

Simple autism communication strategies



app2vox 

One of the great joys of parenthood can be communicating with your child. The moments when it first becomes clear that they understand what you are saying to them and of course their first words or meaningful gestures can be magical. But some children, including many autistic children, find communication and especially verbal communication extremely difficult. They may be much slower in developing speech than other children of the same age.

Fortunately, there is far more to communication than just speech and words, and there are ways to help children develop their speech when this is proving difficult.

This resource is designed to give some practical ideas of techniques to try for parents and carers of autistic children struggling to develop communication skills.

Remember, all children, autistic or not, are different. A method that works well with one child may not be effective at all with another child even if they appear to be very similar in other ways. Try lots of different ideas and see what works best for you and your child.

One key method to try is to use an app to support communication, such as app2vox. This can give both parents and children a head start on communicating when words are proving difficult. Alongside this, here are some other methods that could be helpful.

Simplify language

If you start to learn a new language, you are unlikely to begin by learning complex scientific terminology or by reading the work of a poet known for their unusual word choices. You start with something simple, such as saying hello, asking someone's name and giving your own. Yet when we talk to our children it is easy to quickly assume that they have mastered language and can understand just as much as adults.

That is not to say that baby talk is the way to go either. If you teach a child to speak words or a form of language that is significantly different from the normal version used all around them, they will have to relearn much of it later.



Simple and clear is the way to go, perhaps starting with single words. Use words that are easy to say and remember – “car” is much better than “automobile” or “vehicle”, and “sad” is a lot easier than “miserable” or “unhappy”.

It also makes sense to start with things that your child knows well and is familiar with, such as a favourite toy or food, for example. We are all more enthusiastic about learning about that we like, and it is easier to grasp the concept of an object having a name than a more abstract concept. Repeat the name of the item while pointing at it and give your child time to process the information. They may not even seem to be listening at the time, but then say the name back to you at a later time.



Imitation

Copying things that your child says and does will encourage them to do more and make more sounds. They will understand that you are interested in what they are doing and that you want to interact with them. Play with their parents or carer is important to any child to build their relationship and can be even more critical where communication is limited in some way. By copying the sounds that your child makes, it gives them affirmation that this is a good thing to do and encourages them to be more vocal. Over time you can also add in some sounds or simple words of your own.

By joining in with them and making the same sounds that they do, you are entering into their world. When they see you as an ally in this way, they may well be more inclined to open up to you and to try and communicate with you.

There are also benefits for you of this approach. The more you put yourself into your child's place, doing what they are doing and making the sounds that they are making, the closer you will get to being able to see the world from their point of view.

Non-verbal communication

A huge amount of all our communication is non-verbal, though we may not realise it much of the time. With a young autistic child who is struggling to communicate, gestures can play a key role. Your child may not always understand the words you say, but they may well learn much more quickly what makes you happy or sad if you take care to exaggerate your gestures and facial expressions to make it very clear to them. Almost all children will respond positively to you opening your arms wide and beckoning to them to come for a hug!

Gestures can also be used to convey information and instructions. Your child may not understand the question “do you want to go outside?” but pointing to the garden through a window or moving towards the door while holding out your hand for them to take at the same time as some simple words may well get the message across.

Many of us have been in situations in foreign countries where we spoke little or none of the language but needed to seek directions or help with something.

Use the same thought process here – keep your gestures simple, slow and bold, and back them up with key words, so saying “garden” or “out” while pointing to the door and going outside, for example, will help your child to link the word with the action or activity.

As with verbal communication, keep it simple, slow and repetitive, give your child time to process and respond (even if they do not appear to even be paying attention to you), and encourage and praise them enthusiastically when they do respond or join in.

Give your child time and space to communicate

As has been mentioned above, many autistic children need some time to think through and process things that they see and hear. They may appear to be entirely focused on what they are doing or looking at, but their mind may be going into overdrive trying to put the pieces together of what is happening around them.

It may be minutes, hours or even days before they respond to or repeat something they have seen or heard.



Even if you are having a form of verbal or non-verbal conversation with your child, give them plenty of time and space to answer or make the next contribution. In our busy world we are often used to everything happening fast and people responding to us immediately, but many autistic brains simply do not work like that, particularly in developing children.

They are not slow to think – if anything, they have too many thoughts and are trying to process these and formulate a response.

Autistic people often find it hard to filter out all the stimuli that they are exposed to at a given moment so need time to work through everything they are sensing and may have to think through more deliberately what they then say or do than others to whom it comes more naturally.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with this – autistic brains simply work differently, including on a different timetable sometimes!



Positive reinforcement

So much of the world seems strange to autistic people, and particularly autistic young children, that they often need plenty of reassurance that they are getting things right. Think again of trying to make yourself understood in a foreign language – you can only learn when you are getting it right if the person you are speaking to makes it clear when they understand that word you have been trying to pronounce for the last five minutes while they looked blankly at you!

Autistic children need the same reinforcement, together with plenty of encouragement to keep trying to communicate however they are able. If they use a word correctly, repeat it back to them and show that you are happy and pleased with them.

How you do this will vary according to the child – some may love a clap and a cheer, while others may find this overwhelming and prefer a smile and perhaps a squeeze of their hand.

As with all things, every child is different, and you know your child best, but be sure to respond positively in a way that they understand when they do something well.

Communicating with an autistic child can be challenging. But by taking small, clear steps, trying different techniques like those outlined here and really getting to know your child and what works for them, you can make progress and it will be immensely rewarding for both of you.

Autistic children want to communicate with you – they are not deliberately ignoring you and everyone else – but like so many things in a world not designed for them, they find it difficult to know how. With your love and support, you can help them to share more of the wonderful people that they are.

