

Communication difficulties in children with ASD

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What is involved in the process of communication?

'The motivation to communicate with others, & thus to acquire language, is rooted in this view of people as intentional beings with whom to share one's view of the world & learn about theirs'.

- Baldwin, D (1995) Understanding the link between joint attention & language. In.. Moore, C & Dunham, P (Eds) Joint attention: its origins & role in development. Erlbaum, Hillsdale, NJ.

Social motivation to communicate with another person.

What characterises difficulties here?

- Not paying much attention to other people.
- Very few attempts at communicating.
- Very independent, doing things for themselves.
- Manipulating adult like a tool to get what they want.
- Talking to themselves (ie. Not directing their talk to another person).
- Avoiding situations in which they will have to interact with others.

What strategies can help?

- Intensive Interaction!!
- Consistent person that they can get used to being there & begin to trust (predictability).
- Person as someone to have fun with: rough & tumble, tickles, favourite activities.
- Set up situations in which they will want to approach you & interact with you, where they will learn that they can make you do things for them.
- Work on encouraging early interactional skills such as eye-contact, turn-taking & being nearby someone else.
- For older or more able children, you may focus on developing their social understanding & social skills so that they are likely to feel more confident in social situations.

Building a relationship

- Foundation is for the child to enjoy being with you.
- Sit quietly near the child & simply watch him play.
- Comment in simple phrases on what he is doing. With a young child, you could try singing your comments!
- Gradually join in with him by simply copying his actions and sounds. Follow his lead.
- Once you are accepted, start to take the lead sometimes by changing the action a little.
- Introduce some highly motivating toys into your play. Be active, fun, exciting & enthusiastic!

Interactive play

- Rough & tumble play: you want the child to enjoy himself enough that he will try to communicate that he wants you to do it again.
- Repetitive phrases, singing & rhymes: help to build anticipation, structure the interaction, make language easier to pick up, allow child to take a turn.
- Water & sand play: can capture child's interest and develop joint attention.
- Outdoor play: e.g. swing, trampoline, chase, hide & seek, tunnels, etc.
- Pretend play: developing symbolic understanding.

Encouraging eye contact

- Use items that will get the child's attention & be a reward for looking.
- Build anticipation and then pause. If the child looks at you or even slightly glances in your direction, treat this as a communicative act & reward immediately.
- Peek-a-boo.
- Mirror play with props e.g. a big hat.
- Face to face action games.
- Chase or spinning contingent on child looking at you.

Shared interests (joint attention).

- What characterises difficulties here?
- Child very much has their 'own agenda'.
- Child has difficulties in sharing an activity with another person.
- Child has difficulties in following your lead or paying attention to what you are trying to show them.
- Child gets very easily distracted.
- For older children, difficulties may be in sticking to a shared topic of conversation.

What strategies can help?

- Intensive Interaction!!
- Following the child's lead.
- Intruding on the child's play.
- Minimising visual, auditory & other sensory distractions.
- Encouraging imitation through play.
- Rewarding attention & cooperation.
- Bringing older children back to the topic.

Developing turn-taking

- Use exciting & rewarding activities.
- Use phrases "my turn", "George's turn".
- May have to physically prompt child to wait at first.
- When it's their turn, allow plenty of time. If they don't respond to visual & verbal prompts, physically help them to take their turn.

Adapting the environment to encourage communication

- Keep favourite things out of reach so that child can't help himself but has to communicate to get them. But of course do not withhold things or frustrate the child!
- 'Creative stupidity': 'forget' to give the child something important.
- 'sabotage': do something wrong.
- Be the 'keeper': be in control of the important materials & give them a bit at a time, as they are requested.

An idea: something to talk about.

- What characterises difficulties here?
- Not motivated or excited by much, quite passive.
- Talking for the sake of a verbal routine rather than for communicative value (a real 'idea').
- A few fixed ideas about things to talk about.
- Talking too much or in too much detail about something.
- Not giving the other person a chance to talk about their ideas.
- Talking 'out of the blue' about an idea in their head, presuming the other person knows what they are talking about.

What strategies can help?

- Using child's interests to encourage communication.
- Using novel, exciting toys & activities as an enticement for communication.
- Offer plenty of choices

- Model appropriate language that matches the context for those who use routine phrases.
- For older or more able children: helping them to understand that other people might have different interests.
- Helping them to understand what other people do & do not need to know (be specific).
- Being clear about when they can (appropriately) talk about their particular interests.

Making choices

- Start by offering choice of real objects. Encourage the child to reach for item he wants or simply eye-point.
- Ask the child e.g. “biscuits or crisps?” as you hold out the items & emphasise the words.
- May have to offer a favourite item alongside something child doesn't like at first so that he gets the idea of making a choice & doesn't think he's getting both!
- If child grabs for both things at once, keep them a considerable distance apart & give him the first one he touches. He will soon learn to go for the one that he most wants.
- You can offer choices with photos and pictures if the child has some understanding of what these represent.

A message: a way to convey their idea.

- Not being able to talk.
- Not being able to point or indicate to you by gesture or eye-contact what they want.
- Being able to talk but not having the right words.
- Not being able to convey a lot of information, speaking in single words only.
- Having the right words but not being able to say them clearly enough.
- Having stereotyped or echolalic speech.
- Not getting the message across in a way that is appropriate for the situation.

What strategies can help?

- Finding alternative ways of communicating that don't rely on speech, for example, pictures or gesture.
- Work on skills like pointing & eye-contact as a means to communicate.
- Modelling the right words/ gesture/ symbol simply & clearly within the routine.
- Make sure that everyone knows the child's unusual ways of communicating: make a 'communication passport'.
- Work on developing vocabulary.
- Work on extending the child's language by adding just a little more to what they have said.
- Work on narrative ability.

Awareness of tongue, mouth & voice

- Copying facial expressions/ sounds, e.g. putting tongue out, blowing raspberries, blowing kisses, Native American 'war cry'.
- Encourage tongue movements through licking activities.
- Encourage breath control through blowing activities.
- Copy any sounds the child makes to raise their awareness. Try & get a vocal dialogue going, see if the child will copy your sounds.
- Use face-to-face or mirror play.
- Use lots of symbolic sounds.

Developing language

- Use short, simple phrases.
- Stress key words.
- Use exaggerated, 'interesting' intonation.
- Pause during rhymes & songs.
- Label objects in the 'here & now'.
- Read simple stories with repetitive language.
- Play games with repetitive language.
- Use symbolic sounds.
- Use gestures to support speech.

Listening skills: attending to another person.

What characterises difficulties here?

- Not realising another person is talking to them, not paying attention to voice.
- Not following whole class instructions.
- Seeming to ignore what is said when you know they can understand.
- Needing instructions repeating a lot.

What strategies can help?

- Direct instructions to the individual by name.
- Reward strategies for listening to & following instructions.

'Ready, steady, go' games.

- Use exaggerated, 'interesting' intonation.

'Singing' instructions, eg. Having a tidy-up song.

- Building anticipation during rhymes & songs.
- Use symbolic sounds.
- Read simple stories with repetitive language.
- Simplify the instruction or make it visual.

Using music

- 'singing commentaries'.
- Turn-taking with instruments.
- Songs with actions: pause & wait expectantly for the child to fill in key words, phrases or actions.
- Favourite songs from videos can be used as rewards.
- Soothing 'relaxation' music can be good for just being together.

Understanding: making sense of communication.

What characterises difficulties here?

- Not responding to what is said to them.
- Not knowing what is happening & getting distressed.
- Getting easily confused when you are telling them something out of the ordinary or out of context.
- Just repeating back what is said.
- Not understanding facial expressions or gestures.
- Taking what is said literally.

What strategies can help?

- Visual cues to help them understand, eg. Pictures, objects or gestures.
- Play games/ establish routines with repetitive language.
- Speak in short & clear phrases.
- Label objects in the 'here & now'.
- Stress key words.
- Visual timetables.
- Physically prompt the correct response if necessary, but seek for them to become independent.
- Work on non-literal understanding as examples arise.
- Develop understanding of social communication.

Using visual cues

- Understanding is often over-estimated because of natural use of cues within a routine.
- Most children with ASD are visual learners.

- Signs & natural gesture can be used to support understanding.
- Most Children with ASD will find symbols easier to use than signing.
- Symbols can be used to support literacy development.
- Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) is recognised worldwide as an effective means of teaching communication.
- The TEACCH approach makes good use of visual cues to structure the environment & maximise learning.

Recommended Readings:

Hewett, D & Nind, M (1998) (eds) Interaction in Action: Reflections on the Use of Intensive Interaction. London: David Fulton
Nind, M. & Hewett, D (1994) Access to Communication. London: David Fulton.

Nind, M. & Hewett, D. (2001) A Practical Guide to Intensive Interaction. BILD. (probably the easiest read and the most practical - as the title says!)