

Lesson 3: Communication

You can read the content of the lesson 3 videos here.

Communication and interaction

Communication is about so much more than just linguistic understanding. To effectively communicate with others, we also use a great deal of non-verbal communication.

Here are some of the most important factors for communication to be as effective as possible:

- First: coordinating verbal and non-verbal communication into a single whole. This means coordinating spoken as well as non-verbal communication. For example, if I feel angry, I use my body language, facial expressions and words to convey my anger, rather than only using my verbal ability to say, "I am angry."
- Another factor is targeting communication in order to establish and maintain contact. This involves turning towards the person/people to whom I am speaking. For example, if I ask a question, I might need to use my body as well as my eyes, if possible, to make contact and direct my communication.
- Social reciprocity involves several factors. For example, taking turns when talking to one another. First I talk, then the other person talks. Then it goes back to me, and so on. It also involves being able to listen to others. Being able to stop yourself. Maybe you feel: okay, I've been talking a little too much. It's giving consideration to the social interaction overall.
- Finally, it's being able to adapt to whomever we are talking. Is it a child or an adult? If it's a child, maybe I'll sit on the floor to come down to their level. I'll modify how I express myself and my language. If I'm using a lot of difficult words, I might need to clarify and explain them. And if I'm talking to someone who speaks a different language than I do, or if I'm in a noisy environment and it's hard to hear, I might need to use a lot of non-verbal communication.

Understanding others

So let's talk about social reciprocity and autism. In lesson 2, we talked about theory of mind or mentalisation. This involves understanding that other people think and how they think, and that other people have different thoughts and feelings than we do. This ability develops around age four.

Children who have yet to develop this ability often think that others see what they see and think what they think. But when we interact with others and as we develop cognitively, we develop our ability to understand that other people have different

thoughts. But when it comes to children with autism, this development is delayed or at the very least, it doesn't happen fully automatically. So as a parent, you might need to help these kids understand different situations and how to behave in them, and social reciprocity.

It is particularly challenging when there are a lot of different people who have different relationships to one another, and you have to try to understand and keep up in a conversation. Think about teens: they often go out for coffee in groups at places where there might be a lot going on and a lot to take in when it comes to perception. It might be especially hard to keep up in conversations there, and taking turns, which Charlotta was talking about earlier, can be difficult.

Children with autism might have a particularly tough time reading others' emotions and sharing an emotional experience with someone. They might also struggle to adapt their communication to the person and situation. For example, they might talk too much in a situation where maybe someone else wants to enter the conversation. Or they might talk about overly private things that could be inappropriate in this situation. That might happen as well.

What could be different

Now we will give a few examples of other factors that might differ about communication when you have autism.

For example: eye contact. Not everyone with autism struggles with eye contact, but a lot of people do and might find it really uncomfortable. It can also be hard to regulate eye contact, so you either have too much or none at all.

We've mentioned taking turns before. What's the right amount of talking while in conversation with someone else? Some people with autism have trouble concluding what they are saying. They might go on very long monologues and have a hard time letting others into the conversation.

And on the other side of the coin, it might be hard to know when to start talking in a conversation. Joint attention means being able to follow along when someone wants you to look at something. This ability develops in a child's first year of life. For children with autism, this development doesn't always happen at the same pace as it does for other kids. Not developing the ability to follow along when someone points at something could be an early sign of autism.

People with autism might also really struggle with indirect language, metaphors and irony. For example, "Can you pass the butter?" is more of a question about the ability to pass the butter than actually directly saying: "Pass the butter." This makes it easier to understand.

"It's a piece of cake!" is a metaphor that might also be difficult to understand if you have autism. There are also others, such as "skipping a meal" or "keeping an eye on the stove." These kinds of metaphorical figures of speech can be really difficult to understand.

Implied meaning is also difficult. For example, let's say a dad is going to drive a child to school. He goes out to the car and realises he's forgotten the keys. He calls out to the child, "Can you check to see if the car keys are on the hall shelf?" The child looks in through the door, shuts the door, then comes out to the car. The dad asks, "Did you bring the keys?"

"No, but you didn't say to," says the child.

To the dad, it was understood that the child should bring out the keys. But all the child with autism heard was: "Can you check to see if the keys are in the hall?"

Then we have gestures and facial expressions, which can be very difficult to interpret and connect to a feeling. For example, it might be that the child gets stuck on something as a result of their cognitive differences. Getting hung up on the details, for example on a worried, furrowed brow, that the parent is worried about something. The child might interpret this as the parent being angry. That would be a typical issue, that they misinterpret and struggle to understand different facial expressions. This is also connected to the fact that they have a hard time understanding irony – that something might look a certain way and sound a certain way tonally, but the words being said are inconsistent. This can be really difficult to understand if you have autism.

And then there is interpreting communication overall and not getting hung up on the details. This is connected to what we said earlier.

Another possible challenge is understanding instructions in a group. For example: if you're in school and the teacher says something to the whole class, it might be hard for a child with autism to understand what applies to them specifically.

Another process that could function differently is maintaining the through-line of what is being explained, actually having a context and not jumping off into something else that they associate with what was said.

Understanding how much information needs to be shared for the other person to understand what you mean. This means both the details, and describing what you think and feel – that can be hard to judge.

It can also be difficult to understand open-ended questions or general questions, because they don't have a correct answer or only one answer. And then putting thoughts and feelings into words. This is connected to difficulty describing thoughts and feelings in general, both your own and others'.

Facilitate communication

Now we will move on to the purple field: Clarify.

We will look more at how to facilitate communication and interaction for people with autism. What can we do to make communication easier?

General recommendations don't work for everyone, but here are a few things to keep in mind regarding social interactions with children who have autism:

- Start from the child's perspective. Simply put: start from the fact that the child can't see your perspective. So practice taking their perspective.
- Try to keep the communication as clear and specific as possible. You should also try to be neutral. Use few words. Avoid babbling and long-windedness. This can also reduce stress and demands in the communication.
- Do not require eye contact. Try to find a situation in which you and your child are focusing on the same thing. For example, sitting in a car together can be a chance to communicate with your child without having to have eye contact.

Visual aids can also facilitate communication and reduce stress and demands. We can use them to clarify communication for people with autism. For example, we can use visual information, which often works better than verbal information alone. You can use pictures, and you can combine pictures and text. There are also comic strip conversations, talking in pictures and social stories. You will learn more about these soon.

There are tons of IT-based tools and loads of apps. You can also search for cognitive support and visual support to find these kinds of tools. Various pictures and schedules, checklists and more can also help clarify communication for your child with autism.

Pictures and schedules

Unlike what we say, pictures stay in place and are exactly the same the next time we look at them. Pictures can therefore be used to prepare, clarify and explain along with the following questions.

- Where are we going to be?
- What are we going to do?
- Why? When?
- With whom? For how long?
- What will we do next?

When you use these questions, you can support them with different pictures or schedules to further clarify for your child. Schedules can be used for different intervals of time. It could be a weekly schedule or just for one day, or for a specific activity.

How detailed the schedule should be depends on the individual and how far in advance the child needs to be prepared for what will happen. But one example is a weekly schedule for school. This way, your child can see what will happen each day,

and when anything deviates from the usual schedule, such as a field trip on Thursday.

A clear schedule improves predictability for the child and reduces worry. And that will also enhance their independence. The child can look themselves to see what will happen next. A schedule like this could be on a whiteboard, or on a regular paper calendar. You could also have it as an app on your phone or computer, or on the fridge.

You can also use a checklist or agenda when your child is going to do a specific task. To do so: write each part of the task on a note. Then cross things off when each step of the task is done. That way, the child knows what to do when they are finished and what will happen next.

You answer the questions: “What?” “How?” “How long?” and “What happens next?”

It can also help the child to have different schedules and visual aids on the phone, such as apps and different timing functions. For example, you can set an alarm for the whole week to remind the child about different tasks or activities. You can also stay in touch with the child via text to remind them instead of calling. That can feel more like nagging.

An occupational therapist or special education teacher can help you find the right tools for your child. There are also other tools, such as Timstock or Time Timer.

We regularly use pictures and symbols to clarify things without thinking about it. For example, IKEA’s instructions or wall signs, or a very common visual instruction in a lift.

With pictures, symbols and text, you can explain how to do something or why, and when you are finished. This is a good way to give instructions when the child is going to work on something independently. It’s good if the child can visually follow what is going to happen. For example, a household chore or schoolwork. Example of a shower schedule. Text and pictures show what the child should do, in what order, and for how long.

This kind of activity schedule can also work for packing for an outing, or packing a backpack or suitcase.

You could also use visual instructions, for example for recycling, where you have illustrated each word in the instructions. This could be for kids who find it especially difficult to understand communication through words. Also showing pictures.

When it comes to visual aids, it’s important to check with your child to see if this actually works.

Talking in pictures and comic strip conversations

Talking in pictures or comic strip conversations are discussions that use simple drawn pictures and/or text. The pictures or words illustrate what you are talking about and provide visual support.

You can use talking in pictures to talk together about something that happened, or to prepare your child for something that will happen. It can be helpful to save the pictures and look at them again later.

Do not use talking in pictures when the child is upset.

Social stories

A social story is a tool for showing the child different perspectives in a situation and finding alternative strategies. The social story becomes an action plan for how to behave.

Describe the situation without judgement. Then together, describe possible outcomes and problems. Come up with suggestions together for alternative strategies and how they can lead to something positive.

A social story is constructed with descriptive, perspective, directive and control sentences.

- Descriptive sentences describe the situation: "Sometimes there are a lot of seats to choose from. Sometimes it is almost full."
- Perspective sentences explain the feelings and reactions of the child or others: "I wasn't lucky today – my favourite spot was taken."
"When it's taken, I get mad."
- A directive sentence shows a desirable behaviour: "Today I had to sit somewhere else, even though I didn't like it."
- A control sentence is a cue for staying motivated to face a similar situation: "I will get to sit in my favourite spot when it's free."

When you decide to do a social story, it's important to understand the child's individual needs. So start from what constitutes a difficult situation for the child and from signs that the child hasn't understood something in a given social situation.

You can start with a comic strip conversations to figure out how the child perceived the situation. And when you are finished with the story, you can read it together and maybe assess and change it if there is something the child misunderstood or didn't understand.

