

Adapting verbal language

Why change the way we speak?

Research suggests that many children and young people with autism are visual learners (Quill, 1997) and may struggle to understand spoken language on its own.

Strategies to try

1. Say the child's name to cue them in and let them know that you are talking to them.
2. Encourage the child to look at you before you give instructions to ensure they are listening to you.

If the child displays poor eye contact, encourage them to look towards your face by holding desired objects near to your eyes when you offer things to choose from.

Eye contact is desired but be aware that for some children this is very difficult so don't insist on it.

If the child loves singing you could try 'singing' instructions to gain attention.

3. Keep language simple.

Use vocabulary that is within the child's understanding.

Speak using short sentences.

Stress key words.

Break information down into chunks and build it back up again e.g. 'Coat off – Ben take your coat off.'

Give simple commands which involve matching what the child is doing and deals with the whole object or situation e.g. 'show me your drink' 'point to the teddy' 'where is the bucket' 'find your lunch box' 'sit on the chair.'

4. Say instructions in the order they will happen
E.g. 'Ben, coat on, gloves on then outside.'
5. Speak at a slower rate with pauses to give the child time to process what is being said.
6. Reduce the number of questions you ask.

Questioning can put children under pressure to respond. Listen to what the child says and then respond with a comment or expand what the child says with one or two words rather than a question e.g. child says 'my coat' adult says 'yes, your coat, blue coat.'

7. Model language

Child says 'Mrs Collins putted the ball on the shelf.' Adult says 'Yes Mrs Collins put the ball on the shelf.'

Also model language as child would say it e.g. child says 'me want drink' instead of replying 'do you want drink?' adult says 'Ben wants a drink.'



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8. Use 'temptation opportunities' to encourage Child to request.

Put desired objects just out of reach so that the child has to request them

9. Offer forced choice alternatives

In everyday situations encourage the child to request verbally e.g. what would you like to play with? The hoop or the ball? Show the item as you give it and say its name.

If it is obvious what the child wants don't automatically give it to them, offer two choices so that they have to request e.g. if they reach for a red coloured crayon move the crayons slightly out of reach and say 'do you want the red or the blue crayon?'

10. Use action songs and nursery rhymes

Use a range of songs and rhymes for repetition and practice of communicative gestures such as pointing, shared gaze, etc. in order to teach early, shared focus, cause and effect.

When singing, miss out words to encourage the child to fill the gaps.

Change the words to make 'silly' versions to encourage a response.

People games can be used to develop two-way shared attention. Use games with actions such as 'Row the boat' or 'Head shoulders, knees and toes.' These allow for opportunities to stop and wait for a physical response. Songs such as 'Old MacDonald' or 'Wind the bobbin' provide an opportunity to use words to join in or request the next part.

11. Follow the child's lead

Provide a visually clear place to play e.g. a box of toys, the sand pit, water tray.

Give undivided attention

Let the child play with what they want to, comment on actions not what the child says/do not imitate.

Use simple phrases (1 to 5 words).

State actions, don't ask questions, don't make suggestions e.g. if s/he is playing in the sand pit, the adult could say 'sand in bucket' 'tap bucket' 'turn bucket over,' as the child does it.

12. Use visual cues

Wherever possible use visual cues i.e. objects, pictures, symbols, gestures etc. alongside verbal language to support understanding.

Photographs, pictures, objects, small world figures, puppets etc. can be used as prompts and reminders of what the child has done or to scaffold play situations (see picture below).



13. Activities which require the child to name objects, match and post, will all help to develop a greater knowledge of words.