

Information Sheet:

How to communicate effectively with autistic people

Communication happens between two or more people verbally or non-verbally. Often a message can be lost or misunderstood by Autistic people, so it's important to be patient and understanding. Some difficulties an Autistic person may experience include; reading body language, social cues and inferencing, or reading in 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.

Simple phrases like "bring a rain jacket" can work well for Autistic people. Longer sentences like "It's going to rain later so you'll need to bring a rain jacket so that you don't get cold" are more complex statements and may be much more difficult to understand.

You can simplify your language by using key words to help get your message across clearly. 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 Autistic people are visual learners.

Allow for "thinking time"

Autistic people may need time to process what's being said before receiving more information or being able to respond. If the person doesn't respond straight away, you should allow 5-10 seconds before you repeat your instruction or comment. When too much information is given at once, the person may misunderstand what's been said. It can be 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 Autistic people 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 "Jessica isn't coming today because she's sick so we'll go shopping instead, we can catch up with her next week" contains too many ideas. Presenting each idea separately, and in the order that they'll happen, can improve understanding for Autistic people.

Keep your message clear

A clear instruction like "put the lids on the pens when you have finished using them" is easy for an Autistic person to understand. Implied meanings are often too complex and can be easily misinterpreted or lost in translation.

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Keep your message clear

For example, a statement like “the pens will dry out if you leave the lids off” is implying that the lids need to be put back on the pens 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

Autistic people 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. Autistic people are more likely to understand what you’re saying if you speak slowly with a consistent tone and at normal pitch.

Be specific

Autistic people 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 visual 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 do your maths problem now or your reading?” will make the choice much easier.

Use clear language

Sometimes people use sayings or slang, and don’t say what they mean directly. This can be confusing for autistic people who may interpret them literally.

For example:

A person says: “Hold your horses”

What an autistic person may think: “Where are the horses?”

A person should instead have said: “Please wait”.

For group instruction

Group instruction is sometimes difficult to follow as it’s not always clear that the instruction has been directed to the autistic 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.

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For school staff and caregivers

When teachers give feedback or comment on a student's performance, they might say "pull your socks up" or "get with the program". An Autistic student 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, it's time to go home" will be much clearer.

For peers

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

Peer says: "In a minute"

Autistic person interprets as: "I have to wait 60 seconds?"

Peers should be encouraged to say: "I need to finish this first and then I will help you".

Misunderstanding

Autistic people can become frustrated at home when their family member does not respond or act in a certain way to what has been said. For example, if someone asks their family member "Can you put the dishes away?" the family member might interpret this as "are you capable of putting the dishes away?" and answer "yes". Family members believe that the family member has agreed to do this task and the family member thinks that they have answered their question. To avoid confusion, family members should try where possible to rephrase questions as direct instructions like "put the dishes away".

In the community

Instructions, signs and advisory material in the community can be a source of confusion for an Autistic person. Warning signs like 'watch your step' are intended to warn people about hazards. But when the warning is taken literally, an Autistic person might look at their feet. They might not be aware of hazards and may be at risk of accident or injury. This information sheet was produced using advice from Autistic people as well as the experiences of families from the Amaze community.

References

American Psychiatric Association (2013) Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (DSM-5), 5th edn, American Psychiatric Association, Arlington, VA. Linnenbank M, Feldmann R, Schulte-Körne G, Beindiek S, and Strittmatter E (2021) 'Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder of all ages, levels of symptom severity and general cognitive ability display low processing speed index scores warranting special educational assistance', Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 52:3668-3675, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-021-05249-5>

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