

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN EARLY LEARNERS WITH AUTISM

Communication is key to human interaction. Communication is the sharing of information, needs, attention, experiences, and ideas between two or more people. Communication usually involves spoken, written, and nonverbal forms of communication such as eye contact, gestures, and facial expressions. Children with ASD often lack the understanding and/or skills to communicate effectively. Early learners with ASD often have difficulty using language to express their wants and needs, answer other people's questions, understand directions, and understand and use nonverbal communication. This weakness in communication can significantly impact their social and behavioral functioning. This handout is designed to support parents in getting started with teaching basic communication to their child at home.



It is important to recognize that for individuals with ASD, communication skills are generally not “picked up” over time by watching others. Instead, they need to be systematically taught through prompting and practice, and generalized to a variety of situations and people.

Using visual supports

Visual supports can help children with ASD learn communication more easily because they tend to understand things that are visual better than they understand things that are spoken. When children understand better, they are more motivated and they learn more easily. Some parents fear that using visual supports may hinder the use of spoken language. This is not true. In fact, children who understand communication are more motivated to communicate quickly and learn through reinforcement how effective communication can be. Visual supports are often a bridge for learning more complicated and symbolic forms of communication such as words.

Visual representations of communication can then move to more and more abstract forms in the following order:

- actual objects and actions
- photographs of objects and actions
- drawings of objects and actions
- written words which describe objects and actions

Visual supports grow and change as your child grows and changes. As infants and toddlers, people begin to understand their world through objects; therefore using objects is the best starting place for teaching communication skills to early learners.



photograph



line drawing

cup

word

Photography tips: When taking photographs to use for communication, it is helpful to make the photograph as simple as possible. Include only one object in the picture or make the background blank. Some individuals have difficulty generalizing, so it may also be helpful to avoid including details such as the title of the book or video, or the labels on a food or drink item.

RECEPTIVE COMMUNICATION

Receptive language is the ability to understand what another person is communicating. For a beginning learner, objects can be used as a receptive communication tool by pairing simple instructions (e.g. “Time for bath”) with a transition object (e.g. a bath toy). By using objects, you are helping your child make the connection between the words and their meanings. Remember to always use the same objects for the same activities, use clear and simple words, and to go immediately to the place or begin the activity immediately after showing the object and saying the words. Once your child is regularly attending physical objects, you can replace using objects with using photos and illustrations.

Example transition objects include:

- Eat – plate
- Bathroom – empty toilet paper roll
- Car – keys
- School – book bag
- TV – remote control
- Naptime – book
- Get dressed – socks
- Swimming – bathing suit

Once your child understands the meaning behind the transition objects you are using, you can start teaching your child about a sequence of events or instructions by setting up a “First-then” schedule. Visual schedules help children with ASD process verbal information, know what to expect (thus reducing anxiety



and confusion), follow through with expectations, and shift focus between one activity and the next. Once your child understands the First - then schedule, you can use a sequence of three pictures to indicate a sequence of three activities.

EXPRESSIVE COMMUNICATION

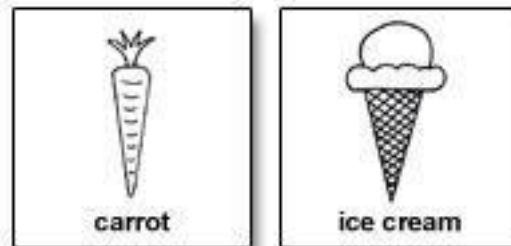
Expressive communication is the ability to communicate wants, needs, and information to others. Again, you will want to start by having your child use objects to communicate. Physically handing something to another person will help your child remember that communication involves other people.

Making requests is a foundational skill of communication as it teaches the idea of an exchange of communication. A **communication exchange** is when someone gives something like an object or word to another person and gets something in return. It is helpful to start teaching requests during highly motivating situations such as snack or when playing with a favorite toy.

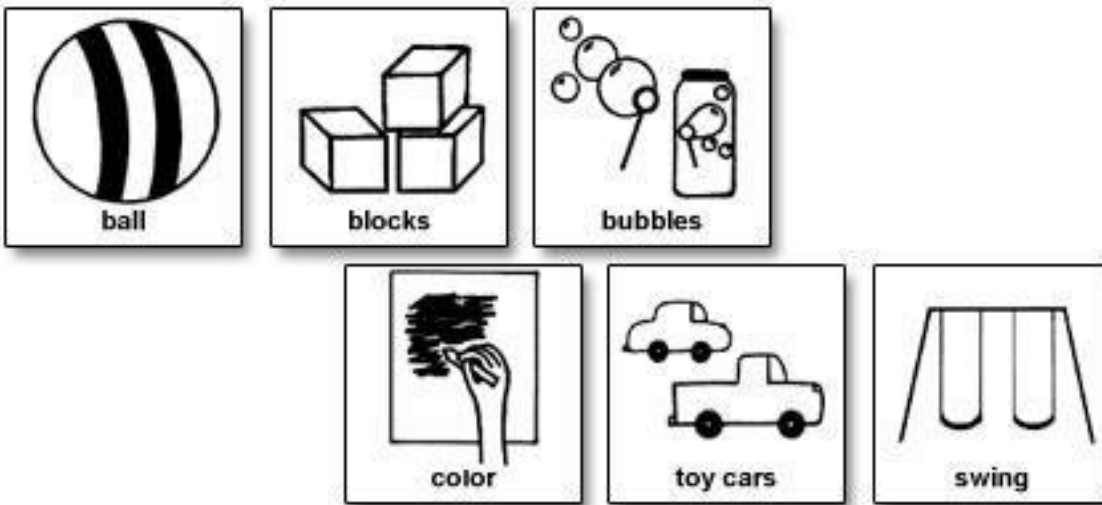
To teach communication exchange, it is best to work with a partner. One person sits across from your child holding something he or she wants such as a food treat or part of a favorite toy. The other person sits behind your child and physically assists him or her in handing an object or picture to the person holding the food treat or part of a favorite toy. The child is immediately rewarded by getting the food and the item is labeled ("chips!" + handing a chip). This sequence is repeated over and over again until your child is able to do it easily and independently. Suggested activities for object exchanges are listed below.

- **Snack exchange** – your child hands a tightly sealed container with a snack inside in exchange for a snack
- **Movie exchange** – your child hands an empty DVD box in exchange for a movie
- **Toy exchange** – your child hands a small piece of a toy in exchange for more pieces (e.g. marbles for a marble run or balls for a ball drop)
- **Outside time** – your child hands a sand shovel in exchange for sandbox toys

Once the idea of communication exchange is understood by your child, you can begin to introduce the idea of **choice**. To teach choice making, start by offering two items simultaneously to your child with a clear preference for one over the other. For example, offer ice cream together with carrots. Gradually make the distinction of preferred and nonpreferred items smaller and smaller until you have an equal choice. Start with objects and move to picture only when your child is ready!



Once your child understands the concept of choice, you can create **choice boards** and have him choose from three objects or pictures. For example, display pictures of available foods and drinks on the refrigerator. When your child wants a snack, have him give you the object or picture from the array of choices presented. Then, give him the requested item and verbally label it. If you can, only give a small amount so that he practices requesting several times. Another choice board idea is to display pictures of activities in a play area, and have your child hand you an object or picture in exchange for the toy.



COMMUNICATING FOR ENGAGEMENT

Another important reason we communicate is to share attention and experiences with another person. An effective way to teach this kind of communication is through the use of social play routines. Children with autism tend to learn routines quickly, making them an excellent way to support learning other skills. **A social play routine** is a routine in which a child and adult (or other child) engage in an enjoyable interaction and communicative behaviors are taught within the routine.

The steps of a social routine are:

- 1) Set up the environment and activity
- 2) Add visual supports (objects, pictures, written words)
- 3) Establish a routine by repeating it over and over
- 4) Pause during the routine and wait for the child to request that the routine continue (the child can request with eye contact, an object, a picture, or words)
- 5) As soon as the request is made, respond immediately

Examples of social play routines for early learners are listed below, but feel free to make up your own routines by observing your child and seeing what he or she likes.

Sandwich game: Use a large pillow to squish the child gently and provide deep pressure. Say “1, 2, 3, squish!” After the routine is established, pause during the count and wait for a request.

Swimming pool: Swim your child around like a motorboat where he or she goes “fast” and “slow.” After the routine is established, pause and have your child request to go fast or slow.

Bubbles/Balloons: Blow bubbles or blow up balloons and let them go. Say “1, 2, 3, go!” After the routine is established, pause during the count and wait for a request.

Tickle monster/chase: Say “I’m gonna get you” and tickle or chase your child. After the routine is established, pause after “I’m gonna...” and wait for a request.

