

Communication tips to support Autistic children

This quick guide may help you to communicate more effectively with an autistic person, whether it's your child, pupil, colleague or friend.

They don't pay attention to what I'm saying

- Always use their name at the beginning so that they know you are talking to them.
- Make sure they are paying attention before you ask a question or give an instruction. The signs that someone is paying attention will be different for different people.
- Use their special interest, or the activity they are currently doing, to engage them.

They find it hard to process what I say

An autistic person can find it difficult to filter out the less important information. If there is too much information, it can lead to 'overload', where no further information can be processed.

- Say less and say it slowly.
- Use specific key words, repeating and stressing them.
- Pause between words and phrases to give the person time to process what you've said, and to give them chance to think of a response.
- Don't use too many questions.
- Use less non-verbal communication (eg eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, body language) when a person is showing signs of anxiety.
- Use visual supports (eg symbols, timetables, Social Stories™).
- Be aware of the environment (noisy/crowded) that you are in. Sensory input may be affecting how much they can process.
- Read what autistic people say about processing difficulties.

They struggle with open ended questions

- Keep questions short.
- Ask only the most necessary questions.
- Structure your questions, eg you could offer options or choices.
- Be specific. For example, ask "Did you enjoy your lunch?" and "Did you enjoy maths?" rather than "How was your day?".

They don't ask for help

- Give them a visual help card to use.

They take things literally

- Avoid using irony, sarcasm, figurative language, rhetorical questions, idioms or exaggeration. If you do use these, explain what you have said and be clear about what you really mean to say.

They hit me if they don't want to do something I ask

- Use a behaviour diary to work out if the behaviour is a way of telling you something.
- Offer other ways of expressing 'no' or 'stop'.

They react badly when I say no

- Try using a different word or symbol.
- They may be confused about why you said no. If it's an activity that they can do later on that day or week, try showing this in a timetable
- 'No' is often used when someone is putting themselves or others in danger. If it's a safety issue, look at ways of explaining danger and safety.
- If you are saying 'no' because they are behaving inappropriately, you may want to change your reaction to their behaviour. Try not to shout or give too much attention, a calm reaction may help to decrease this behaviour in time.
- Set clear boundaries and explain why and where it is acceptable and not acceptable to behave in certain ways.