

Relating to autistic kids
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It is best to reach out to children with Autism Spectrum Disorder through ideas and experiences, not questions and commands, to facilitate communication.

CONVERSATIONS are about an exchange between a speaker with a message and a willing listener. Basically, conversation requires mutual agreement to exchange information.

Developmentally, the ability to communicate with another person develops non-verbally first, before words are acquired.

Most babies would be able to convey their meaning without the use of words. Interestingly, speech can be learnt as a product of thought or as a behaviour independent of thought.

So, children can learn to speak and/or respond on “auto-pilot” without thinking, or being thoughtful about their communication.

Thus, verbal communication can occur without communication intent. This is often prevalent in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), who may say things that have no intentional meaning to themselves or to the listener i.e. repeating a phrase heard on television, repeatedly singing a song verse etc.

In typical development, after the age of two, children begin to communicate with those around them and also begin communicating with themselves. This ability is essential for thinking and for self control.

Inter-dependent

Basically, it is hard to think without language because language and thinking are inter-dependent.

If the illustrative example is considered normal, it is safe to say that 80% of language function is intended to share experiences, ideas and thoughts with another person.

This type of communication is known as “declarative communication”.

Declarative language is stating what one knows, or thinks, in the form of a comment. Such language may be used to share a comment (“Mangoes are my favourite”); to make a prediction (“I think it will rain”); to announce/celebrate (“We enjoyed the game!”); to observe (“You look tired”); to reflect on past experiences (“the last time I switched it on, the bulb blew”); or to problem solve (“The picture has slipped, we need some glue”).

Declarative language does not require a verbal response and provides a social framework for later conversational interactions.

As a Consultant Speech-Language Pathologist for over 21 years, I observe that people, when speaking to ASD children, often tend to do the opposite, using mostly questions, commands, prompts, directives, or communication that require a specific response from the child.

This type of communication is known as ‘imperative communication’: that is, language in the form of questions

or commands/directives requiring a particular response.

For example, “What is that?” or even “Look at me”, are classified as “imperatives”.

Unfortunately, this type of language input does not teach children about how to become authentic communication partners because the nature of such communication does not invite experience sharing.

When people use imperative language with a child, the child learns incorrectly that communication consists of right and wrong answers, questions and directives and that the main purpose of communication is instrumental: that is, used only to “get” something from another person.

In normal settings, an ASD child is often not able to process all the information that is coming his or her way in an integrated manner to enable an accurate or a more intelligent response.

This is not due to the lack of intelligence but because ASD children are not able to integrate all the information simultaneously.

Often this results in the child’s response not being really a thoughtful response.

By creating new environments that are challenging but not overwhelming for the child, we encourage neural growth and information processing abilities towards becoming a better social communicator.

Changing the way YOU communicate to the ASD child can impact the way the child interacts and communicates in return.

Fundamentally, authentic communication is primarily about experience sharing.

We communicate with others to share memories, gather information, learn about one another and the world, seek different opinions and share emotions.

While it is true that we sometimes communicate in order to “get” something, if ASD children are to learn how to socially communicate with others, they need a linguistic environment that is rooted in declarative language input.

Scripts and rote language which are “instrumental” in nature are common features of ASD language development.

This is in direct contrast to what we want for our children which is, language that is “social” in nature.

ASD children often become “stuck” at the instrumental level and fail to reach higher levels of language development involving creative, flexible and dynamic language abilities that comes easily to typical language learners.

As this is a fact, do ASD children really need more language models leading to the development of even more instrumental language use?

What can we do to help ASD children to generate creative language?

The first step begins with the adult. You CAN control what you expose your child to! Pause and notice how you communicate with your ASD child.

What type of language are you using? Are you using mostly questions?

Is your communication filled with directives?

When communicating with your child, is most of your language input requiring something from your child? Or are you giving information and sharing experiences so that the child can learn over time, to do the same in return?

In my experience, mindful use of declarative language with ASD children can make a big difference to their ability to understand communication and use communication and their ability to share experiences, memories, notice things, problem-solve, understand perspectives and communicate in a more dynamic and creative manner, is enhanced.

This result can be obtained from consistent exposure to declaratives language for authentic communication.

The challenge is to commit to change how we communicate with ASD children, and to exercise patience to maintain a communication style as long as required to see results.

A very important by-product of language acquisition is developing an “inner voice” to problem-solve and for planning.

For example, you have misplaced your spectacles. Your inner voice may say, “I had my specs at lunch time. Now where was I seated?”

Basically, your inner voice guides you to think through a situation and starts you on a plan of action to solve a problem.

Inner voice

Many ASD children do not independently develop this inner voice to regulate their thoughts, actions and emotions.

Developing this ability helps ASD children “think out loud”. You can predict (“It’s going to fall!”), or reflect on past experiences (“I built a bridge with the big blocks”), thereby providing a clear language model from which your child can begin to form an inner voice.

As most ASD children have difficulties with perspectives, using declarative language to share your thoughts and feelings provides them a window into the way you view the world in an inviting, non-threatening manner.

Additionally, if different people regularly use declarative language for this purpose – for example, parents, teachers and therapists – it helps the ASD child to understand that different people may have different thoughts, opinions, perspectives and emotions.

ASD children tend to focus on details but often fail to put them together, to understand the big picture.

By using imperative language, you are inadvertently promoting this focus. For example, if you say “pick up your bag”, or “say goodbye to Auntie Sue”, you are focusing on one right answer.

But using declarative language to comment on what you have noticed in this big picture, you help the child to notice the context, integrate this new information with previously stored knowledge, and then form a plan of action that makes situational sense.

So you can say “Your bag is on the table”, or, “we are going home” and wait for a response.

Simple ways to change your communication to help develop a thoughtful communication style include:

- Use non-verbal communication in addition to words, to express yourself
- Use exaggerated facial expressions, gestures, sound effects and pointing to highlight important information.
- Allow sufficient time for the child to think and understand what you are saying
- Emphasis on the “quality” of communication over the “quantity”. Pause between your declarative statements and/or gestures. If you are quiet for periods of time, eventually your child will communicate with you on his/her own initiative, which is what we want!
- Make sure “thought” comes before “speaking”.
- Use a ratio of 80% declarative communication to 20% imperative communication wherever possible.
- Get comfortable if your child does not respond to your declarative communication. Pressuring your child for a response creates anxiety. Remember, no one likes constant pressure, or force exerted, upon them.
- Lastly, S-L-O-W down your speech and use shorter sentences.

This article submitted by Malaysian Resource Centre For Hearing And Speech-language (Marches), is a non-profit association which envisions that all individuals with hearing and/or speech-language impairments will have the opportunity to receive good quality treatment and be able to communicate with the people around them. For information email marchesmalaysia@gmail.com