



Language for Communication

All children with autistic spectrum disorder have some degree of communication difficulty. Understanding these difficulties allows you to support these children better as they begin to interact with others.

▲●■ Links to Area of Learning

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Sometimes children with ASD start out by learning new words rapidly but seem to lose some of these words around the age of two – or at least fail to build them into ways of communicating with others. Some children have an amazing ability to ‘collect’ single words and use these as labels for things that have caught their interest, but they fail to use them as part of a conversation with others. Adults sometimes report that they might hold something up for a child with ASD to illustrate what is being talked about, but it feels as if the child does not make the connection between the spoken word and the object being shown. Instead of using words to communicate, children with ASD will often take an adult by the hand and draw them towards what they want, as if they are using the adult as a tool or piece of furniture rather than a social being. Therefore language for communication actually develops differently for many children who have ASD.

Another difficulty shared by many children with ASD is a tendency not to ask or reply to questions. Sometimes, you will find yourself asking a question which the child simply echoes back to you – this echoing back is known as *echolalia*. Some children can echo back the precise tone of voice of the speaker. They are not being rude as they do not understand the social significance of what they are doing. Don’t be surprised to hear a child with ASD calling out, using exactly your tone of voice and words if the noise in the room is too great – they have made the connection that these words often follow noise and lead to a quietness, but they do not appreciate that it is your job to say them!

You can see from the EYFS that children with ASD follow a very different pathway in this area of Communication, Language and Literacy, right from the early stages. Words may come, but may not be used to communicate about matters. There might be no attempt to make meaning clear to others by varying tone, using facial expression or asking questions. Responding to simple directions might be hard because the children do not realise that the words apply to them. Some children with ASD do develop quite complex language structures but their language tends to be used rather pedantically and literally, lacking the flexibility and the conversational style of most other children. They might find it hard to generalise what they have talked about or heard from one situation to another. Also, an awareness of the listener (for example, what the listener already knows and understands) is often lacking.

▲●■ Assessment records

On the next two pages, you will find an assessment record for working out which skills and competencies the child has already acquired. As a starting point look out for and work on behaviours that are sometimes demonstrated.

