

Communication is a two way process for sharing information and ideas between two or more people and can be verbal or non-verbal. For most of us, it is also a tool for social bonding. By sharing our thoughts, opinions, experiences and emotions, we get to know and understand other people and ourselves. We are also able to both form and maintain relationships. For some people with autism communication is a much more basic tool, used simply as a means of getting needs and wants met.

For effective communication to happen it is important to have ALL of the following:

WHAT: something to communicate - a message

HOW: a way of communicating - common to both sides

WHO: somebody to communicate with - you cannot communicate alone

WHY: a purpose - motivation to communicate

A desire to communicate and interact with other people is an important human characteristic, but some people with autism lack an understanding of what communication is for. Not realising they can have an impact on their world and the people in it, they may fail to develop the essential communication skills the rest of us take for granted.

Communication is about both using and understanding language. Autism is disorder which affects social communication, both verbal and non-verbal. Communication is not just about the ability to talk. Even where there is speech, wider aspects of communication may still be impaired. Some people with autism have disordered or delayed language. Some do not develop speech at all. Others have excellent verbal ability, but the ability to talk does not necessarily mean that the understanding is there to the same degree. The same is also true in reverse – people who are completely non-verbal may understand more than others think.

Communication difficulties and autism

Some people with autism may experience some difficulties in the following areas:

- Difficulties in using language:
- Problems with pace, volume, quality of speech, tone and inflection of voice
- Echolalia – repetitive echoing of the speech of others
- Incessant talking, with no regard to the interest or attention of the listener
- Constant questioning, often expecting the same response
- Making irrelevant comments out of context
- Distortion of language rules e.g. answering a question with a question
- Making tactless remarks and/or using inappropriate language

Difficulties with comprehension:

- Use and understanding of body language – facial expression, gesture, proximity, body position, eye contact
- Literal understanding – problems with irony, idioms and metaphors, jokes and teasing, judging the sincerity of other people's words
- Processing delay

- Understanding abstract concepts
- Following instructions
- Expressing and understanding emotions

Difficulties with social use of language:

- Social timing – may interrupt conversation
- Poor concentration
- Lack of joint attention and shared interest
- Letting people know s/he has something to communicate
- Starting, ending and keeping a conversation going
- Taking turns in conversation
- Knowing if the listener is interested, understands and is paying attention
- No sense of 'register' – recognizing suitability of when and where certain topics can be talked about, who to, for how long and the appropriateness of language to be used
- Following 'give and take' of conversation flow, especially in group situations

Improving communication with people with autism

- Modifying your own language:
- Say their name first to get attention
- Keep language short and simple
- Say what you mean and mean what you say – be clear and specific
- Avoid inferred meaning and ambiguity
- Avoid or explain irony, sarcasm, jokes, turns of phrase
- Give instructions in correct order of action and break down into small steps
- Be positive – avoid 'no' and 'don't' and say what you want to happen, not what you don't want
- Make abstract concepts concrete

Other tips:

- Give more time for processing information
- Provide visual support to make your communication clearer

- Be aware that the ability to talk does not mean that they will understand the subtle nuances of communication
- Teach specific skills for essential language functions e.g. asking for help, asking for a break from activity, making requests, accepting and rejecting requests, expressing pain, anxiety and other emotions, explaining that s/he doesn't understand
- Create as many communication opportunities as possible

Bibliography:

Olga Bogdashina: 'Communication Issues in Autism and Asperger Syndrome'
Jude Welton: 'What Did You Say, What did You Mean?'
Stuart Hamilton: 'An Asperger Dictionary of everyday Expressions'

