



Beginning Communication Home Program- (Moderate Symptoms)

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Autism—the Basics

By Julie A. Daymut, M.A., CCC-SLP

Autism is a developmental disorder. It impairs an individual's ability to interact socially, communicate clearly and effectively, and behave appropriately. Autism is one of five disorders in a group known as autism spectrum disorders or pervasive development disorders. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fourth Edition* lists several factors that can lead to a diagnosis of autism.

Social Interaction

Impairments can include:

- difficulty using nonverbal behaviors such as eye-gaze, facial expressions, body postures, and gestures.
- difficulty forming peer relationships.
- difficulty seeking out others for the purpose of sharing enjoyment, interests, or achievements.
- difficulty with the “back-and-forth” nature of relationships for social or emotional purposes.

Communication

Impairments can include:

- delay or lack of development of spoken language.
- difficulty starting or maintaining a conversation.
- using stereotyped (“repetitive, often seemingly driven, and nonfunctional,”) or idiosyncratic (odd or peculiar) language.
- lacking variety and spontaneity in make-believe play or social imitative play.

Behavior

Impairments can include:

- being preoccupied with an interest—intensity or focus is abnormal.
- being inflexible and sticking to specific routines or rituals that may not be “purposeful.”
- using stereotyped or repetitive motor movements such as hand or finger flapping or twisting or whole body movements.
- preoccupation with parts of objects. (1994, p. 75)

Autism affects individuals of all races and ethnicities. It affects boys three to four times more often than girls. Autism seems to run in families, indicating a possible genetic link to the disorder. This disorder occurs in about one out of every 150 births (Autism Society of America, 2008, ¶ 2). Symptoms of autism are often noticeable before age three. There is no known cure for autism. It continues throughout an individual's life. Autism occurs all over the world. It occurs in any socioeconomic background. There is no known cause of autism. Many specialists believe autism is a brain disorder. It is best to begin treatment of symptoms of autism early in an individual's life. Different specialists, such as a physician, speech-language pathologist, occupational therapist, physical therapist, or psychologist, can be part of the evaluation process for a diagnosis of autism. These individuals, along with parents/caregivers, can work together to help develop and implement intervention plans. Goals and objectives for interventions are to improve social interaction, communication, and/or behavior for better functioning in daily activities at school, home, and in the community.

Resources

American Psychiatric Association. (1994). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (4th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

Autism Society of America. *About autism*. Retrieved April 7, 2009, from http://www.autism-society.org/site/PageServer?pagename=about_home

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Activities for Improving Language:

1. Promoting Oral Language Development in Young Children

by Audrey W. Prince, M.Ed.

Research tells us that children who have strong oral language skills often have strong reading and writing skills. In contrast, children with oral language problems are at higher risk of reading and writing difficulties (Scarborough, 2001).

Educators and parents should encourage oral language even in the earliest stages of a child's development. The following is a list of specific strategies to help promote oral language development in young children.

Talk with Your Children

Educators and parents should talk or converse with their children whenever possible. Children often love to talk about their friends, families, or favorite activities. Try to develop "talking points." Talking points are conversation starters that you can use with a child. Consider writing them on a set of note cards to keep with you whenever you want to promote conversation with a child. Make conversation a game by asking the child to "pick a card" to initiate a conversation.

Get Close & Listen

When speaking with children it is important to get close. The child should be able to see your lips and facial expressions, hear your voice clearly, and make eye contact with you. Making sure that you "get close" helps ensure that the child keeps an interest in what you are saying. Make sure during conversation with your child that you are sending a clear message that you are listening. When a child speaks to you, make comments about what they are saying, nod your head, or add "Mm-hmm," "Really?" or "Tell me more."

Respond and Expand

When a child says something to you, respond whenever possible. After you respond, try to expand the conversation. Add more context to the language even when a child's response is a simple one. For example, if the child says, "I like apples," the teacher/parent might say, "I like apples too. What kind of apple do you like best?"

Talk About What You Are Doing

Daily activities, such as cleaning up toys or snack time, provide many opportunities for language development. Talk with children about what they are doing and what you are doing. This type of talking exposes children to language in general, involves them in learning conversation skills, and helps children acquire and use vocabulary that is important in their everyday lives.

Tell Stories

Tell stories every day about things from the past or things that will happen. The teacher can talk about something the class might do that day or the parent can talk about an upcoming event. During a story, use prompts to encourage storytelling like, "Tell me a story," "What happened next?" and "When did that happen?" or "Tell me what you did at school (Grandma's house) today."

Use Appropriate Levels of Vocabulary

When speaking with children we have to be careful to not use too many new words or too few new words. There is no magic formula for the correct number of words, so teachers and parents must be aware of each child's abilities to figure out if the vocabulary is confusing to the child or if he/she is able to keep up and understand.

Provide Prompts That Promote Oral Language

Include microphones, old telephones, puppets, flannel boards, and even paper towel tubes in your child's play area. Items to play dress-up are big hits with children. Pretending to be someone else encourages children to mimic the vocabulary, facial expressions, and body language that they see and hear from others. These types of prompts encourage oral language interactions. Make them available and encourage children to use them during their playtime.

Resource

V. S. Bennett-Armistead, *Literacy and the youngest learner*. Scholastic, Inc., New York, 2005

2. Imagine the Possibilities with Pretend Play!

by Amber Hodgson, M.A, CCC-SLP

You may know that pretend play is often a part of a young child's daily playtime activities, but did you know that pretend play is also a very important part of a child's development? Children learn through play, especially while using their imaginations! They engage in pretend play when they make believe to be someone else or use one object to represent another. Children love to pretend that they are adults with different jobs and tasks to perform—they might dress up like mommy, have a tea party with empty dishes, teach a classroom full of stuffed animals, fly the couch to the moon, or explore the deep, dark closet-cave!

The Benefits of Pretend Play

Pretend play is an important part of childhood. You begin to see pretend play as early as the toddler stage. Young children are learning about themselves, their families, and the world around them when they pretend play. Children are not just discovering creativity when they let their imaginations take over in play—they are learning many important skills. Below are some of the skills children can learn from pretend play:

Social-Emotional Skills – When children play together, they practice sharing, turn-taking, and negotiating. In addition, children can better understand and manage their feelings by acting out certain experiences. Pretend play also develops children's ability to empathize, because they have to consider the way others act, think, and feel.

Language and Vocabulary Skills – Children have a variety of experiences to share with each other, and when they talk and play together, they are actually teaching and learning new vocabulary. They are improving their language skills when they have to communicate with one another in a clear and effective manner—for example, when they are explaining a story which requires a logical plot and sequence of events.

Problem-Solving Skills – Children can come up with complex plans and solve difficult problems as they play. They have to determine who is going to play which role, where the adventure is going to take place, and what events will happen

along the way. If a problem arises during their *journey*, the children have to rethink the story and negotiate a new situation to reach a final goal that is agreed upon by everyone. Pretend play also develops abstract-thinking skills, which are higher-level thinking skills, for example, using a prop, such as a spoon, as a symbol for something else, such as a microphone.

Disciplinary Skills – Children practice rules when playing. A girl might put her doll in time-out for not cleaning up a mess she made. The girl is more likely to discipline herself and follow the rules given by others having been a disciplinarian herself.

How Can You Encourage Pretend Play?

- Make time for make-believe! Try not to involve your children in so many activities that there is no time for play. Creativity takes time to develop, and children can have difficulties entertaining themselves if they are not given time to use their imaginations.
- Show that play is valuable by playing with your children. Children realize that play is important if adults pay attention to them while they are playing and even engage with them in play.
- Appreciate and talk to your children about their play. We often say, “You are doing a great job working,” but we may never say, “You are doing a great job playing!”
- Create an environment for play. It is important for adults to provide materials that children can explore and adapt in play, and it is also great if adults can provide a special “play place” or designated area for the pretend play and all the inspiring props.
- Adults should monitor play, so that when play appears to be “stuck” or unproductive, they can suggest new character roles, offer new props, or provide new adventures to inspire ideas, such as a trip to the park, aquarium, or museum.
- Children get ideas for their play from books, movies, field trips, and everyday life, so if your children are interested in a particular topic, such as animals, take them to the zoo, read them a book about farm animals, or watch a movie about animals—they will be filled with ideas for pretend play! You might see your children reenacting the trip or scenes from the movie with friends. This helps them to better remember the experience, and it reinforces all of their newly learned information.

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Improving Communication:

1. Can Pictures Help Children With Autism?

By Kevin Stuckey, M.Ed., CCC-SLP

Children with autism often have difficulty focusing on tasks, adapting to changes in routine, and expressing themselves in an effective manner. Pictures may help them improve their communication by providing a visual image for their feelings, thoughts, wants, or needs. When a child uses, or is shown, pictures of routines/schedules, transitions may be easier since the child can see what is happening now and what comes next. Overall, using pictures for communication can help increase a child’s memory skills, understanding of the world, and social communication abilities.

- Pictures are especially meaningful to children with autism because pictures can help them to express themselves more easily.
- Pictures relating to the child’s environment provide opportunities for functional (everyday) communication.
- Pictures (in combination with written words) can help build language and vocabulary skills.
- Picture communication can help minimize behavioral problems by providing a consistent way to communicate feelings, thoughts, wants, or needs.

Here are some easy steps to follow when using pictures:

1. Show the child the picture, and point to and name the object/action. Then have the child practice on his/her own. Give prompts, models, and cues as needed.
 2. Show the child how to give the picture to someone or place the picture in a communication book to express feelings, thoughts, wants, or needs. Then have the child practice on his/her own. Give prompts, models, and cues as needed.
- Reinforce a child’s understanding of a picture and how to use it by giving a clear description of the picture as well as how to use it. This helps the child learn to use pictures for effective communication in the classroom and at home.

Generally, use simple pictures (few items/few colors) for younger children or children who function at lower levels. As the child has success with using the pictures for learning or communicating, you can increase the complexity of the picture (more items/more colors) or add pictures. Following are different kinds of pictures to choose from based on the child’s visual and comprehension skills:

Black and white line drawings—Eliminates many of the distracting background colors and details which exist in more complex pictures. Children who have limited or no verbal output and/or are establishing introductory communication skills may benefit from these simple drawings.

Cartoon drawings—Introduces aspects of color with illustrations of objects/actions. Use these pictures to teach basic items/activities and advance to more realistic drawings of common items/activities. In particular, use these with children who do not find detailed drawings to be distracting or overwhelming.

Photos—Provides actual images of items with real color and detail. Use photos to identify objects/locations in the child's natural environment. Use these for developing personal meaning and motivation.

- Keep in mind that each child will have a different skill level when using pictures.
- Note that students with autism generally have more success with pictures that appear on a white background, which allows the focus to be specifically on the image(s).
- Use more colorful and detailed pictures as the child improves his/her understanding of different concepts/topics.
- Observe a child's preferences for pictures and use what is most effective for increased communication and function with daily living skills.

Resources

Autism. Retrieved December 11, 2008, from http://kidshealth.org/kid/health_problems/brain/autism.html

Autism Speaks. What to do about it, treatments for autism. Retrieved December 11, 2008, from <http://www.autismspeaks.org/whattodo/index.php>

Healing Thresholds. Connecting community and sciences to heal autism. Retrieved December 11, 2008, from <http://autism.healingthresholds.com/therapy/visual-schedules>

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Classroom/Home Activity Suggestions:

1. Accommodating Children With Autism Within an Inclusive Setting

By Megan-Lynette Richmond, M.S., CCC-SLP

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Difficulty with change. Students with ASD benefit from a repetitive and routine schedule. Deviating from a routine can result in a change in behavior, mood, or academic performance. Teachers can help by providing a picture schedule of activities to complete throughout each day. Mount this on a large chart, so that all students benefit from it, or on a smaller desktop version. Always prepare the ASD child for any schedule changes in advance, regardless of how small or insignificant it may seem to you or others.

Difficulty with learning through experiences. Simply hearing and seeing new information is not enough for ASD students. Students with ASD need direct instruction of academic and social skills—structured activities and lessons with an introduction, detailed explanation, and a summary. Integrating visual, auditory, and tactile stimuli also helps improve students' transfer and generalizing skills.

Difficulty coping. If there is anything in the environment that is causing the student obvious stress, identify the distractions (e.g., noise, change in setting) and resolve them. If the student is demonstrating problems with regulating his/her emotions and behavior, provide time away from the group or class in a safe, private area for the student to compose him/herself. When the student's stress level decreases, encourage him/her to return to the group or class setting. Incorporating "stress relief breaks" for the entire class helps target this challenge for the ASD student inconspicuously. Consider including stretching, pushing and pulling activities, or games (e.g., moving desks around, carrying heavy books, fidgeting with small toys and balls, or Simon Says).

Difficulty with pragmatics (social communication). Social communication is a struggle for students with ASD. In a mainstream setting, it is important for the student to continuously work on his/her pragmatics. Pair the student with a peer to help with social skills and activities in the classroom and in other settings (e.g., cafeteria, gym, playground, or library). Role playing in the classroom also gives the student opportunities to participate and observe acceptable social interactions.

Difficulty with behavior. Inappropriate behaviors often accompany poor social skills, difficulty coping, or difficulty receiving information. Realize that these behaviors are usually the result of a misunderstood message or action by you or another student. Use these occurrences to teach the entire class how to react to inappropriate behaviors. Be firm but tactful in your method of correcting the ASD student or bringing attention to his/her behavior. Embarrassing the student or causing him/her to feel shame will not help the student to learn appropriate social behaviors.

Difficulty with responding to environmental sounds. Be conscious of the noise level in the classroom setting. Students with ASD may be very sensitive to certain sounds even though the sounds may not be very loud or distracting to you or other students. Each child with ASD is unique and may find common and familiar sounds (e.g., clapping, high frequency toys, beeping, etc.) to be disturbing and even frightening. Identify sounds that may trigger a change in behavior. If the student has adverse reactions to any auditory stimulus, remove it immediately. Once again, give the student time and/or space to calm down if necessary. Regular classroom teachers should educate themselves regarding the diagnosis and needs of their ASD students. Studying information about the broad spectrum of ASD is the greatest help for teachers. Having a teacher that is both knowledgeable and understanding gives ASD students the best chance for classroom and social success. If you are unsure how to approach or handle certain situations with an ASD student, always consult the student's educational team, especially when implementing interventions in the classroom. Parents can offer valuable information to regular classroom teachers about their particular child's needs and challenges. Also, some children with ASD require medication to help with concentration and/or response to environmental stimuli (e.g., sound, light, etc.).