

Communicating with People with Autism

Communication problems are central to autism. Therefore, special care must be taken to know what each person understands and how to best give messages.

Our messages to people are conveyed through tone of voice, gestures, body language, and choice of words. It's important to create a relationship through which everyone can feel respected. Consider using visual means to convey information whenever possible. Visual information is more concrete and enduring.

The following general techniques are helpful:

1. **Be as positive as possible.** Praise often and honestly. Notice the good things. Ignore things that don't matter. Many individuals are conditioned to react negatively to "no" or "don't". These words may only trigger a signal that someone is mad or something is wrong but give no information about how to correct it. Use these words sparingly and only when you must have immediate compliance. Be specific when praising. "You did a good job. You washed your hands," is better than "You are a good boy."
2. **Teach individuals to listen.** Many repetitions of directions teach people not to listen to the words and thus should be avoided. Instead, follow a set procedure such as: "Wayne, come to the table" accompanied by a picture and/or gesture. Wait and give time for processing and moving. Repeat using the picture and/or gesture either with or without the verbal, "Wayne, come to the table." If he does not come, move toward the person and gently assist him to the table. In this way, Wayne will learn to listen and follow directions. If you give a direction, make sure you have the individual's attention and that it is followed. Learners learn that they do not need to comply when adults do not consistently require them to do what is asked, after it is determined that they clearly understand.
3. **Know what you want the person to do.** Be very clear in your own mind what you want learners to do and why. Be sure you are making a reasonable request and one which they are capable of doing.
 - a. Example: "We will go to lunch when you show me you are ready," is too vague. "Ready" must be defined. "Shut the computer off," then we will go to lunch," gives more information.
 - b. Example: "Dust all the furniture," tells the person what to do, but does not set any standard for quality. Instead picture each piece of furniture

in order and use a light spray to indicate space. Now you have made the expectations clear.

4. Give adequate information. Tell learners in advance what is going to happen next. If there are changes, inform them and involve them with plans. Let the learners know what will happen and what behavior is expected. Use language, pictures, and gestures they understand. Daily schedule boards and sequenced routines made with velcro or check-off sheets and picture wallets are concrete ways to provide information.
5. Use language that is as simple, clear, and concise as possible. People with autism usually can only comprehend a limited amount of language directed at them. It is best to be concise. Loading too many directions and explanations creates frustration and confusion. Individuals can be taught to listen and follow two and three step directions if the language is kept specific and concise. Usually they need individual direction rather than group directions.
 - a. Example: "Pick up your paints, wash your hands, and go to music."

Some people may not be able to follow all of this and may give up or become confused. When several steps are required, break the directions up to allow the receiver to complete one step before a second direction is given.

- b. Example:
 - * "It is time for music. Put the paints in the box."
 - * When the person is finished, say "Wash your hands".
 - * Then, "Go sit on the rug for music."

Often refraining from verbal cuing helps build independence. Use gestures and objects to provide information. Draw attention to others who can be modeled. Some of this information could be provided by sequenced pictures.

6. Tell the learners what to do and avoid telling them what not to do, whenever this is practical.
 - a. Example: Person throws food on the floor. Say, "Pick it up and put it in the sink." (The two-part direction may need to be broken up into two one-part directions.) "Don't throw food," only tells him what he just did.
 - b. Example: Person finds some food on the floor and picks it up with the intention of eating it. Say, "Put it in the trash can," or offer your outstretched hand and say, "Give it to me." "Don't put that in your mouth," probably will invite just that action.
 - c. Example: Person grabs an object from another person. Say, "Ask Jennifer if you can see her magazine," or "Give the bell back to Gary." Avoid, "You must not grab the magazine."


These statements give information that will help learners know what behavior is acceptable. The negative statements only tell them what is unacceptable and do not provide needed information to learn what to do differently and more appropriately.

7. Be as neutral as possible when giving directions. The tone of voice, a facial expression, or the difference of a word can change the meaning of a question, direction, or statement. When giving a direction, state what needs to be done and avoid challenges. Individuals tend to become defensive or upset and try to avoid or do the opposite of what is asked when directions are given in a threatening manner.
 - a. Example: Say, "It's time to go to the library." Avoid, "You must go to the library right now."
 - b. Example: Asking the questions, "Where are you supposed to be?" or "What are you supposed to be doing?" can help the person correct his behavior if said in a neutral tone. However, an entirely different message can be conveyed by the tone of voice. Sometimes students become dependent on these verbal cues instead of self-initiating.

Although many individuals with autism cannot answer questions, they can learn set questions as a cue to stop and think, then return to a place or activity on their own.

8. Avoid asking question with a choice unless the person really has a choice. Directions are given to be followed or to provide information. Do not ask a person if he wants to do something unless you are prepared to accept "no". Clear statements provide information needed to carry out the request. Pictures may be substituted for words, especially in helping the person know sequential happenings. Gestures to objects and environmental cues are sometimes better than words.
 - a. Example: Say, "Jim, come to the P.E. room" or "Jim, P.E." - point to picture. Avoid, "Are you ready for P.E.?"
 - b. Example: Say, "Come to the table for dinner", or point to picture of table or tap the table. Avoid, "Let come to the table, O.K.?"
 - c. Example: Say, "Write your name on the top of the paper." or provide an example. Avoid, "Can you write your name on the top of the paper?"
9. Teach people to respond immediately to learned words, phrases, gestures, environmental cues or questions. These help set expectations and permit the person to function more appropriately in a variety of settings. They may also serve as safety devices. Occasionally the person may have been conditioned

negatively to a word, so another word will have to be found to convey the meaning. Use concrete cues and words.

Examples: "Wait", or a "Out-of-bounds", "Stop", "Find something to do", "What do you do next?" or a fire alarm, an object to use while waiting, an "Out-of-bounds" sign such as 

10. **Label feelings.** Individuals with autism have great difficulty recognizing feelings of others and expressing their own feelings. Labeling expressions of feeling in natural situations helps them gain information if accompanied by the reason for the feeling.

- a. Example: "I'm mad. You broke my necklace." "I'm happy. "You shared your popcorn with me."
- b. Example: "You are mad that you have to come in." "Going swimming makes you happy." "John hit you, it makes you sad."

11. **Avoid labeling people.** Usually people know when they have done something "bad". Criticizing or attaching negative labels to people only reduces their self-esteem and self-confidence. Statements that clearly define the expectation, but do not attack the self-image help people gain a positive picture of themselves.

Examples: "Go change your pants," is better than, "You are a mess."
"Keep your hands to yourself," is better than, "You are a bad boy.
you hit Sally." You are using the moment to teach.

12. **Avoid reprimands.** Use set rules that are consistent and neutral. Reprimands are for the benefit of the adult, not the learner. They have little meaning to most individuals with autism and will not change behavior.

Example: Avoid saying, "You know better than that," or "I've told you not to go in the street a hundred times." Use: "The rule is, ride bikes on the sidewalk."

13. **Avoid threats.** Threats are negative ways to give consequences. They often provide a negative response.

- a. Example: Say, "Get your money. Then we'll go to McDonalds".
Avoid saying, "If you don't get your money, then you can't go to McDonalds."
- b. Example: Say, "Be quiet, then we'll go to recess." Avoid saying, "If you aren't quiet, you'll miss recess."
- c. Example: "If you throw the block at Jim again, you may not play

with the toys any more." This statement is vague and, therefore may act as a challenge and probably cannot be enforced. What does throwing the block mean? What does the person need to learn about playing or cleaning up?

Cuing

To teach a person to remember to act at a specific time, arrange for him to receive a cue before the action is expected rather than after he has performed incorrectly. Cues should be given when needed to help the person gain more independence, but not rely on others.

They may be physical prompts, gestures, pictures, written words, environmental cues such as an object or clock face, or verbal cues that are learned over time, then gradually faded out. Cues are especially useful to people who have problems applying rules, skills, or behaviors across settings.

People with autism sometimes receive more cues than they need, or may need more than they get. It is best to set up a few cues that a person can learn well until he is ready to try on his own. Pictures and environmental cues are the least intrusive and increase independence. Plan for a reduction of cues that rely on the presence of teachers must be in place to prevent dependence.

Examples of Cues:

1. Environmental cues - Lunch box is set out on counter, meaning time to pack lunch. Towel is laid out or pointed to, meaning time to dry your hands.
2. Learned gestures - palm facing out, fingers to lips, lights out. Since people with autism often don't understand gestures, these must be taught in a systematic way.
3. Visual schedules - pictures and/or written sequences that provide information about what is going to happen and provide a way to show changes. These can be velcroed strips, a wallet or book, or a ring; but need to be personalized.
4. Learned words/phrases - time for lunch, get your coat, go outside, your turn, wait.
5. Gradual fade out - Scott interrupted everyone and could not understand that he should wait. His voice became louder until he was noticed.
 - * When Scott first approached, he was cued with, "Scott I'm talking. "I'll talk with you in a minute. Wait." (finger to mouth, then flat palm to Scott, Scott should have his turn in 60 seconds or less).
 - * Next, "Scott, I'm talking. Wait". (finger to mouth and flat palm)
 - * Next, "Wait, Scott". (finger to mouth and flat palm)
 - * Next, the gesture to mouth and flat palm to Scott.
 - * As Scott approached, the flat palm went towards Scott, and a smile given in recognition. Scott was always praised for waiting.

