

How to teach a non-verbal autistic child to read



If your child is slow to learn to speak, it can be a worry on many levels. However, there is plenty of hope, and there are plenty of resources elsewhere on this site to help you. One of your concerns may be whether your child can learn to read and, if so, how they will do so with little or no speech which is often so critical to the reading process.

A key thing to remember is that speaking and reading are two very different skills. Struggles with one do not automatically imply that there will be problems with the other. There have been many people who could not read or write a single letter and yet were tremendous orators and probably spoke better than many of us. Similarly, there are plenty of people who can speak a language other than their native one with little or no knowledge of how to read it.

This is particularly the case where a language uses an alphabet different from the one you are used to, such as Chinese, Japanese or Korean if you are a native English speaker. Others can read a language very well without knowing how to pronounce or speak it.

Unfortunately, our society is very good at assuming that autistic people are always limited in their capabilities, and this is simply not the case.

An autistic child that is slow to speak may well be more than capable of learning to read and grow to love reading. Reading and writing can give autistic children who struggle with speaking an excellent alternative means of communication, particularly with the technology now available. Indeed, many autistic adults, including those without verbal difficulties, prefer to carry out many aspects of their lives by written methods such as email, text and so on.

This resource is designed to give some practical tips for parents and carers of autistic children to help them start on the exciting reading journey together given that some of the more traditional techniques used to learn to read may not be easy to apply when the child is non-verbal.



How children with non-verbal autism learn differently

Autistic brains work differently from neurotypical brains, and differently from other autistic brains. One consequence of this is that autistic people frequently learn differently as well, so the normal methods for teaching a child to read may simply not be as effective with your autistic child.

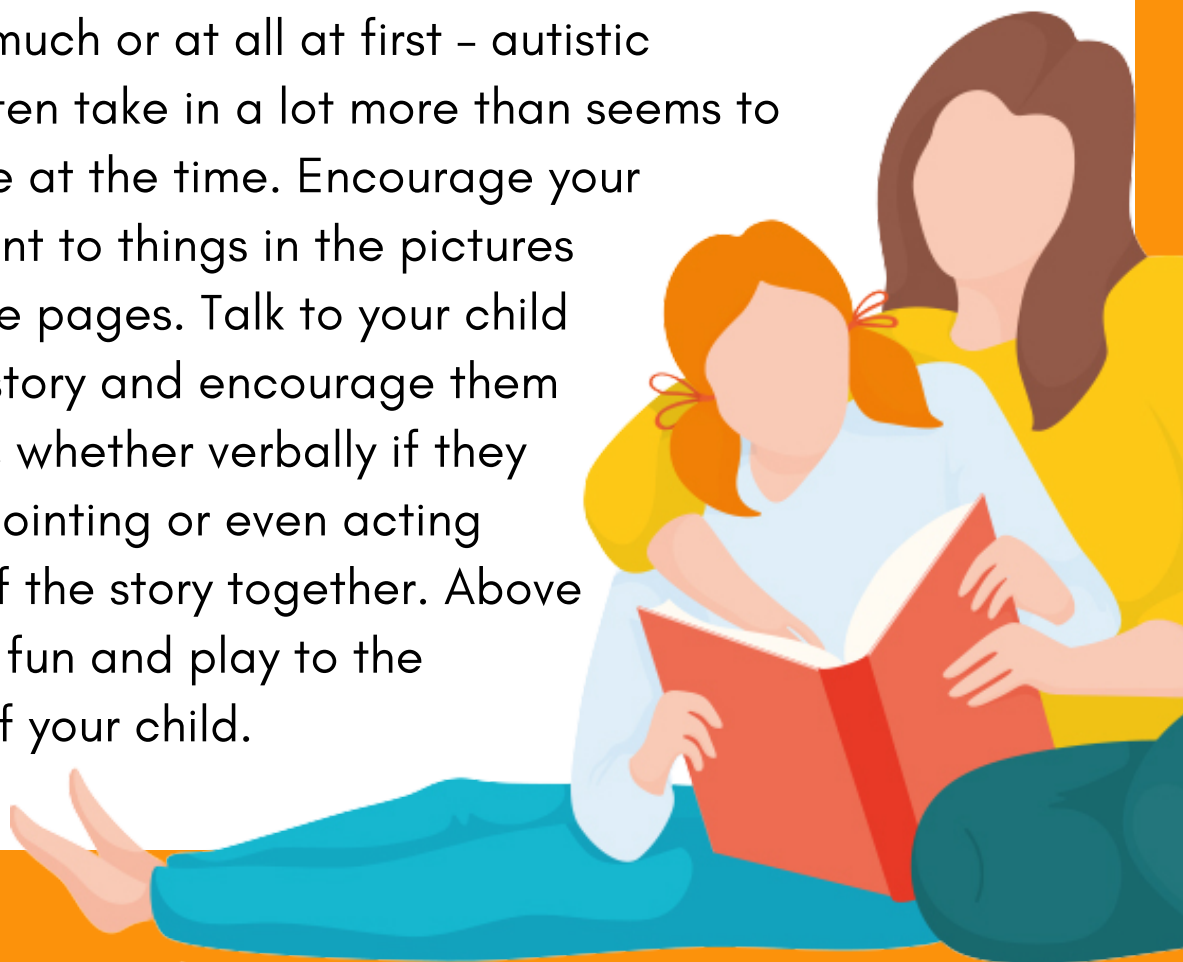
While autistic children often learn differently, it is untrue that they cannot learn at all. It is a case of finding the way that your child learns best and then adapting that to introduce them to reading. This may be by listening, through visual methods such as pictures, by touch or by other means. You know your child best, and you can get to know how they learn by watching how they play and interacting with them as much as possible

Spend time reading together

Almost all children love spending one to one time with a parent or carer. Making books the focus of some of this time together while your child is young can instil a love of reading that may last a lifetime and take some steps towards your child starting to read without them even realising that they are learning.

Try to do everything you can to make this time something that your child enjoys and looks forward to. Pick books that your child enjoys or on subjects that you know they like. Work out the best time to read with them so that it is not when they will struggle to focus (though a bed- time story can be very calming) or have lots of energy and want to be more active. Make it part of their routine – many autistic people find routines important, so if you can make reading together part of the routine, it will be much easier for you both to stick to the reading habit.

Try to make your reading times together as interactive as possible. Follow the words with your finger as you read them, even if your child does not seem to be looking at the words much or at all at first – autistic children often take in a lot more than seems to be the case at the time. Encourage your child to point to things in the pictures and turn the pages. Talk to your child about the story and encourage them to respond, whether verbally if they can or by pointing or even acting out parts of the story together. Above all, make it fun and play to the strengths of your child.



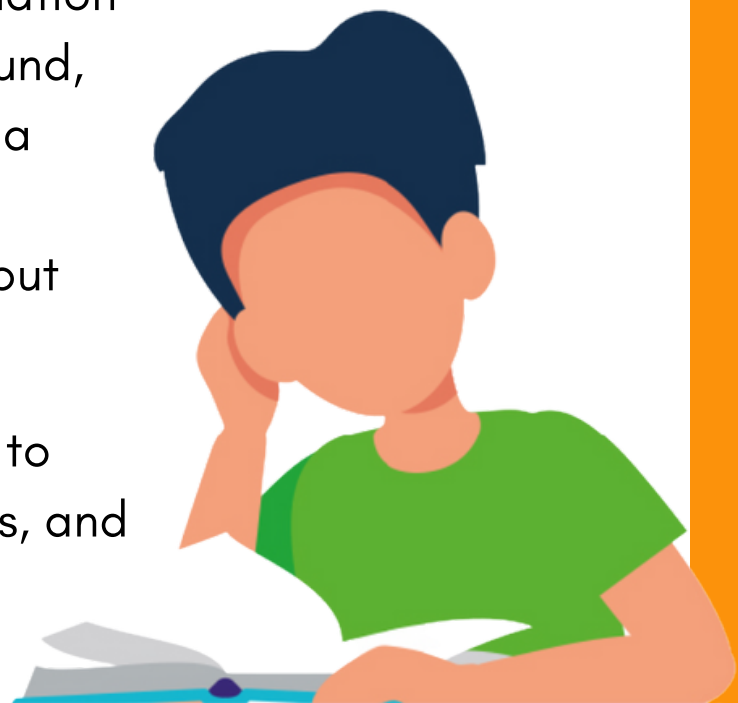
Start with phonograms

When you are ready to incorporate some more active reading lessons into your time together, the best way to start is with phonograms. Phonograms are single letters or combinations of letters that make a sound.

For example, S, M and T are single letter phonograms, and BR, CH and GL are double letter phonograms. Start with the very simplest phonograms, perhaps pointing them out when they appear in the stories that you enjoy reading together.

Phonograms are important because they are the building blocks of words, and the simplest place to start. Once you know that the same combination of letters makes a particular sound, you can use that knowledge as a shortcut in sounding out a new word (even if you only sound it out in your head).

There are a whole host of ways to teach and practice phonograms, and as ever it is a case of finding what works best for your child.



If your child has some speech, you can try and encourage them to make the sounds with you, but if they are completely non-verbal, one technique is to put words together that start with the same phonograph - ball, bat, boy, for example. Your child may be able to point to things in a picture that begin with the same sound. If you can move from saying the sound to showing them the letters that make the sound written down on a card and asking them to point to pictures, they are beginning to read.

Interactive / multi-sensory books

Autistic children sense the world differently. One way to engage more of their senses when reading is to use multi-sensory books. For example, books that make sounds when you press buttons or books containing different textures to feel.

Many autistic children crave having some senses stimulated while finding other senses oversensitive, so find books that give them the type of stimulation that they enjoy. While they make the most of touching the furry fabric or hearing the cow noise, point to words and phonograms that relate to these as you read them aloud.

Children are much more likely to learn words relating to things that they like – it makes it easier for them to ask for them again!

Use Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC)

Augmentative and alternative communication methods are objects, devices and methods that a non-verbal autistic child can use to help them to communicate without using speech, and can take the form of facial expressions, gestures, sign language, speech or vocalisations.

What can be of particular help to non-verbal autistic children, in addition to simple signs, pointing and exaggerated facial expressions, are apps and devices that allow the child to “speak” by pointing to pictures or words on the screen.



There have been many studies done over the years relating to AAC and autism, with one common theme coming through from all of them – the use of AAC devices with children who have autism will not prevent them from speaking, as some people believe, and they actually may increase the speech potential of these children instead. Over time, pointing to pictures can lead to pointing to words or writing words to communicate as reading and writing skills develop.

Praise and encouragement

All children thrive on positive reinforcement, and this can be even more important for autistic children. They may be used to feeling isolated, getting things wrong and not fitting in, so it is extremely important to make sure that they know that they are doing well, making progress and that you are pleased with them.

Nobody wants to keep going back to an activity that they believe they struggle with, so you need to make sure that books and reading are always seen as a really positive experience for your child.

Reading and speech are related by distinctly different skills. While speech is normally used as a key tool when learning to read, it is not the only way and there are many children who have learnt to read while speaking very little or not at all. As with so many aspects of autism, a different approach, tailored to the strengths and interests of your child, can be extremely successful.

