



# Encouraging your child's spontaneous communication - Part 1

- Learning to communicate spontaneously is the most critical educational priority for children with ASD (NRC, 2001).
- In order to be effective communicators, children need to be able to *approach others* and **spontaneously communicate** their needs and wants.
  - “**Spontaneously**” = *independently* or *without* prompting or directing from others
- Children with ASD who are unable to communicate **spontaneously** will have significant difficulties developing friendships and actively participating in family, school and community life.
- The more children with ASD learn to communicate **in response** to adult prompting or directing, the less likely it is that they will learn to communicate *spontaneously*.
- In order to become *spontaneous* communicators, children with ASD must shift from **responding** to adult prompts (e.g. “What do you want? Do you want more chips? Say Chips!”) to **spontaneously initiating** communication (e.g. *independently* approaching Mom, looking at her, and saying “Chips!”).
- “**Tempting**” children to initiate communication (see below) encourages *spontaneity*, while *frequent prompting* can lead to *passivity* and *dependence* on others.
- The more your child's **spontaneous attempts** to communicate (e.g. eye contact, making sounds, reaching, etc.) are **quickly responded to**, the more likely they will be to keep *communicating spontaneously*.

## How to “Tempt” Your Child to *Spontaneously* Communicate

- Set up a “motivating situation” where your child must communicate to get what they want:
  - Child can see favorite toys/foods/objects on shelf but out of reach
  - Child can see favorite toys/treats inside a clear container or tightly closed jar
  - Child can't turn on T.V. or DVD without your help
  - Favorite juice in cup or pitcher runs out
  - Parts missing from favorite toys (e.g. wheels missing or detached from favorite car)
  - Missing puzzle pieces, alphabet letters, chalk, pens, or paintbrushes
  - Lids too tight on play dough
  - Liquids too hard to squeeze out of bottle (e.g. glue, ketchup)

- *Pause* and *wait* just before your child expects you to do something specific for them:
  - Opening a door or gate
  - Giving a favorite toy or food
  - Giving the “wrong” toy or food
  - Unbuckling child’s seatbelt in the car
  - Helping them get up or down (swings, climbing equipment, stairs, etc.)
- *Repeat* a *familiar*, preferred activity (e.g. a tickle game, swing, or song) several times (so child anticipates your behavior), then *pause and wait expectantly* for child to re-initiate game (with a sound, word or action). Immediately respond to child’s communication by continuing activity, then pause and wait again, etc.  
Other activities include:
  - A dressing or undressing routine (e.g. taking shoes off)
  - Blowing bubbles
  - Inflating balloons
  - Activating a wind-up or cause & effect toy (e.g. jack-in-the-box)
  - Playing a harmonica, kazoo, etc.
  - A favorite physical game (e.g. tickling, up/down games)
  - Bouncing or rolling child on a ball
  - Giving child “pressure” or squeezes on their head, hands, feet, etc. with your hands or a pillow or ball
  - Pushing child on a swing
  - Shaking, rolling or swinging child on a blanket

## Strategies to Encourage More Spontaneous Communication

- When your child really wants something, **allow them time to realize** that they must communicate with you to get it. *Waiting can be very difficult for adults who have learned to immediately prompt a child to communicate.*
- If you immediately offer help or prompt your child (e.g. “What do you want? Do you want more chips? Say ‘More chips!’”), they may learn to **passively wait** for your help or prompting.
- To help your child become a more **active** communicator, wait for them to **initiate** communication by approaching you, looking at you, taking your hand, making sounds, etc.
- As soon as your child makes a clear **effort** to communicate with you (e.g. looking at you, pulling your hand, reaching, etc.) **respond immediately** by giving a small amount (if possible) of what they want (e.g. food, toys, tickles, etc.). Wait **quietly** and **expectantly** for your child to communicate for more.
- \*\* To learn more about supporting your child’s communication and language development, please see the following handouts:
  - **Encouraging Your Child’s Spontaneous Communication, Part 2**
  - **Understanding How Children Learn to Communicate and Talk, Parts 1 & 2**
  - **Strategies to Help Your Child Communicate and Talk**
  - **Understanding How Adults Influence Children’s Communication and Interaction, Part 1 & Resources**

**Medical Review:**  
Garrett Watanabe, M.D.

**Author:**  
Andrew Shahan, M.A.  
ASD Regional Health Educator

**Last Updated:**  
September 2009