



Good AUTISM Practice for Teachers

Embracing Neurodiversity
and Supporting Inclusion

Karen Watson

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About the author



Karen Watson

Karen Watson is an Additional Support Needs (ASN) educator, inclusion champion and teacher based in Scotland. She is passionate about inclusion and accessible education, and is committed to providing opportunities for all. Karen has over ten years' experience in the ASN sector and has worked in a variety of teaching roles, including Principal Teacher. She lives and works in Ayrshire, has written for *Tes*, and reaches out to other professionals via her podcast 'Scottish ASN Teacher' and as a presenter on Teacher Hug Radio. In writing this book, Karen hopes to share her experiences and knowledge in order to break down systemic barriers and provide a fair and equitable educational experience for every child.

4 Expressive and receptive language

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter includes:

- **communication;**
- **expressive and receptive language;**
- **non-verbal communication;**
- **echolalia;**
- **processing time;**
- **eye contact;**
- **total communication environment;**
- **support strategies;**
- **reflective questions;**
- **further reading.**

Communication

Autistic children have a broad range of communication abilities including, but not limited to, spoken language (Blume et al, [2021](#)). This was historically referred to as ‘communication difficulties’ under the umbrella term ‘triad of impairment’. However, the phrase communication difficulties doesn’t fully encapsulate the range of ability and need, and the individualised nature of communication. Just because a child doesn’t speak, it doesn’t mean they have nothing to say. Some children you work with will be verbal, some will be pre-verbal, and some will use a communication aid or device. Some children may have

some verbal skills but may not be able to access these when dysregulated or anxious (Wood and Gadow, 2010). An autistic person will not always communicate in a way which is natural or standard to a neurotypical person. This is okay; different doesn't mean worse or less. It just means that strategies need to be developed and adjusted so that communication is inclusive. These strategies will benefit everyone (Milton et al, 2017). Using a communication support strategy for a whole class, for example, could also help a child with dyslexia, a child with an executive functioning difficulty, or an autistic child.

An important thing to keep in mind is that communication is a two-way process (Frith, 1998). It is not the responsibility of one of the communicative partners to force a certain communication style and dominate the conversation. It is about meeting a child where they are, and using different strategies and responses depending on individual needs. It is important not to shoehorn autistic children into neurotypical norms, and instead reach out to them in a communication style that suits them. Ideally, utilise multiple communication strategies to help facilitate conversations and communication with others, and between peers who have differing communication styles.

What is expressive and receptive language?

Language can be broadly categorised into two areas: expressive and receptive language (Porter and Cafiero, 2009).

- Expressive language is how a child expresses themselves to others, while receptive language is how a child processes what is said to them. Broken down further, expressive language involves processes like choosing words, planning sentences, considering the impact of a communication, selecting sounds, articulating them, speaking fluently, using body language and non-verbal communication and self-monitoring.
- Receptive language involves understanding meaning and syntax, engaging auditory memory, listening and hearing, and interpreting non-verbal communication (Elks and McLachlan, 2015).

When communication is examined and broken down, it becomes apparent that there are lots of separate processes and concepts to grasp for fluent communication to occur. A child may have a difficulty with one of these processes and it could throw the whole chain of communication off. For example, a child who struggles with non-verbal cues, such as body language, may become stuck at this point in the chain. This is part of both expressive and receptive communication, depending on whether they have difficulty with processing and delivering their own non-verbal cues, or interpreting them. Immediately, the chain of communication has links missing. If the child has missed some key information from an instruction, they will now not be able to process it fully and so cannot proceed to follow that instruction.

Other things to consider are the processes of giving attention to whomever is speaking, listening and concentrating, filtering out other noise and distractions, hearing, and engaging both short- and long-term memory. All of that together leads to understanding.

There is a lot of integration required to get to the point of understanding and responding, with lots of complex stimuli to be processed.

Non-verbal communication

Let's now move on to think about non-verbal communication.



Figure 4.1 *Anything but words*

A huge amount of information comes to the listener via non-verbal communication (Mehrabian, 1982), who uses it to support understanding. Feelings can often be interpreted through non-verbal communication, especially if they differ from the verbal content.

Non-verbal communication can sometimes mask difficulties. A child may be highly skilled at interpreting standard cues, or perhaps you use the same gesture or tone and they have learned what it means. If you are showing predictable non-verbal cues, a child who struggles to interpret may simply learn what that particular cue means. This is a simple level of support, using predictable cues. Perhaps a consistent point to where the child needs to go, or a wave to support 'good morning'. Essentially, this is the very beginning of signing. Signing to support meaning is a strong support strategy, which supports an inclusive communication environment. It is an addition to speech which can help with providing understanding or context.

EXAMPLE

You've asked a child to stand up and line up by the door. For a child who struggles to follow a two-step instruction, this could be tricky to complete. Perhaps they have difficulty



with their short-term memory; perhaps you worded the instruction in a way which was more complex than necessary, *‘Can you all stand up? Yes that’s great; tuck that chair in please; right let’s get into a lovely line by the door.’* The child is left standing behind their chair wondering what on earth to do next, while the rest of the class is lining up. Perhaps they will follow their peers and get into line, perhaps a member of support staff has noticed and gives them a quick point to the door, or perhaps they will stand by their chair and look to you for further instructions. Now, at this point, the most common response from the adult is something like: *‘Come on now, I said line up, let’s go.’* The adult assumes the child wasn’t listening, or is being defiant, when in reality it could be a simple listening or processing difficulty. If you think back to [Chapter 3](#), sensory processing, it could even be an auditory sensitivity. Perhaps there is a distracting sound somewhere or perhaps the child wasn’t tuned into your voice when you spoke.

PAUSE FOR THOUGHT

- Unclutter that instruction. Think of how you could cut the instruction down to give key points.
- Identify two non-verbal cues you could use to enhance your speech.

It can sometimes take a little detective work to fully understand and support a child. It can sometimes be as simple as making a gesture when asking the children to sit down. Some people naturally use their hands and gesture when they talk; some don’t. Perhaps one day you have your hands full and don’t make that gesture. Two pupils remain standing, looking a little mystified. They are relying on gesture to support your speech.

Autistic children in particular can find non-verbal communication a real barrier. These children may exaggerate facial expressions or maintain a very neutral expression. They may struggle with tone and find things like sarcasm tricky to interpret. This is not true for all autistic children; everyone is different, but it is worth being aware that differences may be present as these are some of the ways it can impact a child’s acquisition and understanding of language.

Echolalia

Another language and communication point to be aware of is echolalia. Echolalia is repetition of speech and words, and is a natural process of language acquisition (Roberts, [2014](#)).

It can vary from a child repeating words that you say to them to a child repeating a word or phrase from a favourite TV show. It can be harder to spot in the second instance unless

it is a particularly familiar piece of dialogue. Echolalic speech may be the only speech a child has or they may only use it at certain times. For example, some children become echolalic when anxious. For some autistic children, it can be a way of providing order and predictability to an unknown situation, and for others it may be a strategy employed when the brain is under stress as it takes less energy to reproduce what someone has previously said than formulate a new sentence. When a child is echoing, it doesn't mean they aren't listening. It's important to know the child well so you can determine whether they are anxious and need some help, whether they are distracted (some children might echo when bored or thinking about something else), or perhaps the echolalia is part of their processing and understanding of the communication.

Echolalia can be used as a form of self-regulation or self-soothing by using repetitive and familiar language. In this case, the intention is not to communicate with someone. Echolalia can also be used as a communication strategy; however, it may not result in a totally comprehensive sentence. But it is usually possible to work out the meaning via context and what is said.

EXAMPLE

The child would like their water bottle from their bag. The child says to the adult '*Would you like your water bottle?*' to request it. The adult is slightly confused, but works out that the child would like their bottle and brings it.

PAUSE FOR THOUGHT

- Why did the child use this phrasing instead of saying '*I want my water bottle?*'?
- How could you help this child use different phrasing to request their water?

Discussion of example

The child has been asked this question before and it has resulted in them getting their bottle, so they are using a direct echo of the question asked of them as the request. In the child's eyes, they have a pre-scripted request, which results in them getting their water bottle. Now, if this script is foolproof and would work with any adult, then it is absolutely okay to leave it as it is. However, if an unfamiliar adult wouldn't be able to hear it and know what to do, amending the request so that the child can always get what they need is a good idea. A positive place to start would be to model an alternative request between adults. The important thing here is to select a sentence and stick to it; if you change the wording slightly each time it won't have the same effect. It would be good

practice to enhance this communication with a symbol or photo for the water bottle. So the adult would say something like, *'I want my water bottle'* and show a symbol for the water bottle. Another adult would bring them a water bottle. The child sees cause and effect: the request is made and met. You could then move on to model the question and response:

Adult A: *'Would you like your water bottle?'* Adult B: *'I want my water bottle.'*

If you are wondering whether you need to work on a particular response or request, ask yourself this. Would anyone be able to understand and meet this need? This is key in communication: can this child be understood? If not, what can you do to make sure this child can be heard and their needs and wants met?

Processing time

Processing time is another thing to consider when looking at language and communication. An individual may be able to process complex sentences and form a response if they are given enough processing time (Elks and McLachlan, 2015). If you refer back to the breakdown of receptive communication, you will see the sheer number of steps required to process a comment or instruction. Taking these steps takes time. If one of these steps breaks down or is bypassed, then the instruction will not be processed thoroughly.

PAUSE FOR THOUGHT

Taking each of the following receptive language processes in turn, note how a breakdown in the process could cause a difficulty with the instruction *'Stand up, tuck in your chair and line up by the door please'*.

- Understanding meaning (fully grasping the meaning of the instruction; what should I be doing? Where should I be doing it?).
- Syntax and semantics (the arrangement of words into a sentence or instruction, and the understanding of words).
- Engaging auditory memory (holding auditory information for long enough to be processed).
- Listening and hearing (the acts of listening to the instruction and processing the auditory input).
- Looking or attending (the process of showing attention to the speaker; note that this does not automatically assume eye contact).
- Interpreting non-verbal communication (watching for body language cues, listening for tone etc).