



# How to help your child communicate and talk

- Given their neurological differences, children with ASD usually have significant difficulties learning to communicate with others.
- Unlike typically developing children, children with ASD often don't realize that they can ask for and receive help when they want or need something.
- Since communicating is so difficult for children with ASD, they tend to:
  - Avoid asking for help when they want or need something.
  - Do things or get things for themselves (e.g. climb shelves or open cabinets)
  - Wait for others to help them or get things for them
  - Communicate their wants and needs unclearly through particular *actions* or *behaviors* (e.g. screaming, whining, hitting, crying, moving away from people, etc.)
  - Wait for others to tell or "prompt" them to communicate (e.g. asking "Do you want more chips? Say 'Want CHIPS!'")
- The more children with ASD learn to get things **for themselves**, (e.g. open a door, get a favorite food or snack):
  - The less they need to communicate for help.
  - The less they will practice communicating.

## Strategies to Help your Child Communicate and Talk

- **Provide frequent communication opportunities:** Set up your child's everyday environment so they must communicate with you to get what they want (e.g. access to the television, favorite toys, backyard, etc.). For example, place your child's favorite toy or treat *in sight* but *out of reach* (e.g. in a closed Tupperware container; on a shelf) so they can only get it by asking for it (see handout: "*Encouraging Spontaneous Communication in Children with ASD*")
- **Respond!!** "Reinforce" or strengthen your child's communication *efforts* by responding *quickly* and *positively* to their eye contact, vocalizations and gestures. Respond much more slowly if they try to communicate in "developmentally younger" ways (e.g. screaming, banging, kicking, etc.)
- **Imitate you child's sounds and words as much as possible:** This shows your child that their sounds and words are *powerful* ways to communicate with people. Simple back-and-forth sound imitation games are the beginnings of social conversations!
- **Play simple games:** Many young children learn their first words during fun, repetitive games with simple language and gestures (e.g. peek-a-boo, clapping games, blowing kisses and waving bye-bye).
- **Help your child understand and begin to use "key" words:** Put simple words and/ or sounds to your child's favorite actions and toys/objects of interest (e.g. "tickle" or "cat – meow!"). Children first learn words that "label" what they are most interested in or focused on.
- **Teach effective non-verbal communication:** Show your child (i.e. "model") different *non-verbal* ways to communicate (e.g. shaking their head "no" when they don't want something; pointing to something they want, etc.).
- **Sing with your child!** Popular children's songs (e.g. "If You're Happy & You Know It"; "Itsy-bitsy spider") encourage language development, imitation and interaction.
- **Speak clearly and simply:** When speaking to a child who is just beginning to communicate, use *clear, simple language* (i.e. single words, short phrases) as much as possible. For example, instead of saying "Do want more chocolate cookie? Say 'Cookie?'"
- **Read to your child:** Read to your child often if s/he likes it. Books with large pictures of Animals often work well. Put a word or sound to the pictures your child's eyes are drawn to (e.g. "Brown Bear!"; "Cat!").

- Help your child communicate:
  - For different **purposes** (e.g. to continue an activity, to get a favorite toy, etc.)
  - In **different activities** and **situations** (e.g. when playing with Dad, eating with Mom, at the park, etc.)
- **Resist the following common tendencies:**
  - Pushing your child to talk when they are anxious, frustrated, or distressed
  - Pressuring your child to say words that are difficult for them to say
  - Constantly correcting your child's speech
  - Using a lot of words when communicating with your child
  - Constantly asking your child questions they may not understand or are not yet able to answer
- \*\* To learn more about supporting your child's communication and language development, please see the following handouts:
  - **Understanding How Children Learn to Talk and Communicate**
  - **Understanding How Adults Influence Children's Communication and Interaction**
  - **Encouraging Your Child's Spontaneous Communication**

### 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). Autism and Developmental Delays in Young Children. 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.

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