

## **Helping Your Child with Autism Develop Social Communication Skills**

What children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) learn at home is often more important than what they learn at school or in the clinic. Teachable moments occur throughout the day at home, such as during bathtime, dressing, and bedtime routines, and during mealtime and playtime. The National Research Council recommends children with ASD receive at least 25 hours of treatment per week. The teaching you give your child, in addition to the time your child spends with other specialists, will help make this goal possible. Research tells us that when children with ASD learn skills at home, they are more likely to use them in new situations and to keep using them over the long run.

Children with ASD thrive on consistent routines. When this is done, a child's frustration level can be greatly reduced and he can more easily anticipate what to expect next. Play is an important routine that can help children with ASD learn social communication and language skills. It also provides a great opportunity for parents to practice intervention techniques with their child. Try to schedule play sessions at about the same time each day. Limit distractions and designate a play space for your child with specific boundaries. The following interactive teaching techniques can be used to help develop your child's social communication, as well as language and play skills, during these playtime activities:

***Follow your child's lead.*** When you let your child choose a toy or activity he will be more engaged and motivated. It is important, however, to monitor your child's focus of attention. If your child picks up a new toy, follow him to that toy even if you have to stop playing with another he was just enjoying. Place yourself in your child's line of sight so he can easily make eye contact with you and see what you're doing. Join in your child's play. If your child is building a tower, hand him blocks. If he protests, respond appropriately, and treat it as an act of communication. Comment on your child's play but remember not to ask questions or give commands. Finally, be consistent with rules and consequences, and don't tolerate injurious behavior.

***Imitate your child.*** Imitate your child's actions, gestures, and body movements. Mimic his play if you have two sets of the same toy. Only imitate vocalizations related to the play and only imitate appropriate behavior. Inappropriate behavior can be shaped into more appropriate behavior. For example, you can remodel your child's hand-flapping as hand clapping, and use it at appropriate times during play sessions.

***Be Animated.*** Remember to be excited, exaggerate gestures, facial expressions, and your vocal quality. This will help your child stay more engaged. Say things like "uh-oh", "oh-no", and "wow" to increase your child's attention. You can use your level of animation to regulate your child's energy level. If your child appears tired and uninterested, you can help to increase his energy level by increasing your own. If your child is getting too excited, you can help calm him by using a quiet voice and decreasing your animation. Wait with anticipation by giving your child an expectant look and exaggerating your gestures. This will encourage your child to communicate to continue the game.

***Model and Expand Language.*** Demonstrate some aspect of language for your child, for example, by giving meaning to one of his actions. If your child reaches into the air, respond as though he wants to be picked up and say “up”. Adjust your language for your child. Try responding to your child by adding one additional developmental unit to how your child is speaking. For example, if he is speaking in one-word utterances, try responding to him in two word phrases. If your child says “juice drink”, respond by saying “you want to drink juice”. Again, remember to avoid questions. Comments are better and less likely to restrict back and forth communication between you and your child.

***Provide Playful Obstruction.*** When imitation and animation aren’t enough, try interrupting your child in a playful manner. Always use the same phrase to warn your child something is about to happen. This can be as simple as saying “my turn” or “here I come”, and then playfully block or take some part of your child’s toy. Often using another toy or even a puppet can be seen as less threatening than a hand. Wait for your child to respond, and then be sure to respond to your child’s act of communication.

***Practice Balanced Turns.*** Help your child with his turn-taking skills by providing consistent words and gestures such as “my turn” paired with a pointing gesture. This will also help your child anticipate when turns should take place. Be sure to take short turns at first. At first your turn should last no more than a few seconds, and should take up no more than 25% of the interaction time. As your child gains competence in turn-taking, increase the length of your turn, and strive to eventually achieve a 50-50 balance of time taking turns. Don’t forget to wait for your child to communicate his turn.

***Provide Communicative Temptations.*** Provide situations that “set up” your child to communicate. For example, try placing desired objects in sight but out of reach (though be mindful of safety when using this technique). Offer your child toys that require assistance such as bubbles, tops, or wind-up toys. This will require your child to request your help in order to play with the toy. You can also create a silly situation, by doing something obviously wrong while looking at your child with anticipation (for example, putting your shoe on your hand).

When using these techniques remember to follow your child’s lead, create an opportunity and then wait for your child to engage or communicate. Respond to your child’s behavior as meaningful, comply with it, and demonstrate the behavior you would like your child to be using.

Your child’s speech and language pathologist can help find appropriate ways to incorporate these techniques into your child’s play sessions. By using these techniques at home you can greatly increase the amount of quality teaching time your child receives. Parents can best serve their children with ASD by becoming active players in their children’s intervention.

Reference: Ingersoll, Brooke, and Dvortcsak, Anna (2010) Teaching Social Communication to Children with Autism (A Manual for Parents and A Practitioner's Guide to Parent Training).

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