



CENTRE FOR AUTISM
MIDDLETOWN

Top Ten Tips for Supporting Communication

1. Modify the environment

The majority of children with autism are strong visual learners – so visual information may be distracting, even if it's not what you want the child to focus on

Difficulties with attention may mean that they only process one piece of information at a time (Murray, Lesser and Lawson, 2005), therefore, make sure it's what you want the child to focus on – make it your Number 1

What can you do?

- Reduce background noise and distractions, where possible
e.g. switch off the white board when not in use, cover up busy wall displays, consider where the child or young person is sitting e.g. are they sitting close to a noisy photocopier? Is light reflecting on a white board?



2. Establish Attention

Consider how you are engaging the child or young person

- Are you offering an irresistible invitation to learn?
- Does what you are doing inspire the child's attention?

(Davies, 2012)



You have to become more interesting than everything else

- Be at the pupil's level
- Become physically close to the child – but know your audience!
- Be in the child's line of vision
- Use the child's name at the start of the sentence
 - E.g. “Jack, it's time for break”
 - Instead of “It's time for break, Jack”
- Watch for the pupil to orientate to you
- Become animated!
- Use visual strategies



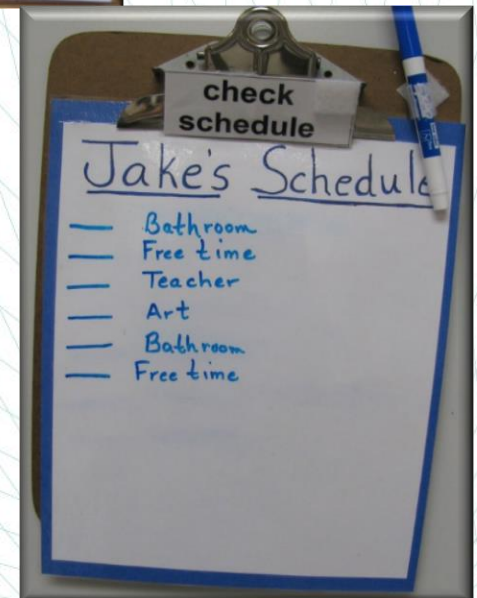
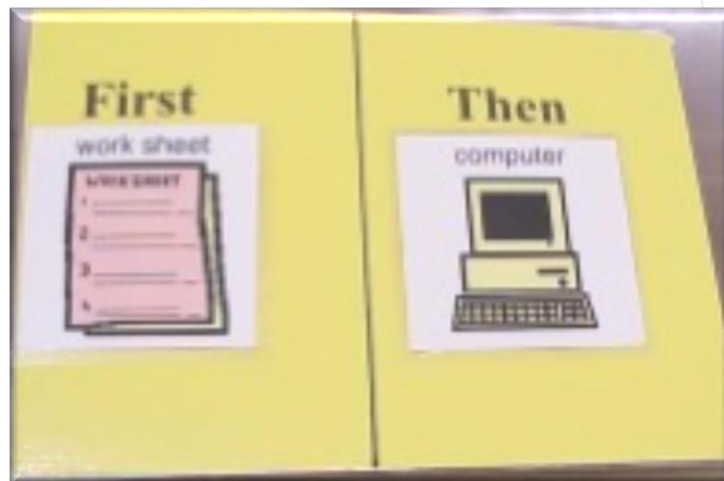
3. Create opportunities

Why would a pupil communicate a need or desire if everything is readily available?

For example, at breakfast often making sure that the child or young person has everything he or she wants and needs available at the table reduces their opportunity to communicate to e.g. make a request.



4. Support communication visually- use consistently



How Can Visual Structures Help With Communication and Behaviour?

Visual information such as

- objects,
- pictures, and
- written language are non-transient.

They remain present long enough to provide an opportunity for the child to engage his or her attention before the message disappears.

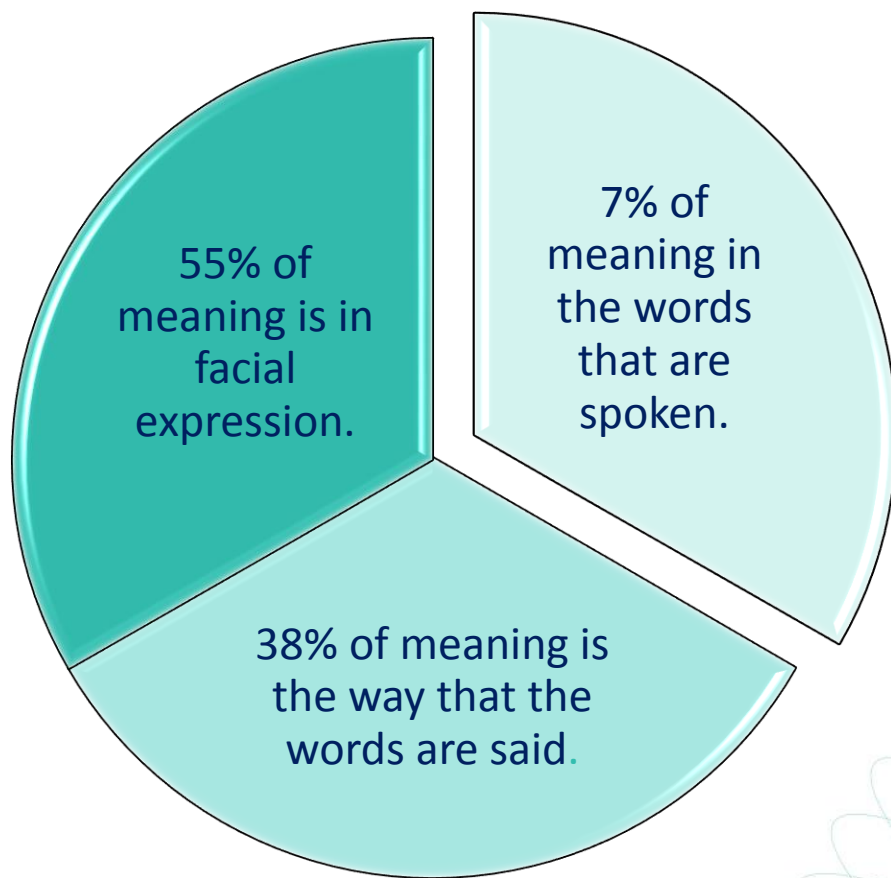


5. Use gestures and body language

Non-verbal communication adds meaning to language

- Facial expressions – smiling, frowning, raising eyebrows
- Hand gestures – pointing, using hands to emphasis a point
- Eye movements – looking with appropriate gaze for an appropriate time, eye pointing

Tip to Remember



Mehrabian, 1971

Children and young people who find listening and understanding language difficult, often rely on non-verbal communication to help compensate for their lack of understanding of verbal information, yet children with autism also experience difficulty reading the non-verbal cues.



6. Slowly and clear

Understanding spoken language depends on:

- Listening and attention skills
- Motivation and interest
- The clues and cues gleaned from the situation and the speaker
- The vocabulary used
- The volume of information and sentence length
- The inclusion of non-literal or ambiguous language
remembering key words

Talk so slowly that it feels funny – then you will probably be talking at the right speed

Inadvertently,

You can make the auditory signal more difficult to understand by,

- Repeating
- Raising your voice
- Changing the order of the words



7. Wait



- Be aware that each child or young person may have a different processing time, which can change throughout the day.
- Flack and Roberts, (2004) recommend the 8 – 12 second rule
- Don't fear silence!
- If you have to repeat your statement , be aware of changing what you say

8. Try commenting rather than questions

Children and young people with delayed language development often engage quietly in activities.

Questions are important to develop a child or young persons understanding but **be aware** of the **quality and quantity** of questions.

Instead use comments

- **Explain** what they are doing
- **Repeat** what they say
- **Expand** their utterance by adding a few extra words



A note on questions

Avoid closed questions – i.e. involving a “yes” or “no” response or allow for giving a one word answer.

Use open questions – to encourage the use of more than one word.

“What would you like to choose?”

“What is the man doing?”

Questions should relate to what the pupil is doing or looking at

One question for every 4 comments



9. Respond

Respond by modelling language, which may be useful for the child or young person:

Explaining: Describe what the pupil is doing or looking at using short simple sentences

Repeating: Repeat what the pupil says but use a correctly structured and articulated sentence, e.g.

Pupil: “I caught the ball”

Adult: “Yes, you caught the ball”

Pupil: “I went on a dain”

Adult: “Ah, you went on the train”

Expanding: Develop what the pupil has communicated by repeating it back and adding something, for example:

Pupil: “walking”

Adult: “Yes, Jack’s walking”

Pupil: (points to car)

Adult: “Car” (plus the sign for car)



What about misunderstandings?

Don't pretend that you have understood.

It's important to give honest and appropriate feedback

If you have to interpret the message...

- repeat it back, so that you can check that you have understood the intended meaning



10. Stay with the interaction until the goal is achieved

When pupils encounter a communication breakdown, the result can be:

- A behavioural outburst
- Withdrawal from the communication attempt
- Inappropriate participation

These are all forms of challenging behaviour

10. Stay with the interaction until the goal is achieved

When pupils don't understand, they need to let you know, but frequently, they don't know how to.

Encourage them to **persist** and keep trying if you don't understand

This may not be easy to do, but helping the pupil use a variety of strategies, particularly visual strategies, to communicate will help them repair the breakdowns.



Remember!

- If a child or young person with autism is upset or angry, he or she may not understand as well as he or she would in calmer circumstances – might have an even longer processing time than usual
- Check that he or she has understood by asking him or her to repeat what has been asked

References

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