

Adapting the home to encourage communication

In most homes and nurseries, children's toys and activities are not placed on high shelves or in locked cupboards. They are readily accessible so that children can learn by exploring. However, for children with severe communication difficulties, providing easy access to everything they need removes important opportunities to teach them to communicate with others and show how rewarding such communication can be.

Adapting the home to provide more opportunities for communication to occur needs to be planned carefully. There are many little things you can do throughout the day to help develop communication skills.

Children with autistic spectrum disorders may ask for what they want by eye pointing, pointing, dragging you towards the object, standing under or beside the cupboard or shelf where things are kept, crying, speaking aloud (but not always asking somebody) or having a tantrum. Consider how your child communicates his/her needs and try to move him/her on to the next stage by teaching pointing and the use of eye contact, by using symbols, pictures, sounds, or spoken words.

What you can do

When you first try some of the ideas that follow, your child may be perplexed and become frustrated very quickly. However, if you model the correct response before s/he becomes upset, s/he will soon begin to understand what is expected and some of the things you try will become little jokes between you.

- Keep favourite toys and food in a locked cupboard. Stick symbols, photographs, or pictures on the cupboard and teach the child to bring you the picture of the thing s/he wants. If you do not want him/her to have a particular toy or snack, you can remove the card or place a red cross over it.
- If your child is able to ask for what she wants but seldom does so, symbols and picture cards will help him/her understand that s/he has to go to an adult and ask for them. You can then encourage him/her to use a word, phrase or sentence to do this, depending on his/her language ability. You should always emphasise what your child has said – for example, if s/he says 'book', you reply, 'You want the *book*. Lets' get the book.'
- You can set-up situations where you 'forget' to give your child something important, like giving a cup for a drink but not putting any drink in it or not giving a spoon at dinnertime when you know s/he has his/her favourite dessert and will need a spoon to eat it. Sometimes you may have to prompt a request if your child cries or sits silently, but give plenty of time for him/her to ask for him/herself. A communication book or board that contains pictures, symbols or written words (if the child can read) can be a very useful prompt for a reluctant speaker.
- You can also try giving something that is wrong – a pencil with a broken point or a plastic biscuit instead of a real one, for example – or do something wrong – such as trying to put a sock on a hand instead of a foot. Whatever you do,

make sure that you give enough time for your child to respond and try to choose things that are motivating for him/her.

- When you are playing a game or doing a favourite puzzle, keep a piece in your hand and see if your child responds by asking for it.
- When you give your child something s/he wants, do not give it all at once. If you have crisps, keep the packet and hand them one at a time as s/he requests them. Similarly, for any pieces for a posting box, or balls for a rolling game, keep them and wait until s/he asks for the next one. The request may be in the form of a look, gesture, symbol, word or sentence – whatever level of communication you are working towards. You may also need to teach ‘no’ so your child is able to tell you s/he does not want any of the choices available. A symbol with a red cross, a sign, or the word ‘no’ can be taught, as appropriate to your child.

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.