

Developing early communication

Early communication skills overlap with social interaction skills and play. The types of activity that we can use to develop early communication skills include the following:

- Learning to play: building a relationship
- Interactive play
- Strategies to encourage eye-contact
- Turn-taking activities to help develop early communication
- Awareness of tongue and mouth
- Developing breath control
- Using music to develop communication skills
- Making choices.

Learning to play: building a relationship

Most young children with autistic spectrum disorders have limited interests that are often repetitive and solitary. They may resist an adult or child joining in their play. Cuddles and games will usually be on their terms.

The first step when teaching a child new skills is to build a relationship where the child enjoys being with you and will join in things you want to do. It is important not to be deterred by the verbal or non-verbal 'leave me alone' message the child may be giving.

What you can do

- Begin by sitting beside your child, watching him play. He may get up and walk away every time you go to sit next to him, so it helps if you have a very motivating toy with you, for example bubbles, a squeaky toy, spinning top, musical instrument.
- When your child accepts your presence, comment on what she is doing in a positive way. If she is looking at a book you could say, 'That's a big book. It looks good. Turn the page. Finished!'
- With a young child you may want to sing about what he is doing.
- Gradually join in with what your child is doing. At first, just copy what she does. With some children it may be necessary to sit alongside. If your child is looking at a book but does not want to share it with you, you could sit alongside and say, 'I'm reading too!' Some children will allow you to share their book, but you will have to look at the pages they have chosen. That is fine because what you want to do is let your child become used to you sharing their space without becoming a threat.
- If your child is playing outside with a ball or hoop, but will not let you play with it too, find a similar ball or hoop and copy what he does. If he likes to run up and down, run up and down beside him or race up and down holding hands.
- When your child accepts you alongside copying her actions, start to take the lead sometimes. If she always does the same thing, change it a little. Make new suggestions seem really exciting. For example, if you have been watching

a music video together, start gently moving to the rhythm of the music. If you have been running up and down together, change direction and go round in circles.

- When your child starts to follow your lead sometimes and allows you to follow his lead sometimes, you have the start of a good relationship. Keep it up! Be enthusiastic, be exciting, be active.

Interactive play

Interactive play is any play that involves two or more participants anticipating and developing their actions in relation to each other. It develops early social interaction and play skills, but is also a form of communication as each participant in the game builds on the other's actions, extending, changing, keeping going, slowing down, speeding up...

Rough and tumble

This is the name given to games that involve vigorous activity and excitement. An adult will pick a baby up and toss him in the air. The baby will scream with excitement and lift his hands up for more. The adult does it again and the baby laughs and looks at the adult, moving his body up and down to show he wants the action repeated. 'Again?' the adult asks and the baby laughs with glee in anticipation of another exciting ride through the air.

Many types of game come into this category. You want your child to enjoy herself enough to show that she wants you to do it again. You want her to move her body, pull you, look at your face, laugh in anticipation, make a sound or ask for more. At first you may need to prompt her. Say 'You want more?' and wait for a response. It may be a subtle flicker of the eyes or a less subtle thump, but you know what it means. 'You want more!' you say and repeat the game. As your child develops her communication skills, you make it harder for her to get the desired response by moving through some of the following stages:

- a slight movement
- a definite movement
- fleeting eye contact
- a definite look
- a sign or gesture showing what she wants
- a symbol
- a sound
- a word: 'bubbles!' or 'tickle!', for example
- a phrase: 'more tickles'
- a sentence: 'chase me again!'

Rough and tumble is a very physical form of play.

It is important to remember that children who have any kind of sensory difficulty may be at a very early stage of their sensory development and need much more physical interaction with the adults around them than other children.

Rough and tumble play has to be enjoyable to the child or the purpose is lost. Introduce different ideas gradually to see what the child really likes. Some children dislike being touched and it is important to respect this and find other ways of developing interactive play.

Types of rough and tumble play

- Throw your child in the air and catch him
- Give your child a ride on your back or legs
- Play with soft play equipment: bounding, jumping, climbing, rolling
- Push your child gently in to a ball pool or on to a soft mat
- Bounce or roll your child on a big ball
- Play tickling games or blow raspberries on ticklish places
- Spin your child around while holding their hands or waist
- Play monsters or 'I'm coming to get you!' games
- Swing or catch your child on a large piece of fabric
- Play hide and seek or peep-o under a rug or around doorways, windows, and hiding spaces
- Play jump and fall down games on thick mats, old sofas or any soft surface.

Repetitive phrases, singing and rhymes are often an important part of interactive play. They help your child anticipate what is going to happen and build up the level of excitement. When swinging a young child round, you might say, 'a one... a two... a threeee!' or, when playing chasing games, 'I'm coming to get you... here I come!' creeping up and then, when the child looks expectantly, racing forward to catch them in your arms.

Other ideas for interactive play

Water play

These ideas can be used to capture your child's interest and develop joint attention: that is, adult and child sharing enjoyment and interest in the activity:

- pouring water out of or into containers of different sizes and shapes
- colour the water
- add bubble/foam bath and froth up with a whisk and blow it or make shapes in it
- build a tower of blocks on a bridge across the water and anticipate the splash as they fall in!
- pierce a plastic bottle on the sides and bottom so the water pours out from unexpected places
- blow bubbles with a straw in a cup containing a little bit of washing-up liquid and some bubble bath
- blow up a balloon and float it on the water
- use wind-up toys in the water, especially noisy ones.

Play with puppets

- the most interesting puppets are hand puppets that make a noise.
- introduce the puppet slowly as your child may be afraid of it initially. Use it to tickle, talk, dance, sing, and make funny noises. Encourage your child to try it on his hand. Take turns or use two puppets to have a conversation.

- puppets are good at the beginning and end of a play session to sing ‘hello’ and ‘goodbye’ songs. They often draw the child’s attention to you and provide a good opening for other play activities. Puppets also encourage taking turns and social interaction.

Outdoor play

- push your child on a swing. Ask if he wants more pushes. If possible, push him from the front so that you can see the expression on his face and respond to it.
- jump on a trampoline. Stop and ask your child if she wants to jump some more and wait for a response before starting again.
- play chase or hide and seek.

When children will not play

It can be hard to engage some children with autistic spectrum disorders in interactive play. Try the following suggestions to further encourage your child:

- collect motivating toys and objects.
- let your child lead: Try to have two identical toys and copy what your child does with his. If your child likes playing in water, you play in water too. Do not be put off when your child walks away from you, try again later. If she likes lying on her back gazing at the sky, then try it yourself. You will find some of these seemingly pointless activities enjoyable and can share the enjoyment in companionable silence.
- develop your child’s interests: changing an obsession into creative play can be difficult, but it can provide an important way into your child’s world.
- making time for play: set aside a specific time each day when you play with your child. Include the play as part of your child’s daily routine, consistently signalled by a symbol, object, or word. You may find it best at these times to play in an area where there are no other distractions and keep to a small number of activities.
- playmates: although interactive play initially builds on the relationship between adult and child, at a later stage it can be helpful to include one or two other children. They can act as positive role models, showing enjoyment in interactive play activities.

Strategies to encourage eye contact

Eye contact is a natural communication skill and it can feel difficult to talk to someone if they are not looking at you. Teaching a child to look at you is an important part of gaining his attention. Care should be taken to build the skill gradually, and not to make too big an issue of it.

What you can do

- To encourage the development of eye contact, you will need anything that might gain your child’s attention and reward her for looking, for example bubbles, balloon, bell, etc. Hold the object near your face.
- Make the exercises fun by using motivating toys and rewards and praise a good response by saying ‘good looking’, while giving your child the reward. If

he steadfastly refuses to look at you, reward a near look and keep working on it, always rewarding the best response.

- Give your child enough time to respond, but do not wait so long that she loses interest in the activity or becomes frustrated. Timing is important; it is better to accept a near response and say 'good try' than lose the opportunity altogether.
- At first, praise and reward the most fleeting eye contact as it will not be intentional. When your child begins to understand that you want him to look at you, increase your expectation before giving the reward. However, it is important not to teach your child to stare at you; try to keep it natural.

Turntaking activities to help develop early communication

Turn-taking activities help build a social dialogue between a child and an adult, then between a child and his peers.

What you can do

- To begin with, activities should be simple and very motivating for your child. Give them plenty of time before prompting a response.
- When playing turn-taking games it can be helpful to say, 'My turn, your turn' or 'Mummy's turn, [your child's name] turn', so your child learns to associate the words with the idea of waiting his turn.
- Many play activities can be shared in a turn-taking game. Here are a few ideas:
 - Take turns spinning a top or pressing a switch on a cause and effect toy (one that does something when you touch it in some way, such as a music box, a toy that spins, or makes a noise, etc.)
 - Take turns dropping balls down a tube
 - Take turns blowing bubbles, blowing a paper windmill, pouring sand or water
 - Take turns rolling a car down a ramp
 - Take turns laying brick to build a tower or knocking a tower over
 - Take turns playing peep-o with a scarf or piece of fabric
 - Take turns dropping shapes into a posting box
 - Take turns banging a drum
 - Take turns bouncing a rubber ball
 - Push a car to your child and wait for him to push it back to you
 - Roll, or kick a ball and wait for your child to return it to you. Start with rolling, with both you and your child sat on the floor with your legs spread out so there is a clear area in which to play
 - Bounce or roll a ball in a blanket or towel by holding the ends of the fabric
 - Hit a balloon back and forth between you
 - Have a pretend conversation on the telephone, taking turns to speak
 - Take turns to pour and drink a pretend cup of tea
 - Take turns when reading a book to turn the pages
 - Take turns to go down a slide
 - Do a puzzle together, taking turns to place each piece
 - Take turns in a singing game.

Awareness of tongue and mouth

Some non-verbal children may not be aware of their tongue and lips and what they can do, although they are very important for forming sounds. Exercises that help to encourage oral awareness and movement of the tongue include:

- Sticking your tongue out and asking your child to copy you. Move your tongue up/down, side-to-side, around your mouth, curl your tongue, etc.
- Put honey or jam on your child's lips and round his mouth so the he will lick it off with his tongue
- Blow out your cheeks and see if your child can copy you
- Blow raspberries with your lips and see if your child can copy you
- Blow kisses
- Make kisses to a mirror.

Developing breath control

Breath control is also important for developing and controlling sounds. Exercises you can use to develop breath control include:

- Blowing bubbles with a bubble wand or through a straw
- Blowing or sucking through a straw
- Blowing a whistle
- Blowing boats on water
- Blowing frothed up bubble bath off their or your hands
- Blowing feathers
- Breathing on a mirror or window and making a pattern
- Blowing paper windmills and making them spin.

Using music to develop communication skills

Most children love music and sometimes their language first begins to emerge as the words of a song. Singing can make unpleasant tasks more enjoyable, help develop play, soothe, and give pleasure.

What you can do

- Try making up songs to describe your actions or those of your child. A 'singing commentary' about a child's play can be a good way to join in, comment and develop a turn-taking dialogue. Copy your child's actions sometimes, then change the sound a little bit and see if she will copy you.
- Sing a song with actions, for example where the child gets a tickle. When the song is familiar, leave a gap before the action to see if your child will ask for the tickle or make a movement to show anticipation. Make sure the gap is long enough to give your child plenty of time to respond, but not so long that he loses interest in the tickle.
- Sit facing your child, or have your child facing you on your lap. Sing simple nursery songs and, when they are familiar, leave out key words or phrases to

encourage your child to fill in the spaces. Make a big thing of this, leave a gap, look expectantly at your child, give him enough time to respond, but not so long that you lose the rhythm of the song completely. Do not give up if your child does not respond; keep up the expectation that he will fill in the gap with a sound or gesture. It often happens when you are not expecting it.

- Songs can be a good way to teach imitation skills. First show her what to do and prompt her if necessary. Then, withdraw the prompt and see if she will copy the action by herself.
- You can use simple actions, such as clapping, or drums, or shakers and get your child to copy your action with that. This then becomes a good turn-taking activity.

Making choices

Offering choices to children is a good way to help them learn how useful communication skills can be. This also gives them a sense of purpose, of having some control over their environment.

If you are asking your child to make a choice between snacks, for example, hold them up and say clearly, ‘You want a biscuit or crisps?’ emphasising the words as you do so. Vary the choices gradually over time, to encourage your child to purposefully make choices and avoid always selecting the same item.

There are many opportunities throughout the day to offer choices. At first, do not offer more than two choices at once, as this could be confusing, but make the choices meaningful. If she grabs at both choices at once, keep the choices at different distances apart and give the first one she touches. She will soon understand that she has to choose the one she prefers.

When your child understands that pictures can be used to represent real objects, you can use pictorial choice boards using symbols, drawings, or photographs.

Strategies for developing social communication

Many children with autism will not progress through the expected stages of babbling and experimenting with their own vocal sounds. For children with autism the innate desire and motivation to communicate is missing. Although we can see how beneficial it would be for a child with autism to communicate, the child may not see that need. As some children with autism may be oversensitive to noise and background noise then activities should be planned to accommodate this. Perhaps the factor most influential for encouraging children with autism is using resources and rewards that appeal to them. A basic human fact is that if we have a purpose or interest then we are more likely to want to participate.

It is essential that children with autism be provided with a means of communication and an ability to understand the communication of others around them. The rules of communication may not be readily understood by children with autism, but these can be developed through repeated modelling and imitation.

To develop a child's social communication skills will involve providing activities to encourage:

- awareness of the basic ingredients of communication – eye-contact, listening, concentrating, having people near to you and facing you
- creating sounds and using the mouth for different purposes
- pointing skills
- strategies to indicate to an adult that s/he needs something (to move them on from taking you by the hand and leading you)
- object naming
- early speech and language from one word utterances onwards
- understanding meaning
- understanding facial expressions and body language
- understanding the meaning of short sentences as opposed to one or two words in the sentence
- reducing echolalia (if used)
- understanding the rules and principles of communication.

The following strategies can be useful:

- When a child needs something:
 - encourage eye contact, perhaps by tilting his/her head
 - face-to-face position
 - encourage pointing to the object
 - name the object within a simple sentence
 - make a positive comment about the communication attempt itself and the object or activity you are being led to.
- Encourage use of the child's name:
 - when the child approaches, greet him/her by name
 - use the child's name when praising
 - call the child by name, even if you know s/he will not respond, then go to the child and repeat the name, encouraging eye-contact and concentration
 - if the child can tolerate physical touch, when you call him/her, another adult could turn the child to face you and encourage a response.
- When you speak to the child, always allow a short pause after, to allow the child to say or do something in return, just as in conversation.
- When near to the child use simple language to describe what you are doing, so appropriate language models are heard.
- Play games that involve turn-taking, sharing and making sounds, and using the mouth for a range of activities to encourage awareness of the mouth and sounds. Examples include: blowing bubbles, making animal noises and sounds, blowing raspberries, swallowing, licking and making sounds at different pitches.
- If the child makes unprompted sounds or noises, copy them to encourage further experimentation.
- Make funny faces and different facial expressions, noises and sounds.
- Use puppets to have conversations with. This will encourage understanding of the rules of conversation.

- Talk about people's expressions in photographs, pictures, and puzzles to encourage recognition and awareness of facial expressions, e.g. 'Daddy looks happy' or 'She's sad'.
- Use rhymes, simple games, and play to encourage taking turns and sharing. This will also help to develop an understanding of turn-taking in conversation.
- Place labels (pictures and words) on objects around the room and house.
- Repeat simple phrases often, and do not change them, e.g. 'Do you want a drink?'. This can be accompanied by an action, e.g. showing a cup.
- Encourage the child to show you things, name them, and talk about them in short, simple sentences. Be interested and praise the action. Repeat the same simple phrase every time the object appears and touch it if you can, to relate the object to the word.
- Link objects to actions to support understanding, e.g. when you say 'It's dinner time' hold up the child's fork, spoon, plate, etc. Always use the same object.
- Refrain from using confusing sayings, e.g. 'jump in the bath', when you actually mean 'get in the bath'.
- Place pictures near objects you know the child may want, and encourage him/her to point to, or bring you, the picture, as opposed to just leading you to the area and you guessing what is wanted.
- Place desired objects such as the child's cup, biscuits/crisps, favoured toys, just out of the child's reach to encourage the need for communication.
- Have fun looking in a mirror, making faces and talking about your face. Give the child a second mirror so you can share the activity and encourage participation.
- If the child attempts a word, but gets it wrong, e.g. 'gog' for dog, always offer the correct version, 'yes, dog'.
- Once the child has developed single-word naming, begin extension exercises by adding a word at a time to describe, e.g. 'yes, a black dog'.
- Use toys and objects to enact verbs, naming them at the same time, e.g. 'teddy is jumping'; 'teddy is sleeping'.

Further reading:

Hannah, L. (2001). *Teaching young children with autistic spectrum disorders to learn: a practical guide for parents and staff in mainstream schools and nurseries*. London: The National Autistic Society.

Wall, K. (2004). *Autism and early years practice: a guide for early years professionals, teachers and parents*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.