



# Understanding how children learn to communicate and talk – Part 1

- In the first two years of life, most young children learn how to communicate with their parents, caregivers, siblings and peers during everyday social experiences.
- Most children appear to learn communication skills effortlessly - *without* much direct teaching or guidance from adults.
- A closer look at *how* young children learn to talk and communicate reveals that they learn some **basic, essential communication skills** in a gradual progression of “developmental steps” (see part 2).
- Many parents and professionals do not have access to this critical information and are therefore unaware of these key developmental steps.
- In general, most children learn to:
  - Communicate first with close, familiar, trusted adults, then new people (including other children).
  - Use many different sounds (i.e. “*vocalizations*”) to communicate **before** they learn how to talk with words
  - Use their eyes, faces, and bodies to effectively communicate (i.e. “*non-verbal communication*”) **before** they learn how to talk.
- Given their neurological differences, children with ASD have significant difficulties learning ***non-verbal*** communication skills that most children learn effortlessly in the first year of life (e.g. directing eye contact and gestures to others when communicating)
- Once they develop these basic ***non-verbal communication skills***, most young children ***greatly enjoy*** communicating and interacting with others, and do so frequently and ***spontaneously*** (i.e. *without* being told or *prompted* to).
- For children with ASD who have not yet developed these basic non-verbal communication skills, everyday communication and interaction is ***extremely difficult*** and ***stressful***.
- Many children with ASD can learn to talk but struggle greatly to *read, understand* and *use* non-verbal communication. As a result, they may not:
  - Approach people and get their attention before talking to them
  - Look at others and/or use gestures when talking
  - Notice whether or not another person is interested in what they’re saying
  - Communicate effectively in social interactions

- It is therefore just as important to help a child with ASD learn to *use, read, and understand* non-verbal communication as it is to teach them to use words or learn other skills.
- \*\* To learn more about supporting your child's communication and language development, please see the following handouts:
  - **Understanding How Children Learn to Communicate & Talk – Part 2**
  - **Understanding How Adults Influence Children's Communication and Interaction**
  - **How to Help Your Child Communicate and Talk**
  - **Encouraging Your Child's Spontaneous Communication, Parts 1 & 2**

### Additional Resources

- Koegel, Robert L., Koegel, Lynn K. (2006). Pivotal Response Treatments for Autism: Communication, Social & Academic Development. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing
- MacDonald, J., Stoika, P. (2007). Play to Talk: A Practical Guide to Help Your Late-Talking Child Join the Conversation. Madison, WI: Kiddo Publishing Co.
- Mahoney, G., MacDonald, J. (2007). The Responsive Teaching Curriculum for Parents and professionals. Austin, Texas: PRO-ED, Inc.
- Prizant, B. M., Wetherby, A. M., Rubin, E., Laurent, A. C., & Rydell, P. J. (2005). The SCERTS Model: A comprehensive educational approach for children with autism spectrum disorders. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
- Potter, C., Whittaker, C. (2001). Enabling Communication in Children with Autism. London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers Ltd.
- Quill, K. (2000) Do-Watch-Listen-Say: Social and Communication Intervention for Children with Autism. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
- Sussman, F. (1999). More than Words: Helping Parents Promote Communication and Social Skills in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Toronto, ON; The Hanen Centre. (Accompanying DVD also highly recommended). *Available at [www.hanen.org](http://www.hanen.org)*

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