

TIP SHEET 5



The advice given on this tip sheet is by
Lucia Smith, Speech Pathologist.

It is based on experience from her clinical work along with her work consulting with teachers and parents.

It is difficult to address all children's communication styles in a single tip sheet.

If you are concerned about your child's speech or language development, please see a speech pathologist.



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10 TIPS FOR TALKING WITH A CHILD WHO HAS AUTISM

Children with autism have, to a greater or lesser degree, difficulties with communication. This can make talking with a child with autism a challenge at times. These tips have been written to address a broad range of children with autism. Some are to assist a child's understanding and others are to assist them in communicating better with you.

Tip Sheets 1, 2 and 7 from Pelican Talk may also be relevant. See website.

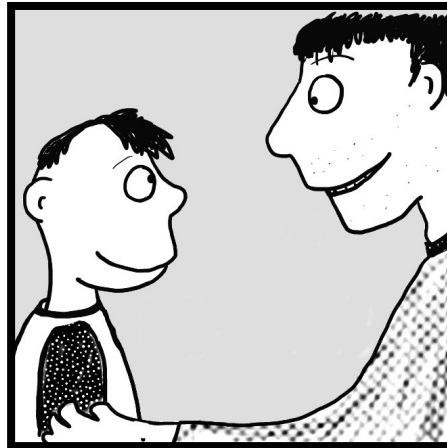
1. Children with autism can have difficulties processing verbal information. It is vital to use strategies that make your speech easier to process. These include: chunking your speech into short phrases, pausing between phrases, keeping your rate slow, stressing and repeating important words or phrases.
(See Tip Sheet 2)
2. Some children with autism do not develop functional speech. They may use other methods of communication in place of, or to supplement speech. Be aware of these different types of communication and be responsive to them. Sometimes, the child's communication attempts may not be obvious, as they may not first engage you with eye-contact. The best way to know about a child's communication style is to speak with their caregivers and speech pathologist.

Different types of communication include:

Picture communication: A child may point to, or give you a picture to request or comment about something.

Sign language: Sometimes these signs may only be approximations, so once again, watch the child carefully and speak with their caregivers about how they use sign.

3. Children with autism often have trouble with eye-contact. Some people see this as a sign of being rude and insist that the child looks at the speaker. Many adults with autism have explained that eye-contact is very difficult and that it only detracts from their ability to attend to and understand what is being said to them. Do not insist upon eye-contact if you find it reduces your child's ability to use and/or understand speech.



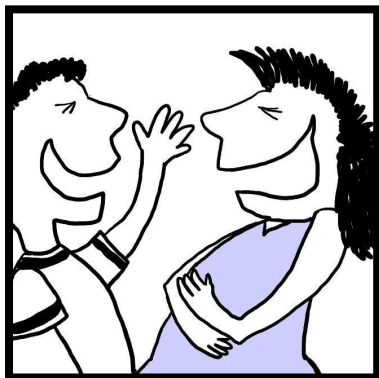
CAREFUL WITH THE LANGUAGE YOU USE...

4. Be aware that children with autism may understand a word in one context, but not in another. This can cause confusion. *An example: Your child looks hot and is struggling to get his jacket off. "Are you hot?" you say as you help your child. Your child starts protesting "No, no, not hot!" but still takes his jacket off. You're confused. You know your child understands "hot". He knows not to touch the kettle when you say it's hot, knows not to turn on the hot water... So you say it again, "You are hot"... this only leads to more protesting.* This child understands "hot" when it comes to things that might burn. In situations like this, try and pick the word or phrase that has caused the problem. In this case, you could take the opportunity to explain *that people can feel hot also. It's when they need to take some clothes off or have a rest or have a cool drink.*
5. Also be aware that children with autism may have difficulty with non-literal or colloquial use of language. You will be surprised how often we use this. An example of non-literal language; *You are running late. You say to your child "We'll fly down to the shops and grab a present for Jamie." Your child is left wondering where you'll catch the plane.* Other examples are *"jump in the car, give us a hand, he's in a stinky mood, that's a wicked bike, we'll have to start from scratch..."*

An example of colloquial language is when I asked a child "Can I see your picture?" and he replied "No". He then proceeded to get his picture out of his bag and show me. I then realised that I had said "Can I **see** your picture?" and he had taken this quite literally. I couldn't see it because it was in his bag. We often ask questions that aren't really questions. When we say "How's it going?", we're saying "Hello" and when we say "Do you want to put your toys

away now?”, we mean “Put your toys away.” “Can you check the bath?” means “Check the bath.” Being direct with your language may cause less confusion.

DEPENDING ON THE LANGUAGE LEVEL OF YOUR CHILD, IT DOES NOT MEAN THAT YOU SHOULD AVOID USING THE LANGUAGE DESCRIBED ABOVE. SIMPLY BE AWARE THAT IT MAY CAUSE CONFUSION AND YOU MAY NEED TO CLARIFY WHAT YOU MEAN.



“We killed ourselves laughing!”

6. When you speak to a child with autism, you may need to be more precise with your language. Things that you assume could go unspoken, may need to be said. An example, would be when asking a child “Check the bath please.” You feel you have been direct with your language (see point 4), only to find the bath water running down the hallway two minutes later. As you fly into action, you say to your child “I asked you to check the bath” and they become upset because they *did* check the bath. They checked it and saw that it was about to overflow. Some children require more precise commands, broken into steps; “Check the bath please...and tell me how much water is in it.”

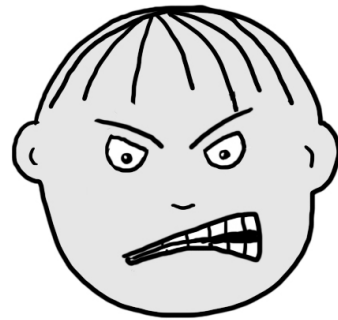


OTHER TIPS

7. Children with autism can be rigid and react negatively if things work out differently to how something was discussed. If you say “We’ll play ball outside after dinner,” your child is likely to make you stick to that. If a storm comes over, you might find that your child gets very upset, not just about the storm, but because *you said you’d play ball after dinner*. It’s not uncommon for a child to perceive this as a lie. To safeguard against this, use words such as “try”, “probably” and “might”. (“We’ll try and play ball after dinner”, “We’ll probably play ball after dinner...” etc...)

Be aware of this type of language. Instead of saying “We’ll go over to Greta’s and you can play together” say “We’ll go over to Greta’s and see if she’s home. She *might* come and play with you.”

8. When a child with autism is anxious or stressed, their ability to communicate can decrease dramatically. This includes their ability to understand your speech and also their ability to express themselves. If you sense that a child is becoming overly stressed, it may be best to change the topic and do something calming. Acknowledge that they are angry/upset/scared and do not pressure the child to speak.



9. Many children with autism have favourite topics. These can provide a great platform for conversation and provide an opportunity to really engage with the child. There are times, however, when the “favourite topic” is all the child will talk about. It may be appropriate to ask the child to “try and stop talking about _____ now” or “I want you to try and think and talk about *(something different)* now.” Sometimes a visual prompt can be implemented. You might stick a picture of the favourite topic on a “NO TALKING BOARD.” I once knew a young girl with Asperger’s Syndrome who enjoyed using such a board as it helped her regulate when she spoke about her obsessions. She took charge of the NO TALKING BOARD herself, moving topics on and off as she judged fit.
10. Children with autism can get stuck if they don’t know how to answer a question. You might try making the question more simple. Instead of a very open question like “What pets live at your house?”, you might ask “Do you have a cat or a dog... or no pets?”
Sometimes you might help your child answer by saying something like the following;
“If you don’t know the answer, you can say ‘*I don’t know.*’ “ or...
“You didn’t answer me. Do you want me to ask you again?”
Once again , remember that anxiety makes communication more difficult, so try and keep the interaction free of any pressure.

If you have any questions or feedback regarding the tips given above, please email me at lucia@pelicantalk.com

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