

AUTISM Advocate

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Person-Directed
Planning—*principles, strategies and more!*

 **AUTISM SOCIETY**

COMMUNICATION

That Facilitates Relationship and Thinking Abilities

It is a common question. “Will my child talk?” While the concern might be more accurately characterized as “Will my child learn to relate to others?”, it is concern about speech, language and communication that causes families of individuals with an autism spectrum disorder to rely heavily on the expertise and treatment of a variety of professionals who target speech and language development as they work diligently to remediate autism. Families might employ the work of a behavioral analyst or a speech language pathologist, or both. However, in my day-to-day clinical work with families, I have observed that it is the parents and the caregivers that really hold the power to model, guide and create opportunities for meaningful human communication; and many are not aware of this most important role they play. Employing delivery models that afford us the opportunity to teach parents and caregivers to communicate with individuals with ASD in a manner that facilitates relationship and thinking abilities is desperately needed in our work with families.

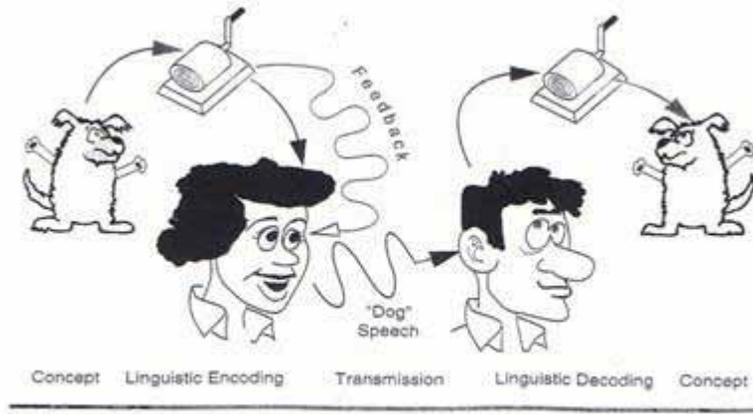
Speech, Language and Communication

The terms speech, language and communication may be confusing for parents and professionals alike and they are often used interchangeably, further complicating focused discussions about communication. For the sake of clarity, let me provide the following simple explanations for each term.

Speech is a system that is overlaid on the human ability for respiration and feeding. When we exhale simultaneously with production of motor sequences using our tongue, teeth, and lips we produce a variety of sounds. Any given language has specific sounds and when combined in defined ways the sounds convey meaning. The spoken word ‘cat’ helps us think how we use speech- combining the sounds /k/, /a/ and /t/ to produce /kat/. When we hear that sequence of sounds we think of a furry four- legged animal with whiskers that meows. The meaning is conveyed via the sounds but it has been defined via the tool of language.

Language is a shared system of codes that allows users within a community to share their thoughts, ideas and reactions in a manner that is understood by all the members of the community. It is important to note that language is not rote, but instead generative, and allows for an endless combination of the available symbols to create novel and specific messages. The symbols may be written, spoken or nonverbal. Language is also rule-governed, aiding shared comprehension by the users. Language can be divided into three components – how it is used, known as *pragmatics*; what is the content of the message, which is *semantics*; and the form it takes, *syntax* and *morphology*, which when combined are what most consider to be grammar.

Finally, **communication** is a complex process of exchanging information between a sender and receiver. The sender uses his or her ability to encode language, that is, translate ideas into the symbols with the rules and intentions in mind. They use speech sounds to convey a language symbol that represents the idea being spoken. Then



Language Development, An Introduction, 4th Edition, 1996, Robert E. Owens, Jr.

Figure 1

the receiver must decode the message, which means extracting the meaning from the symbols and then begin the cycle again as they respond to the message. Speech and language are the tools used to communicate.

The example in Figure 1 illustrates two children communicating about a dog. This is a very simplified representation of communication but it is helpful in understanding the concept.

However, in reality human communication is quite complex. It is rapid. It is shared through a variety of modalities. It is often unspoken. It can be emotional. It can be simultaneous and depending on the context there may be competing signals in the area. Figure 2, also somewhat simplified, is a better representation of human communication.

Humans use communication for two main purposes. Humans communicate to learn or accomplish tasks. But more significantly, humans communicate to compare and contrast their subjective experiences. Although computers communicate and birds communicate, there is something particularly unique about human communication – our motivation to share our experiences over time- past, present and future, with others humans in a manner that creates a relationship bond.

Our world is both defined by and experienced through communication. In the process of communicating about experiences together with children, they learn the who, what, where, when, how and why of our world, but they also gain access to rich human connection and opportunity to continue to think and

grow. Speech, nor language alone, can provide that opportunity for developing children.

Our human communication can be divided into two categories – *instrumental communication* and *experience sharing communication*. There is always a need to communicate with a specific response in mind and that is instrumental communication. We need to give instructions or ask questions that serve as a means to an end – “Pick up your shoes” or “What is 2 + 2?” Many associate the image of a computer with the concept of instrumental communication. Query in and data out. Instrumental communication is needed at times, but is a small part of daily interaction and most would say it is not the part that really matters to us as individuals.

In contrast to instrumental communication, much of what makes life enjoyable and meaningful to individuals, is *experience sharing communication*, also called *declarative communication*. This type of communication does exactly as its name implies. It provides a medium to share our experiences with the people we encounter and those that are a significant part of our lives. It does not require a specific response. As a matter of fact, it does not require a response at all. We might share our reaction to a beautiful painting, a fabulous meal, a wonderful vacation, or a horrible boss. As that experience sharing communication is exchanged between two people they are often drawn closer to each other and may be compelled to continue to share and thus a relationship develops.

As individuals compare and contrast their subjective experiences they utilize a variety of channels to send a single message. The channels include our voice, facial expressions, gestures and proximity. And of course, even silence conveys messages. Both members of the communication exchange are constantly evaluating, on an ongoing basis, their

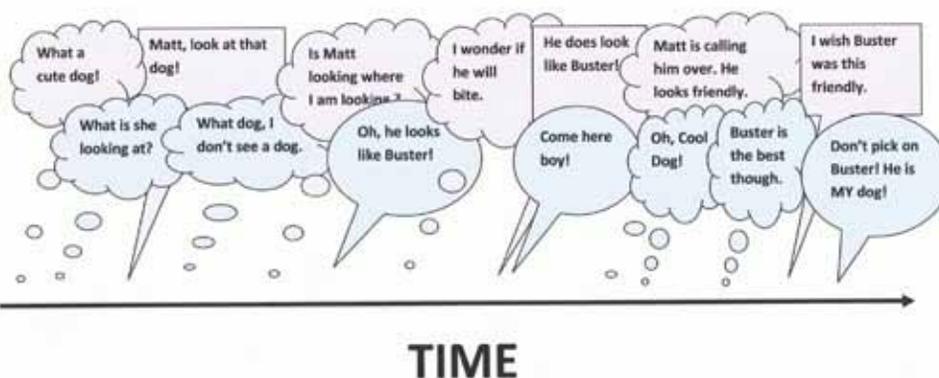


Figure 2

own and their partner's comprehension. Inevitably communication breaks down and the individuals use skills to repair the breach and restore the communication opportunity. In healthy relationships the vast majority of communication is for the purpose of experience sharing and much less so, to achieve a specific response or drive a particular action.

Communication is Coregulation, Coregulation is Communication

Communication development in children is well documented as experience driven, but it also is modeled by more experienced guides, primarily parents. The cycle of communication, the 'give and take' of communication, is learned in a process known as coregulation. Coregulation serves as a prototypical conversation in infants and toddlers and it is the foundation that precedes speech and language development. **Coregulation** is "each person reacting to the other's actions without knowing exactly what the other person will do next, or exactly how the other person will interpret and respond to your actions" (Gutstein, 2009). Coregulation makes partners interdependent and yet because the partners do not control one another's actions and reactions they are also independent in this process. This means that communication (or coregulation if you prefer) is a continuous and dynamic process that is made up of more than simple exchanges of discrete information between partners. Dynamic processes are fertile ground for dynamic observation, dynamic thinking, dynamic problem solving and ultimately dynamic intelligence.

The Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM-IV-TR) defines an autism spectrum disorder as a constellation of qualitative impairments in social interaction and communication, as well as, restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped

patterns of behavior, interests, and activities. Anticipated changes in the DSM-5 may collapse the diagnostic criteria into two domains — social communication impairment and repetitive and restricted behaviors. Using either criterion it is evident that purposeful treatment of autism spectrum disorders must encompass more than rote speech and language skills. It must include purposeful opportunities for communication; most individuals with an autism spectrum disorder develop speech and language but are not able to use it to navigate the social arena or establish meaningful relationships. Therefore, one might be comfortable stressing the need for more experience sharing opportunities. Parents and caregivers are critical to this need and their communication matters!

When the communication and feedback loop between a parent and child is interrupted by an autism spectrum disorder, patterns of communication are often adopted by the parents, and even professionals, that may be more instrumental than experience sharing. This usually stems from an effort to elicit speech and/or language, mistaking that for the foundations of communication. Natural pausing, deliberate thought and open ended communication that do not require a specific response are often replaced with an endless string of questions that can be answered with simple labels and rote phrases used in scripts. After an introductory period of time, each learned label requires little to no thought on the child's part. This has been further perpetuated by treatment options that encourage the tasks of speech and language prior to the child learning '*why we communicate*'. He learns discrete labels or phrases without any understanding of the motives, intentions or joys of experience sharing communication. When that is coupled with restrictive

interests, there is increased risk for the child's communication to grow more narrow and less effective for relationship building. But there are ways to encourage richer, more experience sharing communication.

Experience sharing communication requires no specific answer, although in many social contexts, a polite response is offered. For example, "This dessert is amazing," requires no set response. The speaker is not controlling the receiver of the message. Of course, a polite "thank you" might follow such a comment, but so could "It is the first time I made it" or "I don't think it turned out so well." As the discussion of the dessert unfolds the shared dessert experience is being defined by both the sender and receiver and is recorded for future use as common ground between the two people. It might lead to a discussion of one another's favorite desserts, a funny personal story about the time pumpkin pie was made and a key ingredient was omitted, or even an invitation to see a treasured cook book passed down from a great grandmother. Treatment of speech and language alone, often assumes that such experience sharing will be the natural outcome of teaching labels and language structures. To remediate an impairment in social communication, treatment must lay that foundation first.

Imagine instead, the question "What is this desert?" followed by "What are the ingredients?" and finally by "When did you make it?" The receiver's responses will likely be comprised of shorter responses: "lemon pie", "eggs, lemon juice and sweetened condensed milk", and "last night." It is very difficult to expand those questions and answers into a rich human experience sharing moment. This latter example more closely mirrors the communication that is taught, rewarded, modeled and extracted from a child with autism. It certainly fills up the communicative space between each partner, but it will

Intent is the Key!!!

	Communication Terms	Verbal	Non Verbal
Use less	Instrumental (Means to an End)	Questions Directives	Pointing, Hand over Hand, Facial Gazes, Clearing Throat, Sighing
	Indirect Prompts	Statements that sound like they are experience sharing but are used to 'get' the child to do something or redirect the child's thinking	Actions or nonverbal communication that appear to be experience sharing but are used to 'get' the child to do something
Use 80% or more in Communication	Experience Sharing Communication OR Declaratives	Inquiring, Wondering, Sharing, Observing, Commenting, etc. (Use "I" statements – "I wonder...", "I'm not sure...", "I can't wait...", "I think..." etc.)	May be conveyed with nonverbal communication: Prosody – word stress, rate of speech, volume, pausing, inflection, voice quality; Gestures; Facial Expressions; Proximity; Noises, and SILENCE!

Figure 3 Stop Light Communication Red for Stop, Yellow for Use Caution and Green for Go!

not bring on more learning of the very dynamic process and thinking that makes up mindful social engagement between two individuals. Think about it. In our own adult experiences we don't look forward to communication that could be characterized as interrogations or data dumps, but we do enjoy 'catching up' and 'sharing what's new' with friends, family and colleagues.

We can help our children on the spectrum and family members gain more experience sharing communication by relying less on instrumental questions and directives. When we do need to elicit a specific action or response we use more indirect language, allowing them more opportunity to think and infer. We model (and then model more) the use of declaratives or experience sharing statements that do not seek a set response. We slow down and pause more. Finally, we increase nonverbal communication and employ silence often! Figure 3 illustrates the balance that is needed in our communication to help lay the foundation of social communication. Use little in the red

zone, occasional yellow zones and apply green zones liberally and with much curiosity, joy and expression.

Every day parents and teachers encounter the need to 'get' a child to demonstrate their knowledge of a task or academic content. Most often a question, such as, "What is this?" is employed. Reducing the need to probe for that information to a bare minimum will reduce the emphasis on static knowledge and leave space for more social communicative opportunities. A simple "I bet you can tell me about this," offers more experience sharing communication while opening the door for demonstrating mastery of knowledge. In the same manner, adults want children to 'do what I say'. It may feel more efficient and effective to provide directives than allow the child time to think and process in a problem solving manner. Again, reducing the quantity of directives will lead to more opportunity for dynamic thinking and social communication.

There is middle ground between instrumental communication and experience sharing communication. It

is the use of an indirect communicative prompt. Although caution is offered to adults, therapists and teachers to avoid relying heavily on these types of messages, they are preferred over a directive. They allow the child more opportunity to think and problem solve. "Put your shoes on" is less preferred. But in the real world there are times when the child really needs to put their shoes on. To solve this conundrum, the adult can offer an indirect statement. As the adult guide looks at their feet, they can comment, "I have my shoes on." The child hears the message, has to consider why the adult is saying that and what is their intention and then problem solve a response. An indirect prompt transfers more responsibility to the child to think, problem solve, and act without being prodded by the adult.

Parents, therapists and teachers must model declaratives in the majority of their communication. An example would be a statement, such as, "You look like you had a great day at school." This may certainly invite more than the typical "Fine" to our usual question of "How

was your day?” Even when an attractive invention to share is provided it is often cut off by following up with a question or rattling on. Allowing space for the child to respond is so important. Many children with autism have great ideas but need additional processing time in order to share them. Share the declarative and then WAIT! Counting silently to 10 or however long it takes is a great strategy. When first learning to do this many parents report they are scared the child will not respond. It is a risk. After all, the statement does not demand a response. However, it has been my experience that most children will begin to share about and provide longer and more meaningful statements. Consider that the child may feel pressured to respond or experience fear of giving a wrong answer, increasing social anxiety. When they are invited to respond, at their pace, in an open-ended manner, to an experience sharing statement the pressure is reduced.

Many may be asking, “But my child does not talk yet. How does this apply to me?” It absolutely applies! When a child is not yet talking, the adult’s model communication should be nonverbal or one word. If the child speaks in one word utterances the model should be two word utterances. Any number of one word utterances can be used to talk about the juicy, red, round apple that was just produced for snack. The spoken word along with a sign gives that child the maximum opportunity to learn the symbol for the fruit. But most importantly, communication can be infused with the reaction to the apple and extend the “yummmmm” to convey a personal love of apples. In that exchange, experience sharing is born. There is a great opportunity for a child to learn ‘why we communicate’ – to build a bridge between our minds.

Professionals are greatly needed in helping families and their children on the autism spectrum develop speech, language and especially communication. But because parents interact with their

children all throughout the day – at breakfast, at play, at bath time and as they tuck them in at night they have an endless opportunity to model and encourage experience sharing communication. Our efforts to remediate autism, a qualitative impairment in social communication and repetitive and restrictive behaviors might be better served by helping parents learn to use their daily communication to model, guide and create opportunities for communication that leads to meaningful social engagement and thinking opportunities.

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Mrs. Guice has presented domestically and internationally to parents and professionals on a wide range of communication topics related to autism spectrum disorders, including research at the American Speech Language Hearing Association (ASHA) Convention. She has received multiple ASHA ACE awards (Award for Continuing Education) and was nominated two times by her peers for Teacher of the Year. She has completed Lindamood-Bell’s Learning Processes, including Seeing Stars®, LIPs® and Visualizing and Verbalizing® approach for improving reading comprehension, as well as, SCERTS training.

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