetitive behaviours that they use to manage stress, such as flapping their hands or tapping their feet amongst many other effects on their lives.

It is important to recognise that autism can also bring many gifts, such as attention to detail, enhanced focus on a particular subject or project, and huge amounts of creativity and new ideas as a result of seeing things differently amongst many others.

Autistic people have difficulties principally because they are constantly having to adapt to live in a world not designed for the way they think and function. In many cases, a few relatively small adjustments can make a huge difference in the lives of autistic people.

### **What is non-verbal autism?**

Non-verbal autism is where an autistic child does not develop speech and language skills in the same way and at the same rate as other children of the same age.

Up to half of all autistic children exhibit this, so it is not an unknown condition and you are not alone as a parent in facing the challenges of helping a non-verbal child and wondering when a child with autism will start talking.



As a parent, your instinct is telling you that you need to know when your child is hungry and what they would like to eat, or when they are upset and need some extra love and comforting. This can put pressure on people who may feel that they are not being the best parents they can, as they fear they will be unable to tell whether their child is cold or hungry, frightened or insecure.

Any parent would understand that this would be a situation that would leave you feeling worried - after all, being a parent of a child with autism can have challenges anyway, and if the child is nonverbal then these challenges may be compounded.

Having an autistic child in no way makes you a bad parent and is nothing to be ashamed of - it simply means adapting and learning what does and does not work for your child as you go along, like all parenting really!

In the past it was believed that if a child was diagnosed as being nonverbal after the age of 4, that they would never speak. However, a study in 2013 by the American Academy of Paediatrics showed that this was simply not the case.

The study was based on 500 children and the conclusion that they came to was that non-verbal children can potentially be taught to speak at any age, with some of the children who were studied learning how to communicate fluently as late as in their teenage years.

This means that if your child is diagnosed as being non-verbal then you should not be resigned to the fact that you will be communicating by non-verbal methods forever. New breakthroughs in research have shown that you can use non-verbal methods of communication, such as specially designed apps, as a way to begin encouraging your child to start using words while you develop other effective strategies for knowing what it is that they want and need.

Having said all this, it is really important to remember that no two autistic children are the same. Therefore, a communication strategy that works well for one child may not work at all for another - but that applies to all aspects of parenting! It is not enough to just know how to help a child with autism - you need to find out how to help your child with autism.

There are some tried and tested strategies that parents can use to try and get through to a non-verbal child, and more importantly that may allow the child to be able to convey their wants and desires to their parents. In all likelihood, some will work better for you than others, and you need to find which are most effective for you and your child.

Remember, you are not alone, and you can do this.

### **How to get a diagnosis**

If you have any concerns about your child's health or development, your first step should always be to speak to your doctor or another medical professional. Keeping a record of the issues that concern you, including when and how they occur, can be very helpful - it is natural and easy to become emotional when talking about your child



and your concerns for them, and a written note can be invaluable to make sure that you give the doctor all the information that they need.

Your doctor may seek a variety of tests and opinions in pursuing a diagnosis of autism, including both physical methods, such as blood tests and a CT or MRI scan, and psychological opinions from behavioural or developmental specialists.

This can be a lengthy and wearing process, but stay strong and be persistent. Build and use your support networks, such as family and friends, and communities of autistic people and parents of autistic children both online and in real life.

Continue to keep records of your concerns and do not be afraid to return to your doctor if you are not satisfied with the steps being taken or your worries remain. Diagnostic tools and therapies for autistic issues are improving and developing all the time.

### **How to support a child with non-verbal autism**

The very fact that you want to know how to help a child with autism and are using this resource to find out more is a great first step.



Learning more about autism and communication is hugely important to be able to support a non-verbal child.

## **Communicating vs Speaking**

There are many alternative forms of communication. Some children can communicate without speaking - and your child may be in this category.

They may perhaps point to a toy they want or take you by the hand and lead you to the kitchen to help them pour a drink.

Autistic children who are not yet speaking often do not understand the function of communication although they are actually able to learn how to speak. However, the fact that they do not understand communication can prevent them from developing speech.

## **The Function of Speech**

For those children who do not understand the function of communication or the reason why it is important to speak, it is critical that you teach them. You can do this by showing them that they need to do something in order to get something, such as I say 'train' and the

train is given to me and I can play with it.

## **Play can be a learning opportunity too**

Children love to play, and this should always be encouraged, but play can also be a great opportunity to learn. Playing games with your child, especially games that involve sorting and matching are a great idea because they enable the child to work on their motor and visual skills as well as communication. Other activities that allow your children to use their hands, such as using play-dough, will create opportunities for them to describe the physical sensation, perhaps using gestures at first and then words.

You can always encourage communication by getting musical as well. Whatever activity you are doing with your child make sure you get on their level, make eye contact and let your child see what you are doing so that they can learn from it (but also be aware that some autistic people find making eye contact extremely difficult, but lack of eye contact does not mean that they are not listening.)



## **Use imitation**

Imitation is a great way to learn - and it can go both ways. You can start off by imitating your child, how they play and the sounds they make, which will help to encourage them to do more of both. This can be as simple as building a block tower if that is what your child is doing, and then knocking it over when they do too. All toy boxes contain items that give you lots of opportunity to engage in role playing games and games which encourage communication and imitation in a way that does not at first need words.

## **Follow your child's lead**

Let your child take the lead and allow their interest and pace to dictate what you are doing so that they do not lose focus. Following along with what they are doing and using words to describe it is a great way of encouraging your child to start connecting words with their chosen favourite activity. Make sure to choose words that your child can easily understand - using single words in the beginning to help your child to imitate and understand them.

## **Create a learning space**

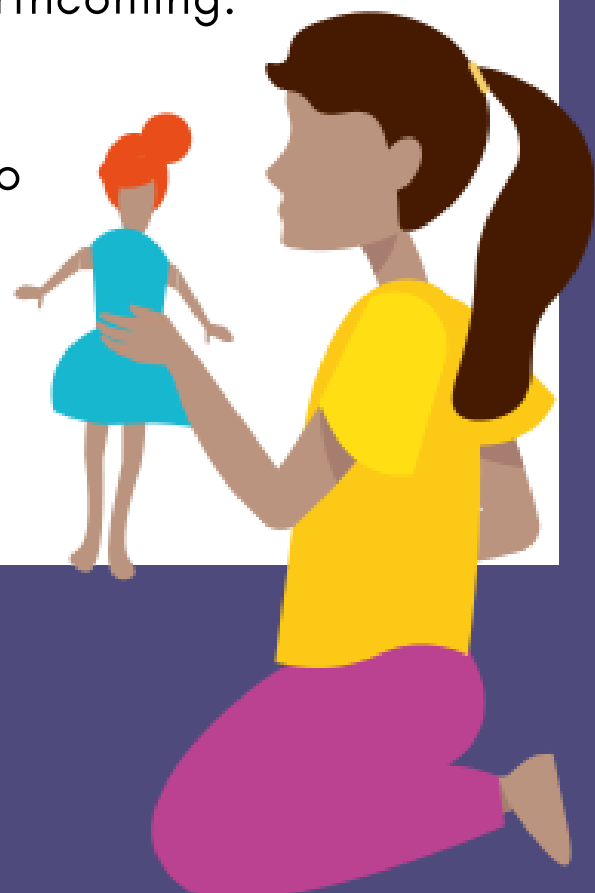
Many parents have found good results from having a special place in their home for their autistic child to learn and interact.

Having a space that is dedicated to them and set up in a way which makes them feel calm and comfortable will help them to concentrate and learn. It can also be a great space for them to learn how to communicate.

## **Give your child some space**

While you are working on communication with your child, it is important to keep in mind that they will not always respond fully or even at all. You need to fight the temptation to finish their sentences, or answer questions on their behalf and just give them space to answer, even if the answer is not forthcoming.

Children who are autistic need time and space to be able to think and to process things. Encourage them to do so by continually providing them with opportunities to respond even if they choose not to.



## **Advice on communication**

Here are some ways you can help a child with autism to communicate if they are finding speech difficult:

- Get down to their level

When you are speaking to your child make sure you are face to face with them, and down on their level. Sit in front of them and get close so that they can concentrate on you, even if they do not make eye contact. You cannot expect your child to listen to you if you are across the room or are standing when they are sitting. It will be much harder for them to understand you.

- Use toys to help your child learn language

Your child may not be motivated to ask to go to bed or do their homework, but they are motivated to want to ask for their favourite toy or game. So, start by teaching them the word for their favourite thing. Each child is different - it could be their favourite thing is a train or they could love play-doh. Whatever it is, you should teach them to request that item first.

- Make it fun

All children, whether they have autism or not, will learn better if you make the lessons fun (and so will adults!). There are lots of free printables available online which will help them to follow instructions, learn colours and learn new words as well. Engaging with your child in this way will help them to learn speech without them realising it.

- Use adapted sign language

One technique that some parents have used to help their child to communicate is to teach them adapted sign language. Adapted sign language is based on English sign language signs but made simpler, such as teaching them signs without movement. Once your child has learnt adapted sign language and is using it to communicate, you can then pair the signs with verbal approximations than words. Once your child is using words you can then fade the signs out.

- Use repetition

It can take a lot of time for your child to learn words and speech, and to ask for specific items and so you should keep their interest levels up by changing learning activities frequently.

There are many different ways for your child to learn how to make the same request. Games are a great way to help your child to learn the same word with a variety of different pictures.

- Teach your child to point

Pointing is a key skill for your child to master if they want to be able to communicate successfully. You can use photos of objects, places and animals to help your child learn to point. Simply go through the pictures with your child, say one word to label each picture such as 'dog', 'juice' 'ball', and guide your child to point at each photo as you say the word. You can then start to reduce your guidance each time you do this activity.

- Decrease mouthing behaviour

Mouthing behaviour includes thumb sucking and chewing on toys. Excessive mouthing behaviour can make it difficult for your child to develop verbal skills.



There are gadgets out there that can help you with decreasing mouthing behaviour in your child, but your key worker may be the best person to ask for help with this.

- Use assistive devices

There are lots of assistive devices out there designed to help both children and adults who find it a struggle to communicate. These apps and devices are not meant to take the place of speech, but to be a foundation for communication. They are visual supports that help children to make requests and share thoughts by touching pictures which then produce word.

