



Helping Your Child with Autism Communicate: The Power of Words

By Dr. Peter Beddow, BCBA-D



Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) may communicate differently than their neurotypical peers. This article offers strategies to encourage verbal communication in your child at home, along with addressing the challenge of differing parenting styles.

The Importance of Waiting

Patience is key. When your child tries to communicate non-verbally (gestures, pulling, pointing), resist the urge to fulfill their request immediately. This teaches them that words are not necessary. Instead, wait patiently for them to attempt a verbal request, even if it takes time.

Making Words Rewarding

When your child uses words, even approximations, acknowledge and celebrate their effort! This positive reinforcement makes using words a rewarding experience, motivating them to continue.



Moving Beyond Yes/No

While "yes" and "no" are good starting points, it is important to progress beyond these. Prompt your child to use the specific word for what they desire. For instance, instead of asking "Do you want a strawberry?" ask "What do you want?" It may be helpful to expect the child to use a sentence instead of just a single word. This encourages them to think and express themselves more fully.

The Power of Choice

Offering choices can motivate verbal communication. Phrases like "Do you want juice or milk?" present options that require a verbal response.

It's Okay to Say No

Waiting for a verbal request might lead to frustration for both you and your child. It's okay to walk away if they don't attempt to use words. This teaches them that communication is necessary to get their needs met.

Tantrums are Normal

When you withhold what the child wants, the child might become upset or even cry and scream. This is because in the past, the child has been able to get what he/she wants without using words, and the change can be hard to deal with. Some children even become aggressive with their parents or teachers because historically, this behavior has caused adults to give up and give in.

Instead of continuing the pattern of giving in, be willing to wait, even if the child has a tantrum. If you give in because you don't want the child to be upset, you are confirming for the child that a tantrum is the most efficient way to get something. This will cause the tantrum behaviors to continue, and even increase. It will also make the child believe that tantrums are effective with other adults, too – and this can affect the child's behavior in school and in the community.

A United Front: The Importance of Consistent Communication Strategies

When parents have different approaches to fulfilling their child's needs, it can be confusing and frustrating for the child. Imagine a child who learns that crying or tantrums get them what they want from one parent, but using words is necessary with the other. This inconsistency can lead to:

- Frustration and Anger: The child may feel their world is unpredictable and react with meltdowns.
- Resentment: The child might hold resentment towards both parents. They may see one parent as unwilling to set limits and lacking the patience to teach the child to do hard things, while the other parent seems too demanding.
- Overgeneralization: The child might associate a specific caregiver's gender with the inconsistent approach and develop a negative bias towards all caregivers of that gender.

Creating Consistency



- Communication is Key: Parents should discuss and agree on a communication strategy for their child. – Seek Professional Guidance: A therapist or pediatrician can help create a communication plan that works for your family. – Patience and Consistency: It takes time for children with ASD to develop new communication skills. Be patient and consistent with your approach. ## Additional Tips
 - Focus on your child's interests during communication exercises. – Use picture cards or other visual aids to support verbal communication. – Talk to your child's therapist or pediatrician for further guidance and strategies. By incorporating these techniques and presenting a united front, you can create a home environment that encourages your child with ASD to develop their verbal communication skills and feel safe and supported.
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Continue learning

Open the companion resource and choose the next practical step.

<https://accessiblebehavior.com/go/helping-your-child-with-autism-communicate-the-power-of-words>

About the author

Teacher at heart, behavior analyst, and writer, Dr. Peter Beddow has spent more than two decades helping children, families, and school teams navigate autism, behavior, trauma, and learning differences with clarity, structure, and hope. He studied English Literature and Creative Writing at Middlebury College and earned a PhD in Special Education from Vanderbilt University's Peabody College, where his work focused on fairness, learning, and access in assessment. Peter has worked as a teacher, special educator, clinical director, consultant, and board certified behavior analyst in homes, schools, and clinics. He founded Accessible Hope, a Nashville-area practice supporting diverse families, and writes and teaches practical, humane approaches to behavior and learning.

Scope and safety

This article provides general educational information. It is not individualized medical, behavioral, mental-health, legal, or emergency advice. Individual support should consider the learner's communication, health, safety, disability-related needs, culture, and context.

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