

National
Autistic
Society
2008

help!

programme

Parent manual

Communication

Creating shared moments with children who have very little communication

Many children with an ASD do not have the natural inclination to pay attention to a parent's voice or look at a parent's face – actions that most babies do naturally. Words may mean very little to them. They may be unable to link what they see with what they hear, and so find it very hard to make sense of the things that happen around them.

This can be frustrating for parents. However, it is a mistake to assume your child is not interested in communicating with you – it is simply that he or she has to learn how to do this and it can take time.

Creating shared moments with your young child will help to develop his or her communication skills. Playing games is a great place to start, as your child will be introduced to a number of skills, such as how to play, getting someone else's attention, taking turns, expressing choices, showing pleasure or dissatisfaction, all of which are communication.

Listed below are just a few ideas that have been used by parents on *help!* programmes. Some may be of use to you while others may not be, so adopt whatever techniques best apply to your particular child and your situation. Be willing to experiment!

Step back and observe – what are they interested in?

If you experience difficulty in capturing your child's attention, spend a bit of time just watching your child – see what they like doing, without trying to direct them. Offer a few toys but let them show you what they're interested in and how they prefer to play with the object. When a child is very focused on objects rather than those around them, it often helps to follow their lead, to begin with.

How does your child want you to communicate?

Spend some time working out what sort of interaction he or she likes best. It may be that your child is very easily overwhelmed and prefers quiet voice tones, or may prefer big movements and want you to make different exciting noises to engage them. Even if your child prefers you to be quieter, try using slightly exaggerated facial expressions; eg open your eyes to encourage him or her to respond in some way. Also, you may need to ensure that your voice tone is varied (even if not too loud) for your child, because you are trying to make your child see that communication is fun and interesting.

Try sitting close and face-to-face with your child. If they will not tolerate this position, move yourself to where they can see you at a comfortable distance.

Keep language very simple. Use fewer but better chosen words.

Try to find ways to capture their interest

Use your child's favourite toy, food or special interest to create excitement and the motivation to communicate. Try activities that will catch your child's interest. Shiny, moving objects often work as well as blowing bubbles or balloons.

Using your child's name when trying to get their attention can also help. Your child may take some time before he or she knows his or her own name. You may need to use mirrors and photos to get your child to recognise their own face and link this to their name. It may also be necessary to get another adult to physically prompt them to respond (ie look at you) when you call their name.

Teach the value of eye contact

Try to get your child to make eye contact with you, but be aware that they may not find this very easy. Begin by using a favourite item held up near your face and then immediately reward them for directing their face towards yours, by giving them the object. You are trying to get your child to understand the link between looking at someone's face/eyes and getting what you want.

Teach your child the meaning of words

If you are unsure how much your child really understands, try asking them to follow common directions (eg wait, stop, come here, sit down, show me, bring me).

Make a list of phrases you are teaching your child needs to learn (eg "sit down" coupled with a gesture towards a chair) and ensure that everyone in regular contact with the child uses the same words over and over until you are sure he or she has learnt what they mean in different settings (eg "sit down in the lounge", "sit down in the bathroom").

Encourage the whole family to do and say things in a similar way. Be consistent. For example, all agree just to say, "John, dinner" and gesture rather than present the child with lots of different instructions such as: "come on now it's food time", "are you hungry? Yummy!" or "sit at the table now please."

Help your child understand that sounds (ie words) can be linked to things. The most powerful words a child is motivated to learn are those that lead to getting an object, activity, and/or person (eg Mum, Dad, cup, juice, ball, swing). The best opportunity for teaching your child words is while they are engaged and paying attention – whether it is to you or the object itself.

Following simple routines throughout the day will make it easier for your child to learn the meaning of words and possibly start using them. For example, if you always follow the same morning routine, your child may find it easier to work out which words are the names for which objects, such as a cup, plate, bed, socks, table or door. Say the name of the object as you use it.

Getting your child's attention

Even for children who do have language, finding ways to get their attention is not easy. Most parents of children with an ASD find this task quite difficult.

- Sometimes it helps to use your child's name first but it is important not to over-use their name, otherwise they won't ever respond unless their name is used.
- Sometimes we call from another room, but in the case of a child with autism you may need to go to them directly in order for them to understand.
- Using a firm but not unexpected touch on the shoulder or arm can work for some children to gain their attention – but not all children respond to this.
- You may be able to hold a younger child and gently turn their face towards yours – but some children will find eye contact very difficult, so go slowly.
- When speaking to younger children it often helps to get down to their level – but do not over-crowd them.
- Preparing your son or daughter before giving them information is helpful. For example, you could try saying: "John (PAUSE) I am going to tell you something, I need you to listen..."
- It is usually better to use your son or daughter's name before saying something, rather than at the end of a sentence. This way they will know you are addressing them.
- Using a clear voice will also help to gain their attention. Your child may shut themselves off if the information you give them is spoken too quickly or in an anxious, high-pitched tone of voice.
- Your son or daughter does not have to look at you to be listening. They may find it difficult to look as well as listen, so although it is good to gradually encourage eye contact, you should be aware that this may not come naturally.
- You may have to turn off or stand in front of the TV or even click your fingers in order to gain your child's attention.
- You may have to try inventive ways to get your child to tune in to you. One parent said "Earth calling Martin" to get their son's attention, because he loves space and astronauts; he won't respond to his name on its own.

One instruction at a time, fewer words

Children with an ASD process spoken words more slowly, so it is important to use fewer words and give one instruction at a time. For example, saying "John...shoes on... coat on... car" may be better than saying "Come on, it's time to go now so please would you mind finding your shoes and put your coat on then get in the car ready to go."

Although very short instructions may seem quite abrupt, most people with an ASD tell us that they prefer simple, clear communication.

Sometimes it is useful to tell your son or daughter that you are about to tell them something, before you actually do. In other words you are preparing them for the information. For example, you might say "John I am going to tell you something. I need you to listen to what I say... (pause)... I want you to go to the bathroom and brush your teeth."

For younger children or those with limited understanding of language it is sometimes a good idea to give instructions in the order in which they are going to happen in addition to reducing the number of words you use, eg "John... shoes on please... then coat on... wait at front door" may be better than "we're going in the car and I need you to put your coat and shoes on then wait at the front door."



Give positive feedback and praise

Many older children and adults with ASDs state that they wish their parents had actually told them when they were being 'social', 'polite' or 'friendly', so they would know what to do for next time.

Many children with ASDs lack self-esteem, so giving them praise for doing things right is important. (NB: Some children will require praise to be given in a happy but fairly neutral way rather than with lots of 'fuss' and some children don't seem to be bothered with other people's praise.)

If your son or daughter does not like direct praise, try leaving them post-it notes with kind messages on them. Alternatively, try talking to another adult about him or her within earshot but not directly to them.

Some children benefit from seeing the things they have achieved on display. You could create a pin board with lots of positive things about your son or daughter, such as certificates, photos of favourite people, pictures of them enjoying their interest/hobby, or some of their art work.

Building your child's self-esteem is the most important thing to achieve.

Provide structure to their day

Children with ASDs benefit from having predictability to their lives. This is often known as providing structure. Structure does not mean doing the same thing every single day or being bored, it means the child is in an environment where he or she feels safe and in control. Providing structure does not mean using the same routines forever, it means that changes are planned for and introduced carefully.

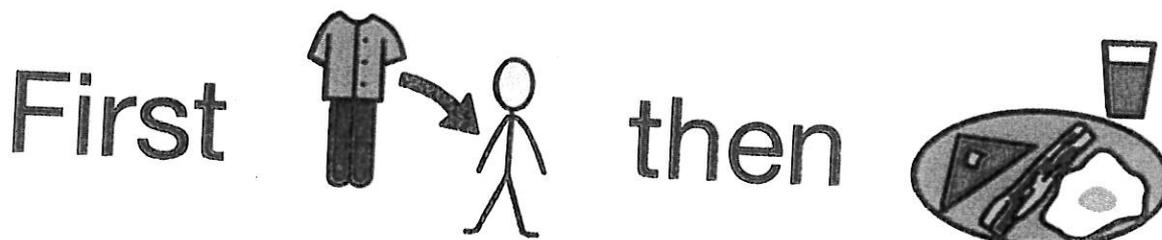
Providing structure can be broken down in a number of questions. Does your child know:

- what will happen during the day?
- what they will need to do and how?
- when each activity will start and how long it will last?

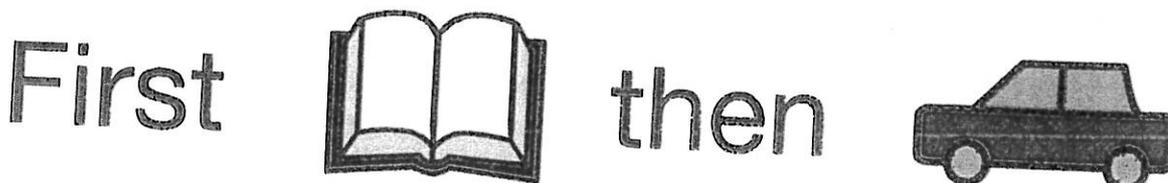
This is one of the Golden Rules used in NAS services and schools. If someone with an ASD knows the answer to all the above questions they are more likely to feel secure in their surroundings.

1. Does your child know what to do and what happens next?

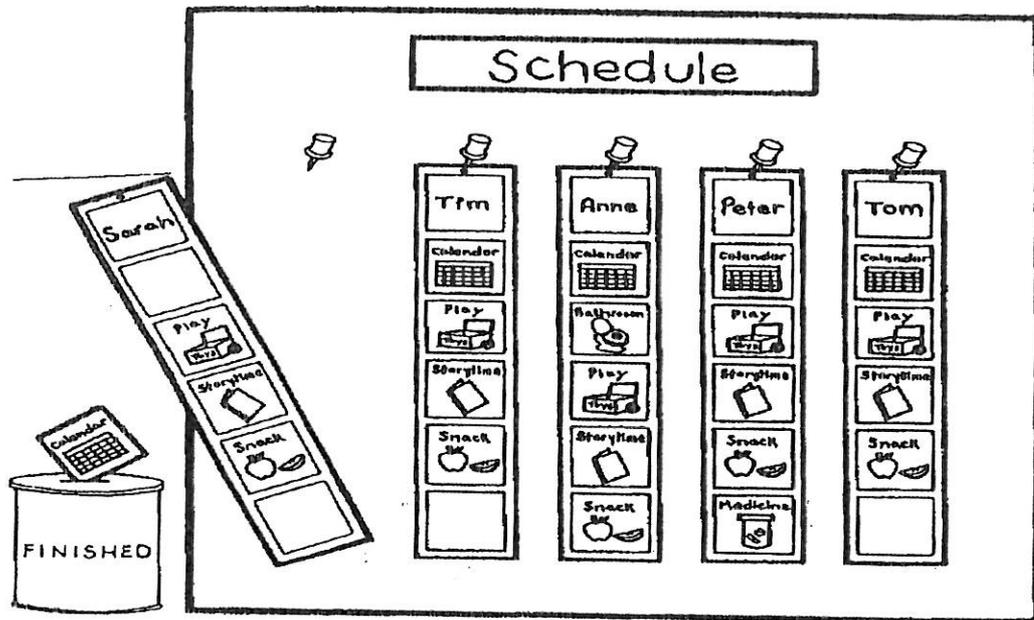
It is very helpful for your son or daughter to know what he or she will be doing each day and during each part of the week. For younger children and those who have a learning difficulty, just being able to follow a clear two-step sequence is often reassuring. Using simple expressions such as 'First' and 'Then' may help your child to understand that if they do a certain less-favoured activity they will get to do a more fun activity afterwards. Using a picture strip to illustrate this, like the ones below, can help to reinforce the message.



First get dressed, then breakfast.



First we'll read a book, then go for a drive.



Timetables can be useful ways to remind your son or daughter what lessons he or she has and what to remember to take to school. Some families have wipe-clean boards mounted in the kitchen or hall where messages and reminders can be left. It helps if the whole family tries to use this, so the child with a diagnosis will realise we all benefit from visual aids. Older children could be encouraged to use a day- or week-to-view diary and to write up their own 'things to do'.

If your child benefits from timetables and tick lists you might consider using them at home to help them cope with holidays and other periods away from school, as in the following example.

Tick	Time	Timetable for half term <i>Monday</i>	Alternatives
		Breakfast	
		Play on X-Box - 45 mins	
		Go to the park	Shops if raining
	1pm	Lunch at kitchen table	1.15 or 1.30pm Lunch if we stay at shops a little longer
		Colouring or making - one hour	
		Play on X-Box - 45 mins Free play until tea (not X Box)	
	5pm	Tea and TV	
		Play with dad for 45 mins	TV if dad too tired to play

Once your child is getting towards the end of an activity, it may help if you remind them that there is something good happening next. For example, if you need to leave the toy shop in town, why not say "two more minutes then we can go and get a drink and a bar of chocolate." This may enable your child to cope better with leaving the shop.

One parent found that by teaching her 10-year-old son to ask for more time, she could reduce his temper tantrums when he was asked to get out of the swimming pool. She stopped saying: "come on it's time to go... don't make a fuss" and instead allowed herself an extra 5 minutes, saying: "It really is about time to go. You have two choices. Either you can get out now or you can ask me for 5 more minutes please."

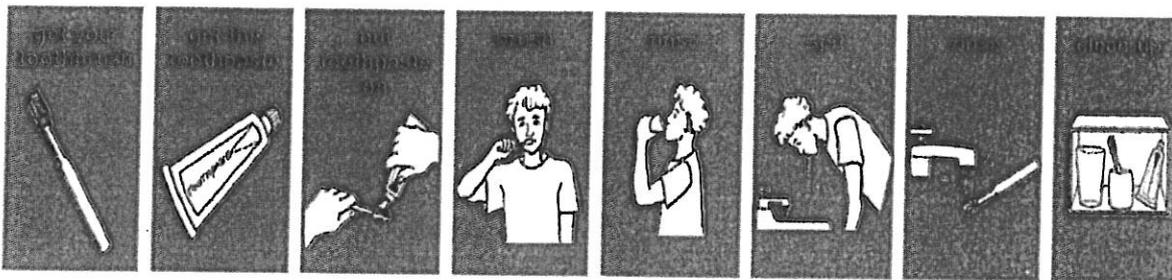
By getting her son to ask "Can I have another 5 minutes please?" she gave him a sense of control over the ending of the activity.

Other parents say: "this is your last time on the swing" and make their child repeat it back to be sure they've understood.

Many parents find that using a 'finish' signal (eg a cross on a piece of card or sign with their hands) can be useful to make it clear when an activity has ended. Often this is backed-up by saying "TV is finished."

3. Does he or she know what to do and how?

As well as knowing in what order events and activities will occur, it is important for your child to know how to carry out daily tasks. You may need to break down the steps involved into each separate action in order for them to successfully accomplish the task. For example:



It is also important to be precise and accurate in what you say, otherwise your son or daughter may misunderstand you. Many people with an ASD ask us to be clearer in our language. For example: "put your shoes under your bed" is more likely to be understood than a vague instruction like "go and tidy your room."

Similarly, "You left a mess by the sink!" is merely a statement of fact. Your child may not be able to infer from it that what you really mean is: "please rinse out your paint cup and put the dirty paper towels in the bin."

Prepare for change and transitions

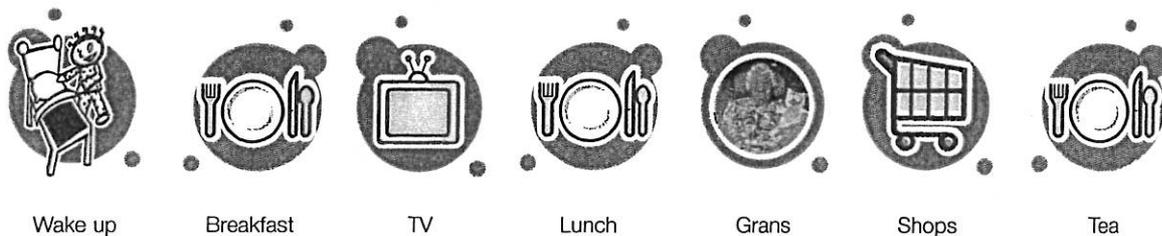
For children with ASDs, variety is not always the spice of life. Life can be very confusing for them, causing anxiety and/or aggression, so they will often try to impose some predictability into their lives.

Routines will therefore be important to your child but it is equally important that you gradually introduce variety into their life so they get used to unexpected changes. We need to introduce changes in such a way that they do not feel they have lost control or that their world has become too unpredictable.

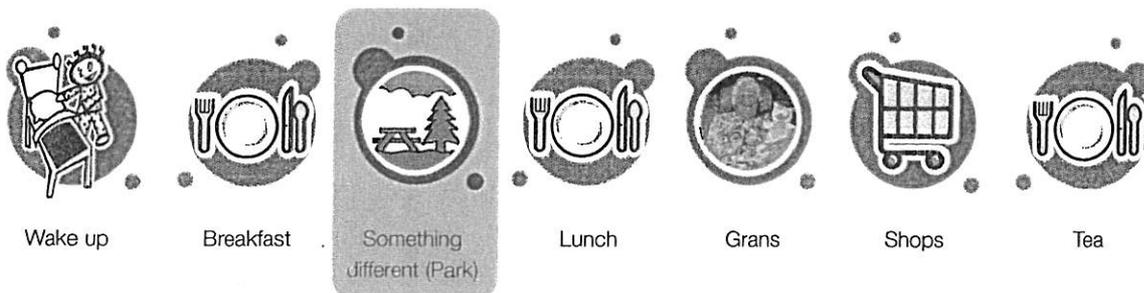
The order for introducing change should be as follows:

1. Make life as predictable as your child needs it to be so they are not in a state of constant stress/anxiety.
2. Once your child does seem more settled, gradually introduce small manageable changes to their routine.

Using a 'something different' symbol or card is one way to introduce unexpected changes to your son or daughter's routines.



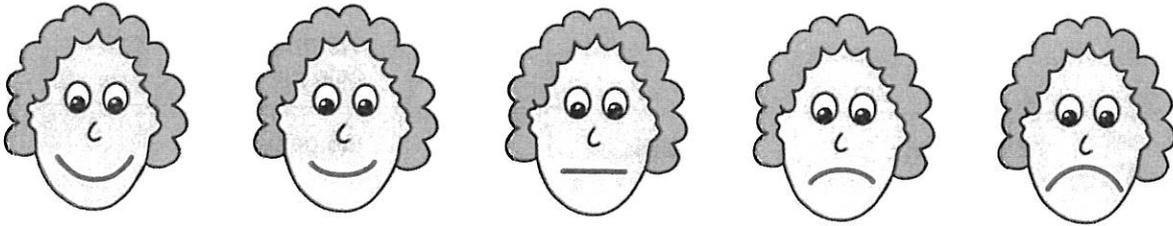
If your child uses a strip with daily events on it, like the one above, then a different coloured background instead of the usual background can be used to signal clearly that a change is taking place. Onto this 'something different' background you can attach whatever new activity is taking place.



Does your child know how to express their feelings?

One of the areas where your son or daughter will require particular support is in understanding emotions. This may be because they find it hard to talk about abstract things like feelings and also because they are less skilled at recognising and managing their own feelings.

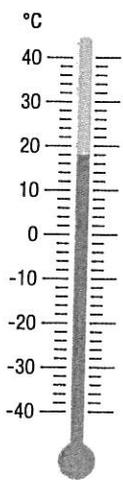
Giving your child a visual support to point at like the one below can be a good way of letting them tell you what sort of a day they've had or what they feel about a particular event or person.



Some children like to use a simple signalling method such as 'thumbs up/down/level hand' when they are out with their parent, to indicate their level of stress, anxiety or anger.



Other children have learnt to use a 5-point scale to express their feelings and use the idea of a thermometer to explain how they are feeling.



5. **VERY ANGRY** – do not come near me, leave me alone I am going to blow
4. **ANGRY** – I need someone to get me out of here
3. **UNCOMFORTABLE** – I need to leave and get a drink or go to the school office
2. **BIT UNCOMFORTABLE** – ask me if I need to leave
1. **OK** – no action required

Another useful technique is to use stick people and simple cartoons to get your child to understand other people and how their thoughts and feelings work.

In the following example, stick people have been drawn with thought and speech bubbles to help a child understand that it is OK to think different things but not always to say them out loud. The thoughts of the second person have also been shown to help your child realise that what they say has an effect on others.

