

Modify Your Message: Communicating Effectively with Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders

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Try simplifying your language

If it becomes apparent your instructions or directions are not being understood, you could try simplifying or modifying your language.

For example, a sentence like **“We’re just going to put out pens down now so that I can tell you about what’s happening after lunch”** is very complex. Simple phrases like **“pens down, listen”** are more effective.

Using the key words in a sentence is usually enough to get the message across. We may feel that we are being brusque when we say so, but it will not come across as that to the person with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). For additional visual supports, basic pictures of what the person is being asked to do, could be shown whilst the verbal instruction is given.

Leaving pauses and waiting

Pauses allow individuals with language difficulties time to process what has been said before receiving more information.

Often, if the child does not respond immediately, we try to assist by repeating the statement in a different way. This may cause confusion as they may not have

finished processing the initial statement. Leaving 5-10 seconds before repeating ideas, important works or concepts may facilitate a clearer understanding in individuals with ASD.



Communicate one idea at a time

Individuals with language difficulties can find it difficult to process more than one piece of information at a time and can easily miss some of what was said. Break up the ideas into several sentences with pauses in between, to allow time for the information to be processed before presenting the next idea.

For example, a sentence like **“art class is cancelled today because Mrs Jones is sick so we will be going outside to play a ball game instead, but you can finish your art projects next week”** contains many ideas. Simplifying each idea and presenting them

separately may make it easier for an individual with an ASD to understand.

List the events in the order that they occur

It is much easier to process and integrate information if it is presented in sequential order. A complex sentence like **“we are going to swimming lessons after we do another activity”** does not present the events in the way that will occur. Simplifying the phrase to say **“we are going to do a maths activity now (pause). Later we are going swimming”** allows the information to be processed more easily.

State your message clearly

We often use implied meanings rather than directly stating our message. This requires children to make inferences (deductions) about what is being said, and individuals with language difficulties may not pick up on their implied meanings. When they do not change their behaviour, they may be perceived as naughty or defiant. However, it is more likely that they have not understood what is being asked of them.

For example, a child who is told **“textas dry out if you leave the lids off”** may not realise that this means that the lids should be replaced after use. Using a clear instruction like, **“put the lids on the textas when you have finished using them”** will allow the message to be more easily understood.

Avoid giving instructions by asking a question

We often use questions to give instructions, even when we do not wish to give the person a choice about carrying out a task. This can cause confusion for children who interpret language literally, and innocent responses can be perceived by others as rude. Instead of asking **“are you going to do**

your maths problems now?” it is clearer to give the instruction **“please do your maths problems now”**.

Speak in a normal tone of voice

This may be obvious but it can be easy to slip into speaking louder, faster or in an agitated manner when you feel your message is not getting across. Instead of talking excessively, using a high pitched voice, it is more effective to use normal intonation and volume, slightly slower speed and plenty of pauses.

Give specific choices (limit open ended questions)

Individuals with language difficulties often cope better if given two options to choose from, rather than an open-ended question. Be aware – if the person presents with echolalia (repeating back words or phrases they have heard) they may just repeat the last choice given to them. To overcome this, you could show pictures of the two choices and the person can choose their desired option. An open-ended question like **“what do you want to do now?”** may be difficult for some people to answer. Presenting concrete options by saying **“do you want to play outside or do drawing now?”** may make it easier for the person to respond.

Avoid ambiguous language

Ambiguous language such as metaphors, similes and idioms can confuse individuals with an Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Language may be interpreted in terms of its literal meaning, rather than in context of everyday sayings. Australians use a lot of colloquialism and slang, and this can make things even more confusing.

This section discusses some strategies to minimise ambiguity in language.

Person says: "Hold your horses"

What is heard? "Where are the horses?"

What is meant? "Please wait."

For school staff and carers:

- Individuals with ASDs may find group instructions difficult to follow as they are not directed toward them specifically. Some individuals may need to be taught that generalised terms such as 'everyone', 'guys' or 'boys and girls' include them too.
- When improvement is required, teachers or mentors often use phrases like 'pull your socks up' or 'get with the program.' As individuals with ASD may not understand the colloquial meaning to these phrases, it is more effective to state exactly what improvement is required and how this can be achieved.
- Similar situations arise at the end of the day when a teacher may say 'let's wrap it up' or 'let's call it quits.' An individual with ASD may require a more direct instruction such as 'stop writing and put your pens away' in order to understand the message.

For classmates:

- Peers often use slang or popular phrases which have implied meanings. For the person with an ASD, questions like "what is on the cards this weekend?" and, "what's up?" can be interpreted literally and cause confusion or distress.

Misunderstandings at home:

- Many parents become frustrated with their child over misunderstandings: for example, if they ask the child, "can you put the dishes away?" the child might interpret this as, "are you capable of putting the dishes away?" and answer "yes". Parents think the child has shown their intention to complete the task, and the child thinks they have answered the parent's question. To avoid confusion, family members may find it easier to rephrase questions as direct instructions like "put the dishes away, please".

Person says "In a minute."

What is heard? "I only have to wait 60 seconds."

What is meant? "I need to finish this first and then I will help you."

In the community:

- Instructions, signs and advisory material in the community can be a source of confusion for a person with ASD. We know that cautionary signs like 'WATCH YOUR STEP' are intended to warn people about hazards, but taken literally, a person who is looking at their feet may not be aware of hazards ahead and may be at risk of accident or injury.

Person says "Are you all right?"

What is heard? "To the right of what?"

What is meant? "Do you need help?"

Helping a person confused by literal language:

- Carol Gray, author of many practical resources to help individuals with ASDs, suggest that the associated social difficulties should be viewed as a 'shared impairment'¹, between the individual with the ASD and their communication partner. Both parties need to modify their behaviour in order to have a successful interaction. In keeping with this, assisting individuals to overcome difficulties with literal interpretation should be a process of meeting halfway. The person can increase their knowledge of common sayings, while the other person can adapt their language to reduce possible confusion.

Person says *"Hold your horses."*

What is heard? *"Where are the horses?"*

What is meant? *"Please wait."*

Useful references:

What did you say? What did you mean? by Jude Welton (2004). An illustrated guide to metaphors. Each page shows a saying and how literal interpretation could make it confusing. This is followed by an explanation of what the saying is means and when it can be used. Suitable for 8 years and up. Available from the Autism Victoria Library [#2447](#).

¹ Reference: www.thegraycenter.org

An Asperger Dictionary of Everyday Expressions by Ian Stuart Hamilton (2004).

Contains thousands of sayings that cause confusion when interpreted literally. This resource explains what each statement is trying to convey. An excellent feature of this dictionary is a 'politeness rating' for each statement, so the reader can decide when each statement should be used appropriately. Suitable for 12 years and up. Available from the Autism Victoria Library [#2449](#).

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