

Building Communication Skills in Children with Autism

Communication is the foundation of learning. Children learn to communicate by interacting with those around them, whether through spoken language, augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), or another modality. For our children with autism, additional strategies, time, and practice may be needed to build this essential skill set. Below are 5 easy-to-implement tips for communication immersion across the day.



1. Make it Fun

Students are much more likely to attend to and learn from activities they prefer. Educators and families can capitalize on opportunities to build communication practice into times the child finds enjoyable, such as mealtimes, recess, or science. Before teaching any new skill, find out what people, locations, and items motivate the student.

- What are the students' favorite things to do?
- Who are their favorite people and characters?
- What makes the student laugh, and when are they most engaged?

In addition to the questions above, a simple observation, preference inventory, or preference assessment can be helpful in this regard.

2. Set up Your Environment to Include Everyone

Visual supports are particularly helpful for autistic learners, though they benefit everyone. Visual representation of communication also builds inclusivity for all students. Consider adding icons for core vocabulary around your room. Core vocabulary is a set of frequently-used words that can apply across environments, topics, and people. Here are some ideas for where to include core vocabulary within the environment:

- On the Smartboard: Display a core vocabulary board
- On the door: "Stop," "go," and "who" is there?
- By the faucet: "Turn," "off," and "on"
- On Cubbies: "Put in," and "put on"
- Near the blocks, cars, and other toys: "Up," "down," "more," and "play"

3. *Model, Model, Model*

Consistently interact with the student in their chosen communication modality. Narrate your actions and the actions of others, comment on what is taking place, ask questions, and read books together. If the student uses AAC, model by pointing to the icons/words on the AAC system as you speak.

Keep talking! Even if the child doesn't respond yet, your voice helps them process language and connect words to their meaning. This serves as the foundation for using communication as a powerful tool for connection.

For example:

While playing, say: ***"Look! Dad is climbing up on the house! I hope he doesn't fall!"***

On the AAC device, model the core word "up."

4. *Respond to ALL Communication Attempts*

To foster a language-rich environment, it is essential to honor all forms of communication, including speech, gestures, signs, body language, or AAC supports. This ensures the child feels heard and understood throughout their day. For example, if a child leads you by the hand to a shelf and points to the bin of dolls, say, "I think you want the dolls! Let me get them down for you!" If a child pushes food away during snack time, say, "It looks like you don't want graham crackers." Holding up both options for them to choose from, ask, "Would you like fish crackers or fruit snacks instead?"

5. *Remember, Communication Is a Choice*

When we are eager to hear a student's voice or see them use a new skill, it may be tempting model a word and immediately follow it with, "Now you say it," or "Touch the button for 'more'." When we do this, we inadvertently shift the goal from expression to compliance. This can lead to disengagement."

Instead, model and be patient, pausing to allow the child the opportunity to communicate. A silent, expectant pause (about 5–10 seconds) gives the child the time to decide if they want to contribute. Sometimes, they may not respond and that is a valid choice. Accepting their silence shows that their voice belongs to them and has power whenever they choose to use it.

Additional Resources

- [Preference Assessment Factsheet](#)
- [Social Emotional Engagement Webcast](#)

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