

How to communicate your message to people on the autism spectrum

Introduction

Communication happens between two or more people verbally or non-verbally. Often a message can be lost or misunderstood by people on the autism spectrum, so it's important to be patient and understanding. Some difficulties can include; reading body language, social cues and inferencing, or reading between the lines.

Simplify your language

If your instructions, comments or questions aren't being understood, you could try to limit the number of words you use and keep it simple.

In the classroom simple phrases like "put your pens down, listen" can work well for people on the autism spectrum. Longer sentences like "We're just going to put our pens down now so that I can tell you about what's happening after lunch" are more complex and much more difficult to understand.

You can simplify your language by using key words to get your message across. Sometimes this can feel too direct, but it won't come across this way to a person on the autism spectrum. You can also use visual supports or basic pictures to support what's being said. This can be helpful when communicating an idea or giving a simple instruction because most people on the autism spectrum are visual learners.

Allow for "thinking time"

People on the autism spectrum may need time to process what's being said before receiving more information. If the person doesn't respond straight away, you can allow 5-10 seconds before you repeat your instruction or comment. When too much information is given at once, it's easy for the person to misunderstand what's been said. It's helpful to break up ideas into simple sentences, allowing for "thinking time" after each instruction.

Communicate one idea at a time

It can be difficult for some people on the autism spectrum to process more than one idea at a time. To communicate ideas more clearly you can break up an idea into smaller chunks and allow for thinking time. This will help the person to process what's been said before presenting the next idea.

For example, a sentence like "art class is cancelled today because Mrs. Jones is sick so we'll be going outside to play a ball game instead, but you can finish your art projects next week" contains too many ideas. Presenting each idea separately, and in the order that they'll happen, can improve understanding for people on the autism spectrum.

Keep your message clear

A clear instruction like "put the lids on the textas when you have finished using them" is easy for a person on the autism spectrum to understand. Implied meanings are often too complex and can be easily misinterpreted or lost in translation. For example, a statement like "textas will dry out if you leave the lids off" is implying that the lids need to be put back on the textas otherwise they'll dry out. This isn't clear and relies on a person's ability to make inferences about what's being said.

Giving Instructions

People on the autism spectrum will sometimes interpret what's being said very literally, so giving an instruction by asking a question can sometimes cause confusion. For example "are you going to do your maths problem now?" This could be taken literally and the reply could be "No" which can be taken as uncooperative or rude. Questions suggest there's a choice so it's best to avoid them when an instruction needs to be followed. A clearer way to give this instruction would be to say "please do your maths problem now".

Be aware of your tone of voice

Be aware of the tone in your voice and how loudly or softly you're speaking. People on the autism spectrum are more likely to understand what you're saying if you speak slowly with a consistent tone and at normal pitch.

Be specific

People on the autism spectrum are more likely to make a choice about a particular task or event if choices are limited. Too much choice may be overwhelming. If a person has echolalia (repeating words or phrases back to you) they may just repeat the last choice given to them. A good solution would be to use a choice board or offer two options for the person to choose from. An open-ended question like "what do you want to do now?" is far too overwhelming. Presenting concrete options such as "do you want to play outside on the swing or do some drawing?" will make the choice much easier.

Avoid ambiguous language

Ambiguous language such as metaphors, similes and idioms can be confusing for people on the autism spectrum. Language can be interpreted very literally, rather than in context of every day sayings. Australians use colloquialism and slang regularly, which can make communication confusing. This section offers strategies to minimise ambiguity in language.

Person says: "Hold your horses"

What's heard: "Where are the horses?"

What's meant: "Please wait"

For school staff and carers

Group instruction is sometimes difficult to follow as it's not always clear that the instruction has been directed at the individual as well as other members in the group. Some people need to be taught that generalised terms such as 'everyone', 'guys' or 'boys' and 'girls' include them, too.

When teachers give feedback or comment on a student's performance, they might say "pull your socks up" or "get with the program". If a student is on the autism spectrum they may not understand the colloquial meaning behind these phrases. A more useful approach would be to state exactly

what improvement is required and how this can be achieved.

Similar situations may arise at the end of a school day when a teacher says "let's wrap it up" or "let's call it a day". Direct instruction such as "stop writing and put your pens away" will be much clearer.

For peers or classmates

Peers or classmates will often use slang words or popular phrases which have implied meanings. For the person on the autism spectrum, questions like "what's on the cards this weekend?" and "what's up?" can be interpreted very literally and can cause confusion or distress.

Person says: "In a minute"

What's heard: "I only have to wait 60 seconds?"

What's meant: "I need to finish this first and then I will help you"

Misunderstanding at home

Parents can become frustrated at home when their child does not respond or act in a certain way to what has been said. For example, if they ask their 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 believe that the child has agreed to do this task and the child thinks that they have answered their parent's question. To avoid confusion, family members should try where possible to rephrase questions as direct instructions like "put the dishes away".

Person says: "Are you all right?"

What's heard: "To the right of what?"

What's meant: "Do you need help?"

In the community

Instructions, signs and advisory material in the community can be a source of confusion for a person on the autism spectrum. Warning signs like 'watch your step' are intended to warn people about hazards. But when the warning is taken literally, a person on the autism spectrum might look at their feet. They might not be aware of hazards and may be at risk of accident or injury.

How you can help a person to understand literal language

Carol Gray, author of many practical resources to help a person on the autism spectrum, suggests that social difficulties should be viewed as a 'shared impairment' between the people on the autism spectrum and the person they are communicating with. Both people need to change their behaviour to ensure clear communication. It is important for people to meet half way so that the person on the autism spectrum improves their knowledge of common phrases and sayings whilst

the other person can adapt their own language to make conversation clearer.

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