Hot Tips For IY Autism Programs

Communication Translation: Combining Body Language, Sounds, & Words to Enhance Comprehension

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One of the goals of the IY Autism programs is for teachers and parents to help children with ASD understand both the *meaning of words* being used (receptive language) and *how to use words and gestures* to let others know of their feelings, needs and wants (expressive language). Parents and teachers learn to do this through narrating the child's social actions, describing their own actions, labeling objects while showing them to the child. and enhancing understanding with exaggerated facial expression of emotions and use of gestures. Getting into the child's attention spotlight and using a motivating antecedent (A) support the child to pay more attention to the teacher or parent's modeling of language or behaviors, and then to imitate and learn from them. (*See Hot Tips for Attention Spotlight and Hot Tips for Explaining the ABCs of child learning*).

Tailoring Language

The Basic IY parent and teacher programs, designed for neurotypical children, also cover ways to build children's receptive and expressive language by narrating and describing their actions and the objects they are playing with. As children's language understanding develops, parents and teachers begin describing pre-academic concepts such as colors, numbers, sizes, textures, letters and object positions. Social and emotion coaching is layered on top of this descriptive commenting to help children understand words for their emotions, how to self-regulate when distressed, and what it means to use appropriate social behaviors such as asking, waiting, taking turns, sharing, helping, and problem solving in interactions with others. This descriptive commenting and coaching is tailored to children's developmental level as they move from the toddler to preschool to school age stages.

For children on the autism spectrum, similar strategies are helpful for promoting language development but the pacing and use of language is deliberate and matched to the individual child's goals. To determine target language goals, parents and teachers complete the *IY Child Communication Checklist* http://www.incredibleyears.com/resources/gl/parent-program which evaluates the child's language with adults and with peers.

For some children with ASD or with language delays, adult narration or descriptive commenting can be too complex and rapid. This results in the child feeling overwhelmed, confused, anxious, and, as a result, the child may withdraw because they don't understand the verbal information or request. Furthermore, children's frustration increases when they can't make their needs understood by others. Sometimes it may seem to the parent or teacher that the child is ignoring

them, when in fact, the child is unable to process or understand the words that they are hearing so they stop listening. For these children on the autism spectrum, the language and coaching process must be slowed down. This means using a few targeted words that are highlighted at a higher volume of enthusiasm with more repetition, gestures, and persistence. Imagine you are lost in a country where you don't speak the language and you ask someone for directions. The more foreign words the person uses to give you directions and the faster they speak, the more confused you become. However, if they are patient and positive, slow down and use fewer words and more gestures, draw a picture, or show you a map, or even take you there, you will understand more and feel less anxious or intimidated. Parents and teachers can act as a communication translator for their child, by limiting the number of words and using gestures and visual prompts to enhance their child's understanding. They can help the child realize that they can turn on their voice with sounds and gestures to indicate their wants and needs to others.

Turning on the child's voice

Model and Imitate Simple Sounds: To develop verbal speech, the child first needs to be able to make a sounds in response to an adult's language or sounds (*reciprocal responding*). Children with ASD produce fewer sounds than typical children. Hard initial consonants like "ba, da" are more difficult than soft consonant and vowel sounds like "zip, zap, zee." Parents and teachers can start by frequently modeling simple and exaggerated vowel sounds. When the child vocalizes back, repeat and imitate their sounds with delight, wait for another sound from the child, and repeat, making this into a back and forth vocal turn taking game. Most children will need time to vocalize a new sound, and parents and teachers must patiently model the new sound multiple times, allowing the child to listen and learn before imitating. Don't require the child to imitate right away. With this repeated practice, the adult is gradually turning on the child's voice and helping them realize their sounds promote an interesting or similar sound from the adult. Most people speak this kind of "parentese" with babies, and this approach is still crucial for children with ASD who are learning to use reciprocal language. Parents can do this sound imitation game by making sound effects during play with cars (vroom!), animals (moo), and when reading books (choo, choo for a train picture). Children love these sounds and will repeat them just to hear the teacher or parent say them again. Songs with repetitive rhythms such as, "Oh Macdonald has a farm…" are also good ways to reinforce the fun of language, emphasizing the animal sound effects in each verse. Parents and teachers can make silly fun noises during any daily interactions such as getting ready for bed, mealtimes, lining up for recess, or hand washing. Combine simple words and sounds with gestures, actions and songs. Children love the rhythmic social action routines that accompany songs such as "Row, row, row your boat" and "London Bridge". Pause these songs and actions midway through to see if the child will fill in the blank with a word, sound, or a gesture (partial prompt). To encourage interaction, the adult imitates any child initiation and can add a gesture, additional sound, or word. Treat the child's efforts to communicate as if they make sense!

Gesturing: Using gestures to help children communicate has been discussed throughout the Incredible Years program as gestures help make meaning for the words that are not yet understood by the child. It can be helpful to teach some specific gestures that can be used when

prompting behavior in the child. Gestures that include a desire for social interaction and joint attention include: waving hello, smiling at someone, reaching out with arms up, clapping, high fives, and waving good bye. Use these gestures repeatedly. For example, every time the adult leaves or returns, it is important to wave hello or good-bye in an exaggerated way with a big smile and a wave. If the child doesn't wave, you may gently take their arm and wave it. Repeat these greetings multiple times each day. You can also use puppets to make these greetings. After a few weeks, the child will likely respond to the greetings with a wave, eye contact, a sound, and or word.

The teacher or parent can also help a child learn to make a request for an object or for help by teaching a gesture (offering open hand, pointing, or arms up). Pair this gesture with the word "need help" or "give me" or "want up.". Children also need a signal for saying, "all done" or "no" such as shaking their head or pushing something away. Adults can practice this by offering one activity or food the child likes and one the child doesn't like. Offer the desired object or food and signal head nod "yes". Then offer the unwanted the activity or food and prompt head nodding "no" along with removing the food or activity and saying, "no you don't want banana." Children begin learning about communication through nonverbal body signals, such as facial expressions, gestures, and eye contact, before developing spoken words. It is important children learn nonverbal communication to substitute for grabbing, screaming, and crying.

Naming objects and actions while using request gestures: Children who have single word language, are ready to expand the range of words they know. Adults can help them learn new words by naming *objects* such as the foods, toys, body parts, and clothing. Don't worry about colors or letters at the early stage of learning words. Also name *child actions* or requests in daily situations such putting on shoes, walking, making dinner, taking a nap, going to bathroom, and making requests for something. Describe *adult actions* as well as what the child is seeing and doing. Once children know the names of objects or actions, then the next step is for parents or teachers to add a word to the simple gestures that have been taught in earlier stages. When the child gestures for an object, the adult should imitate the gesture and add a word for the object that they want. Always name the object or action rather than using a generic gesture for "please" or "more." This expands the vocabulary and gives the child a more accurate way to convey a specific request. A child who says "app" or "apple" is communicating more clearly than a child who says "more." As with sounds and gestures, reward the child's attempts to make words by giving the child the requested object as soon as they have attempted to say the word. Even if the word is not said correctly, respond to this verbal request with enthusiasm and understanding and repeat the word several times while giving the child the requested object.

Using the "One Up Rule" for Expanding Language: For children with more words, the parent or teacher responds with the "*one up rule*", that is, adding one more word to the child's word sentence or completing the sound with a full word. If the child has single-word responses, one more word is added to the description of what the child is doing or asking for. For example, if the child says "apple", this may be expanded by saying, "want apple". If the child is already combining two words, use sentences that are 3-4 words, such "please give me apple." If the child echoes a whole sentence, but only produces single words spontaneously, then stick to the "one

up" rule. Echoed sentences or phrases are not generally being used by the child as communication. Keep the words simple and short, just slightly more complex than the child's existing language. Children who have more language still benefit from gestures.

Helping Children Learn How to Respond to Requests: Another important communication skill is responding to another's speech, instruction, or request. When children are not communicating, sometimes adults give up expecting a response. Instead of asking the child to do something or make a decision about what they want to wear, or eat, or play with, the adult makes the decision for the child. For example, the parent hands the child his shoes rather than asking him to get them, gives the child both an orange and an apple rather than asking him to make a choice, or makes the decision about what activity they will play rather than offering a choice. Instead adults can get into the child's attention spotlight and then make the simple, clear request: holding the physical options, "apple or orange" or "play dough or cars". The next important, and often difficult, step is for the parent or teacher to wait for a response from the child. If there is no response, the request is repeated, adding a prompt (provide a word, help the child form a gesture). If the child responds to the prompt in anyway, the adult immediately reinforces the child by giving them what they wanted or acknowledging their good choice and cooperation.

There are also times when a parent or teacher wants the child to follow a specific request where there is no choice option; such as washing hands, sitting down, or getting school backpack ready, or putting the dirty clothes in the clothes hamper, or putting away toys. The request should be simple, face to face, and, when possible, include a physical cue or gestural prompt. It is important that the parent or teacher have decided on a reinforcer that will follow the child's cooperation. For example, the child's favorite cereal is offered after the child is dressed, another food is offered when hands are washed, or a favorite bath play toy is given after toys are put away, child gets special sticker when dirty clothes are in hamper, or a favorite book is read after putting on pajamas. The preferred activity follows the less preferred activity. Whenever the child responds to these requests, the parent or teacher also makes a big deal with social reinforcement: claps, funny sounds, a tickle, or thrown in the air.

Persistence in follow through is key to these children learning to cooperate, otherwise they will learn to ignore the adult instructions or requests. Limit requests to those that will be consistently followed through and reinforced. Adults may need to walk the child physically through the appropriate response with gestures, prompts, and encouragement. Over time the number of prompts will diminish and children will need less help to following these requests. During the learning period, adults should balance the number of requests made with many opportunities for choices. This will help prevent power struggles.