Helping Your Child Develop Communication Skills

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As a parent, you want to provide every opportunity for your child to reach his or her potential. Communication is an essential part of life and for children on the autism spectrum and communicating can be challenging. Professionals such as speech language pathologists and other educators can assist you in meeting the communication goals you set for your child. Remember, you know your child best, you care the most about your child, and you are the most constant and important person in your child’s early years. This article focuses on some strategies to make learning to communicate easier for your child.

What is an expressive language delay?

An expressive language delay is when language skills lag behind other children the same age by at least one year or a failure to reach typical milestones for language development. There may also be an inability to follow simple directions. The child may have slow or hard to understand speech after the age of 3. Typically the child understands language better than he or she is able to communicate. An example of expressive language delay could be a 4 year old, who may understand stories read to him but is unable to describe the story even in simple terms or a 2 year old, who can follow two step commands but cannot name body parts. Imaginative play and social uses of language may be impaired causing difficulty in playing with peers.

How is an expressive language delay diagnosed and treated?

First, the child’s hearing should be evaluated to rule out any hearing loss. A hearing screening can be conducted by your child’s pediatrician or your child may be referred to an audiologist in your area. An assessment should then be performed by a speech language pathologist. Both verbal and non-verbal tests may be used in the assessment as well as parent interviews, observations, etc. Typically there are two types of treatment that work in tandem: working with the speech language pathologist and involvement from the child’s family to incorporate spoken language into everyday activities and play.

As a parent, how can I help my child communicate?

Interaction occurs whenever you and your child do things together and respond to one another. Every time you and your child interact, you make a connection that gets communication started. In order to have successful interactions, your child needs to respond to others and to initiate interactions on his/her own.
Communication is not always verbal in nature. Look at how your child communicates. Does he cry or scream? Moves his body next to people or things? Points at things? Makes sounds? Looks at things he wants? Uses words or sentences? Use echolalia or repeats what you say? Just as his or her form of communication may be different at various times, he or she will communicate for different reasons. He or she may be protesting or refusing, requesting, responding, trying to get your attention, greet or say good-bye, ask questions, express feelings, etc.

Your child’s communication will depend on his/her ability to interact with you. Additionally, their communication will depend on how he or she communicates, and why he or she is communicating. It will also depend on your child’s level of understanding. It is important to know what your child can and cannot do.

In the Hanen Program that was developed for helping parents develop communication skills with their children in the home, four stages of communication are referenced: “own agenda” stage, “requester” stage, “early communicator” stage and “partner” stage.

If your child is at the “own agenda” stage…

He or she will interact with you very briefly and almost never with other children. Typically, at this stage the child wants to do things alone. He or she will look at, or reach, for what he or she wants. They will not communicate intentionally with you and will play in unusual ways. He or she makes sounds to calm themselves and will cry or scream in protest. They understand almost new words. They will smile and laugh.

If your child is in the “own agenda” stage, try to get your child to engage in joyful interactions with you. Set up situations for your child to communicate intentionally starting with requests. Teach your child to take turns using body movements, eye contact, smiles, and sounds. Increase your child’s understanding of activities so he/she can begin to respond to what you say.

If your child is at the “requester” stage…

He or she will briefly interact with you. They will use sound to calm or focus on self. They will echo a few words. He or she will usually reach for what they want and communicate mainly by pulling you to what they want. When they want you to continue a preferred activity such as tickling, chase, etc., they will do so with eye contact, smiles, sounds, or body movement. They understand the steps in familiar routines and occasionally follow familiar directions.

If your child is in the “requester” stage, help your child use an action or sound to get you to continue in a physical game. Replace the pulling and leading behavior with gestures, pictures, sounds or word attempts. Increase the things that your child requests. Help your child understand several familiar words. Encourage your child to play the games he or she plays with you and other familiar people.

If your child is in the “early communicator” stage…

He or she will interact with you and those he or she knows in familiar situations. For example, he or she will take more turns in games with others. He or she will request that you continue in a few physical games. Typically, he or she will request or respond by repeating what you say and make requests for more motivating things. He or she begins to protest or refuse.
Occasionally he/she will use body movements, gestures, sounds, or words to get your attention. They understand simple, familiar sentences. Also, they will say hi/bye and answer yes/no, choice and “what’s that” questions.

If your child is in the “early communicator” stage, then teach your child to take turns consistently in physical games. Encourage your child to initiate physical games rather than waiting for you to do so. Increase the child’s use of gestures, signs, pictures, or words to make requests for things he or she wants. The strategies will help your child improve the way he or she communicates and to communicate for a variety of reasons. Help him or her understand familiar words, phrases and follow simple directions.

If your child is in the “partner” stage …

He or she will be able to participate in longer interactions. He will be able to play with other children successfully. He or she will use words or other methods of communication to request, protest, greet, gain your attention, ask and answer questions. He or she will start to use words or other means of communication to talk about past and future, express feeling, or pretend. They will make up their own sentences and have short conversations. He or she will understand the meanings of many different words and will sometimes be able to repair or fix what he or she says when not understood by others.

If your child is in the “partner” stage, help your child change the way he communicates through conversation, play or communicating with other children.

Strategies to Use

Strategies to assist your child making requests include placing his favorite thing within his view but out of reach requiring him to “request” that object. Requesting could be by gesture, pointing, sign, picture or verbal. Offer things, like a snack, bit by bit, so the child will have to make multiple requests.

Ways to help your child tell you “no,” “enough,” “all done,” or “stop” are to offer him or her their least favorite things. Continue an activity until your child wants to stop. Let your child end the activity.

To help your child understand several familiar words, describe to what your child is doing while he does it. This will help him understand the meaning of words. Your emphasis is on helping your child understand words. Don’t pressure him or her to talk.

When playing a physical game like chase or swinging, your child can learn he or she can start the game by saying “go” after you say “ready, set…” Don’t chase or swing until one of you has said “go”.

To help your child make choices, start with easy choices. The easiest choice for your child to make is between two things that he can see: one that he really likes and one that he really dislikes. Hold the choices up in front of him.
Conclusion

It takes time for children to become communicators. If your child isn’t sending any messages directly to you, don’t expect him or her to talk right away. However, expecting him or her to pay more attention to you is a realistic goal. By continually re-evaluating and setting new goals, you can help your child reach his full communication potential.

References


