Communication
Participant Notes

Introduction

‘Communication is a reciprocal, dynamic process. It is the instrumental force propelling social knowledge, relationships and a sense of self. An effective communicator has an inherent motivation, something to express, and a means of communication. Unlike language which is symbolic and rules based, communication is social and constantly changing.’ (Quill, 2000, p. 14)

All children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) have some challenges with communication but there is considerable variation in their communication abilities. What makes supporting the communication development of children with ASDs difficult is that their challenges are not reserved to one aspect of communication, but affect the understanding and expression of both verbal and non-verbal communication behaviours.

What is communication?

Communication is an incredibly important life skill that most of us take for granted. We start communicating well before we can speak through our behaviour and non-verbal messages.

Communication often involves speech, but it is not dependent on it. ‘Communication is about two or more people sharing a message. It is the exchange of information, thoughts or opinions between people. Communication may involve the use of conventional or unconventional signals and may occur through spoken or other modes.’ (Victorian Department of Human Services 2006/2007, p. 4)

Communication is very complex and involves two distinct but equally important processes:

• Expressive communication involves the sending of a message. A message can be sent using a range of different forms of communication including verbal (i.e. speech) or non-verbal (i.e. gesture, facial expression, tone of voice etc). Pictures can also be used to send a message. We will talk more about forms of communication later.

• Receptive communication involves the receiving and interpreting of a message. Receptive communication is often called comprehension. It is the ability to understand the intent and meaning of someone’s effort to communicate.

Children with ASDs have difficulties with both receptive and expressive communication but the degree of difficulty in each of these areas will differ considerably between individuals. Some children with ASDs may be non-verbal and have significant challenges with expressive communication, while others may be verbal but use language inappropriately or get confused by
the language of others. It is critical to remember that just because a person can talk does not mean they are an effective communicator.

When we think about communication it is important to consider:

The **form** of communication refers to **HOW** we communicate, and can include:

- speech
- writing
- facial expression
- vocalisation
- body language/gesture
- signing
- pointing to or exchanging a picture card
- speech generating devices

The **content** of communication refers to **WHAT** we communicate. It is ‘the message’ or meaning of our communication. The message:

- can be concrete or abstract
- can be implied (which requires the communication partner to have strong ‘theory of mind’ as discussed below)
- relies on the communication partner’s shared understanding
For the content of our message to make sense to others we need to have an accurate understanding of the meaning of words, phrases and expressions, as well as the probable meaning of non-verbal behaviours (e.g. a wink or a smirk). This is also true when we are trying to interpret the communication of others.

The **function** of communication refers to WHY we communicate. The functions of communication can be summarised into a few broad categories. These include:

- request (e.g. food, objects, attention, escape, information)
- protest
- comment (e.g. providing information, labelling)
- social interaction (e.g. greetings and farewells)

As stated above, communication is social and constantly changing. Therefore, for communication to be effective, a person needs to be able to:

- establish and shift attention (often in the presence of competing stimuli)
- follow rapidly changing stimuli
- take in information
- process information and integrate multiple elements (e.g. context, non-verbal information, emotions, language and the social situation)
- store information
- retrieve information
- send information (Hodgdon, 1995; cited in Dodd, 2005).

**Characteristics of communication difficulties in children with ASDs**

**What difficulties do children with ASDs experience with communication?**

Children with an ASD develop differently and as a result have a wide range of communication deficits, from being unable to speak or understand communication to having a good vocabulary but difficulties with social communication.

Children with ASDs have difficulties with both receptive and expressive communication. Unfortunately, because greater emphasis is often placed on expressive communication by parents and others supporting children with ASDs, the true nature and impact of their receptive communication difficulties can be missed.
**Difficulty understanding the spoken communication of others:**

Some children with ASDs present with significant deficits in their comprehension of verbal language resulting from the failure to attend to the speech of others, an inability to effectively process information they hear and poor understanding of the meanings of words.

It can be easy to misjudge a child’s receptive communication because:

- Many children with ASDs use their knowledge of the routine to give the impression of understanding verbal instructions.
- Some children are able to pick up on a word or two or a particular gesture or facial expression which tells them what they need to do.
- Some children have the ability to repeat chunks of language (which can be quite sophisticated) and therefore appear to have better understanding than they truly do.
- Splinter skills and abilities in specific areas can result in communication performance being over estimated. An individual may be able to speak at length about their area of interest, but lack many of the essential skills to engage in two way communication. This leads people to assume the person is understanding what we are communicating.

**Difficulty understanding the non-verbal communication of others:**

Children with ASDs also experience difficulty making sense of the non-verbal communication of others (eye gaze, body posture, facial expression, hand gestures and vocal characteristics including intonation, volume and phrasing) which can mean that they will miss the true meaning of communication interactions.

Below is a great example of how non-verbal elements of communication can change the meaning of a phrase. Consider the seven different meanings that can be communicated simply by changing the emphasis on individual words. Imagine the difficulty a child with an ASD would experience in understanding the desired message:

I didn’t say she stole my money (but someone else said it)

I *didn’t* say she stole my money (I definitely didn’t)

I didn’t *say* she stole my money (but I did imply it)

I didn’t say *she* stole my money (but someone stole it)

I didn’t say she *stole* my money (she did something with it)

I didn’t say she stole *my* money (she stole someone else’s money)

I didn’t say she stole my *money* (she stole something else)
Difficulties with ‘Theory of Mind’:

People with ASDs are often described as having poor Theory of Mind (ToM). This means that they have difficulty understanding the mental states (emotions, intentions, needs, beliefs, desires) of others, and appreciating that other people may have a different mental state to themselves. Difficulties seeing things from another person’s point of view can make communication more difficult for children with autism. This can often mean that they have:

- difficulty understanding the emotions of others
- lack of empathy
- poor understanding of the social communication needs of others (e.g. desire to share their news)
- minimal understanding of what others can be expected to know (e.g. that they may not be aware of what happened at school)
- limited understanding that they can affect how others think and feel (e.g. that they are not interested in “A Bugs Life” and “Ants”)
- lack of motivation to please
- challenges sharing attention
- lack of understanding of social convention (e.g. asking others about their holidays or their weekend)

Difficulties with Theory of Mind combined with difficulties with flexible thinking can mean that a child with an ASD has difficulty understanding idioms, metaphors and colloquialisms. When you read the following sentences consider the differences between the literal and implied meaning:

- “It’s raining cats and dogs.”
- “Pull your socks up.”
- “I need this like a hole in the head.”
- “Hop over here.”

Delayed processing:

Due to the transient nature of verbal communication, people with ASDs have difficulties processing the information before it is gone. It is important that we provide time for the person to process information. Be aware that this may take even longer if the person is under stress. Because many people with ASDs are visual learners, non-transient communication methods can assist them to process the information and understand the meaning of it.
Lack of motivation to communicate or understanding the need to communicate:

Children with ASDs often lack motivation to communicate with others either for social contact or in order to meet their needs. They may independently access their favoured toys or food rather than making an attempt at communicating. Other children may be motivated to communicate as long as it relates to their interests or to achieve a purpose that is meaningful to them.

Other children may not realise they need to communicate with others. They may not realise that other people could meet their needs or are not aware that others have different knowledge to them that would be valuable. Sometimes, the parents and other support people in the life of a child with an ASD know that child and anticipate the child’s needs so well that there is no reason for the child to communicate.

For example: The teachers of a non-verbal boy with an ASD intentionally did not open the child’s lunch box so that he needed to use a picture card to ask for help. One of his classmates saw him struggling so helped him open the lunch box without him needing to communicate.

Delayed or absent speech development:

Some children with autism are delayed in the development of speech and some never develop speech. These children usually have significant difficulties with receptive communication as well, but some may have difficulty with the physical production of speech and can effectively use alternative communication systems to communicate.

Echolalia and stereotyped communication:

Some children with autism will repeat or echo whole phrases or sentences from things they have heard others say or from the television or radio immediately before or sometime in the past. Echolalia is used for a range of reasons including as a coping strategy, to provide an opportunity for rehearsal, to assist in comprehending, to maintain or initiate an interaction or to communicate a message (e.g. to request or to protest). Other children with ASDs often communicate using scripts or chunks of echoed language which they incorporate into their spontaneous spoken language. In some children, this can mean their communication is somewhat stilted, repetitive or inappropriate to the situation.

Difficulties with expressive communication:

Most children with ASDs do develop speech, but this does not mean that they are effective communicators. Children with ASD can exhibit the following difficulties with verbal and non-verbal expression:

- using inappropriate, non-verbal behaviours as a means of communication especially when stressed
• communicating primarily to get their needs met, rather than to establish and engage in social connections

• difficulty initiating interactions and communicating independently or the tendency to depend on prompts

• confusion about the meanings of words, the use of made up words and unusual use of words

• difficulty saying things another way

• reduced or unusual eye contact

• lack of or unusual use of gesture

• blank facial expressions or facial expressions that don’t match the spoken language

**Difficulties with understanding rules of social communication:**

Children with ASDs often have difficulty understanding the reciprocal (two-way) nature of conversation. They also have difficulties understanding the unspoken social rules or hidden curriculum that determine the appropriateness of conversation topics and how to speak with others. Challenges in this area may result in the child having difficulties:

• knowing how to begin or end a conversation appropriately (e.g. ‘By the way…’, ‘I’ve got to head off’)

• taking turns (i.e. taking both the speaker and listening roles) so they may interrupt, remain silent or revisit a topic after it has changed

• maintaining a topic or changing topics appropriately

• discussing a wide range of topics or knowing what is appropriate

• demonstrating interest in interactive language (e.g. social chit chat)

**Generalisation:**

As well as the above specific communication difficulties, children with ASDs find it hard to transfer learnt skills to another situation. This can be frustrating for people working with the child, as to these people, it is obvious that the same communication skill applies but for the child with an ASD the environment, person or circumstance is different, so the same skill does not necessarily apply.
Fluctuations in communication ability:

Children with ASDs are often described as ‘consistently inconsistent’. This can be related to their difficulties with generalisation but is often related to variations in emotional arousal especially stress. At times of stress, a child with an ASD may:

- have more difficulty understanding the verbal and non-verbal communication of others
- be more rigid and inflexible with the meaning and use of words and phrases
- have difficulty using verbal communication at all
- repeat things over and over
- insist on discussing topics of interest to the exclusion of other topics
- have more difficulty remembering and following the hidden social rules that guide social communication

Impact of communication difficulties in children with ASDs

The impact of communication difficulties vary from child to child. The impact of a particular communication characteristic will determine whether it is a priority for intervention.

Impact at home

At home, a child’s communication difficulties may affect the whole family. Difficulties with communication may result in:

- frustration for the child and other members of the family
- use of challenging behaviours to communicate message
- difficulty explaining changes to the usual family routine
- sharing family secrets with less familiar people
- upsetting family and close friends by making honest but not helpful comments about their appearance

Impact at school

The difficulties that people with an ASD experience with communication have a significant impact at school. The communication characteristics of a child with an ASD may result in:

- isolation in the classroom and playground
- lack of response or perceived non-compliance
• difficulty participating in classroom activities especially answering questions
• reduced access to the curriculum especially in subjects like English where talking, listening and interpreting are particularly important
• challenges developing relationships with staff and friendships with peers
• use of challenging behaviours to communicate messages
• bullying by peers
• frustration for child and communication partners caused by communication breakdowns

Strategies

Visual supports:

One of the key ways to support communication with children with an ASD is to use visual supports. Children with an ASD typically have difficulty understanding spoken communication and understand and learn best when new information is presented visually. The permanency of visual supports (the picture is always the same) make them easier to process than spoken messages. Visual supports are less transient than speech so there is longer time available to make sense of the message and they can be looked at again if needed.

Visual supports can be used to support both receptive and expressive communication. Visual supports can be used for a range of purposes including helping a child understand instructions, routines or transitions, to display and encourage positive behaviour or to explain social rules.

Visual supports can be useful because they can:

• reduce communication breakdowns
• decrease dependency on the presence of others
• decrease dependency on verbal prompts
• reduce the need for the person to seek clarification and ask questions
• reduce behaviour problems and challenges
• increase understanding
• develop success and independence (and in turn, self esteem and confidence)
• promote participation and inclusion in the community

Using a visual tool is not the goal, it is a strategy to assist in achieving effective communication!
Strategies to support receptive communication

Communication partner strategies:

Each child on the spectrum will differ in their ability to understand what is said to them so it is important that you consider their individual needs when you are modifying your language. Some of the following strategies may be a useful starting point to maximise your child’s understanding:

- get on the individual’s level
- establish attention
- prepare the individual for what you are going to communicate
- use gestures and body language meaningfully
- support your communication visually
- speak slowly and clearly (Hodgdon, 1995)

And:

- Keep your language simple (e.g. “Pack up then lunch” rather than “Before we have lunch, we need to pack up all these toys and put them where they need to go”).
- Avoid inferring meaning by being specific and direct (e.g. instead of saying “Your room is a quite a mess”, say “It’s time to clean your room”).
- Give your child time to process what you have said (e.g. count to 10 in your head between ideas).
- Keep language positive (e.g. say “Feet on the floor” rather than “No climbing”).
- Avoid using questions to give instructions (e.g. say “Computer time is finished” instead of “Are you finished on the computer?”).
- Avoid phases that could be incorrectly interpreted literally including sarcastic remarks (e.g. say “Sit down” instead of “Grab a chair”).
- Show as well as tell. Emphasise non-verbal messages, use objects and other visual supports to provide additional information so that the child doesn’t need to rely on the auditory information (e.g. hold up the car keys when you say “It’s time to go”).

Strategies to support expressive communication

Recognise communication attempts, interpret & respond:

‘To understand the best ways to help children with autism to communicate, the first step is to look at how they already communicate. Parents and carers can start by observing how their child lets them know they want something or don’t like something.’ (Autism Spectrum Australia, 2007).
The child’s attempts to communicate may be very subtle or they may be using apparently unrelated challenging behaviours.

Once you have worked out ‘what’ they are communicating, you need to encourage them to communicate at the ‘next level’. This can be achieved by:

- following the child’s lead
- showing an interest in what the child is interested in (regardless of what it is)
- provide a verbal or visual model of what they want or what they can see (i.e. name and sign what they are interested in or show them a picture that corresponds)
- provide reinforcement for closer approximations of the desired level of communication by giving the desired item or interaction
- offer a choice if you are not sure exactly what they want
- expand what they have said
- praise and reward for great communicating (Autism Spectrum Australia, 2008)

Create opportunities:

There are many strategies that families can use to provide plentiful opportunities to practise communication skills at home. Some ideas include:

- limit verbalisation
- include ‘wait time’ in your interactions
- guide or prompt the individual to respond if needed
- stay with the interaction until you reach a desired response
- adjust the environment, minimising distractions and place favorite things within view, but out of reach
- be forgetful, on purpose
- make things difficult for your child to access (e.g. lid on really tight, leave their lunch box closed)
- use people toys, such as bubbles, balloons, wind up toys and wait until the child asks for ‘more’
- give all but one
- offer things bit by bit, such as food or puzzles
- give lots of choices, showing pictures or the real object
• offer least favourite/wrong items
• make mistakes ‘accidentally’

Teach alternative ways to communicate:

Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC) approaches should be considered when a child’s verbal communication skills are limited. AAC systems include:

• signing
• communication boards and books
• Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)
• Speech Generating Devices (SGDs)

Parents of children with ASDs may be concerned that use of AAC approaches will negatively affect the development of speech, however research indicates that AAC approaches support communication and do not affect speech production.

Social language and conversational supports

Children with ASDs often need explanation of and explicit teaching about appropriate social communication.

Explanations will need to include information about the details of social nuances that the child may have missed and may include the use of:

• Social scripts or Social Stories™. Social scripts instruct the child about what to say or do in a situation, where as Social Stories, developed by Carol Gray, explain the situation so that the child knows the details of the social situations that they may not have noticed or understood.

• Cartooning/Comic Strip Conversations (Gray, 1994). These involve the use of thought and speech bubbles to explain what someone is thinking and saying in an interaction or situation.

A child with an ASD may need explicit teaching about:

• appropriate versus inappropriate conversation topics
• types of conversational topics that are appropriate with different people
• meaning of abstract, figurative and colloquial language
• unspoken social rules and hidden curriculum (e.g. Mrs Jones likes it when you nod to show you are listening; Mr Smith prefers students to call him ‘Sir’)

Summary

All children with ASDs have difficulties with communication to a greater or lesser extent but there are things that can be done to reduce the impact of these difficulties on the lives of the child, family and school staff. If you need additional information about communication, it can be useful to talk to your child’s teacher or consult a speech pathologist.

Useful resources and references

Books and Articles


Websites

www.do2learn.com
www.speakingofspeech.com
www.visualaidsforlearning.com
www.tinsnips.org
www.bitstrips.com/create/comic/
www.thegraycenter.org
www.usevisualstrategies.com
www.adaptedlearning.com
http://card.ufl.edu/visual.htm
www.elearning.autism.net/visuals/main.php
www.spectronicsinoz.com
**GROWTH MODEL**

*My son, Henry, has autism and has very little language. He will lead me to things when he wants something. I can’t always stop what I am doing so if I don’t go with him immediately, he gets upset and often begins to hit me or himself. What can I do to help him communicate what he wants to me?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>G</th>
<th>To help Henry communicate what he wants without getting upset.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>Henry doesn’t use words to request. When Henry wants something, he gets frustrated easily. Can’t wait without becoming upset. Henry hits when I don’t go with him. Henry has no other way to communicate what he wants. Henry only has a small range of things he requests. Henry doesn’t realise when I am busy. Henry has poor awareness about my feelings. Henry has a high pain threshold so it doesn’t hurt him when he hits me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>Try to come immediately when Henry wants something. Try to ignore the tantrum or upset behaviour. Hope that when he wants something enough, he will learn to talk! Give Henry another way to request things – photos, pictures, voice output device.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>Teach Henry to request what he wants using photos.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>Take photos of things Henry requests most often (his favourite jam tarts, straws, his computer and his scooter). Talk to school about which photos we need to take at school. Help Henry to understand the connection between the photo and his favourite things by showing him the photo every time he leads me to it. Use physical prompting to assist him to give me the photo. Practise with other people at home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>Have some spare photos so there is always a back up if one gets lost. Make a simple visual reminder to show my husband and other family how to communicate with Henry. Talk to school in collaborative planning meeting about a communication goal and using photos at school (i.e. put in his individual plan).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Matthew has Asperger syndrome and is in year 10 at high school. He has a special interest in Geography and has become quite an expert in the area. He has been in trouble recently because he told the teacher that she was stupid when she gave the class an incorrect fact. Matthew is furious he was given a detention and insists he was right because teachers should know the facts about what they teach.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>G</th>
<th>For Matthew to speak politely to people in authority.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>Matthew always says what he is thinking. He speaks in the same tone to peers and adults. Matthew doesn’t understand the social rules about being respectful to adults. Matthew is very rigid in the way he thinks. Matthew says he doesn’t care if people think he is rude.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>Teach Matthew to speak in a polite way. Others just have to ignore Matthew when he is rude. Matthew is given a detention whenever he is rude to adults at school. Move to a different class. Mother write Matthew a note to excuse him from detention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>Teach Matthew a more appropriate way to speak with teachers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>Prepare a social script that explains why it is important to be polite to teachers. Make a list of polite ways to tell someone they are wrong. Role-play and practise these phrases and praise/reward Matthew when he uses them. Video some polite interactions between students and teachers and some impolite interactions and watch and discuss the differences with him. Give Matthew a small notebook where he can write down the teacher’s mistakes and discuss in private after class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>Praise Matthew whenever he uses appropriate polite language. Continue to point out situations in his life or on the television where people are being polite or impolite. Make sure that rewards for being polite are motivating for Matthew. Talk to school about the goal so that they can encourage and support the process with all teachers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>