Supporting Meaningful Communication and Dual Language Learning for Young Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Developing Meaningful Communication

- Communication happens in many different ways
- Children show us how to help them learn to communicate

What About Children with ASD?

- Children with ASD might have trouble providing the cues
- It is useful to learn strategies that might help
Developing Social Communication

- A child with ASD often learns to communicate for requesting and protesting
- However, aspects of communication might be less developed
  - gaze-shifting
  - shared affect
  - conventional gestures
  - communication for joint attention
- In other words - social communication has to be taught!

All Communication is Social

- Children may learn to talk or use alternative methods of communication
- But these have little value if social interaction skills are not developed to provide opportunities to use those skills for meaningful communication with another person

Has Meaningful Communication Occurred?

- Is the child sending a message to you or responding to a message you have sent?
- Does it matter that you are there?
- Is the message that is received the one that was intended to be sent?
Core Difficulties in the Communication of Children with ASD

- Joint Attention: coordination of attention between people and objects
- Symbol Use: learning conventional or shared meaning symbols

Joint Attention

- Orienting (body and eyes) and attending to another person
- Looking between people and objects
- Sharing affect (emotion) with another person
- Drawing another person’s attention to objects or events in order to share an experience

Symbol Use

- Use of every day gestures
- Learning the meanings for words
- Using objects functionally
- Pretend play
Communication, Language, Speech

- **COMMUNICATION** - An exchange of information between individuals
- **LANGUAGE** - a formal system for communication
- **SPEECH** - communication by talking

STRATEGIES FOR FACILITATING COMMUNICATION

Think “Keep it Simple”

- Using long sentences might make it harder for your child to understand...think “keep it simple!”
- More words or saying it louder might not help!
- Try not to repeat verbal directions
Communication
(Think Ping Pong)

• Communication is sending a message or responding to a message

• Think ping pong NOT darts!

Conversation

“A conversation happens when two people take turns communicating about something they are both paying attention to.”

Reciprocal (Back and Forth) Interaction

What can you do to make the conversation as close to 1:1 turn taking as it can possibly be?
Limit Verbalization

- How does a child let you know something that is important to them?

- Use language that is similar to or slightly above their way of communicating ("One up rule")

REMEMBER

Even though a child may understand more than they can say, we want them to be successful in copying the language they hear.

Follow the Child’s Lead

- Notice what the child likes to do and play along

- Let the child pick the game or activity and follow along
**Be On The Child’s Level**

- Helps them focus on interaction with you
- Might involve sitting, kneeling or lying on the floor even when the child is sitting on furniture

**Respond**

- Respond to all attempts the child makes to communicate
- Help them learn that all of the effort is worth it!

**Slow Down**

- The child will probably need extra time to process incoming information and formulate a response...
Wait and Signal

- Wait with anticipation for the child to take a turn

Elicit Attention

- Use nonverbal behaviors to direct the child’s attention to an object or event, for example pointing to an object, gently banging puzzle pieces together or tapping a picture to orient to a book

Model

- Demonstrate the communication behavior that you hope that the child will use
Imitate and Expand

- Do what the child does - then add a little more

“Play Dumb”

- Create “mistakes” that the child can correct can elicit initiation and interaction...

Provide Opportunities

- Wait to see how the child will communicate for something that you know that they want
- Put desired items in sight but out of reach
- Repeat opportunities for the child to let you know what they want
Structure Activities for Give and Take

- Meal time
- Books
- Blocks
- Music
- Puzzles
- Drawing
- What else?

Snack or Meal Time

Instead of giving a favorite food or drink...
• Take turns choosing parts of the snack
• Take turns giving parts of the snack
• Provide as many choices as possible
• Provide frequent opportunities to request

Reading Books

Instead of just reading a book to the child...
• Take turns turning pages in the book
• Take turns pointing to pictures in the book
• Take turns opening to any page in the book
• Child points, adult labels
• Adult “reads” familiar phrases and waits for child to respond (with action, sound or word)
Play With Blocks

**Instead of watching the child build and talking about what they are doing...**

- Take turns putting one block at a time on a tower
- Adult has some blocks and child “requests” by color
- Child has some blocks and adult requests from them
- Child builds tower and “requests” adult to knock it down
- Adult builds tower and requests child to knock it down

Music

**Instead of watching while child plays with an instrument and clapping when they are done...**

- Take turns plucking guitar strings/hitting xylophone/blowing on whistle
- Take turns choosing instruments from a box
- Child requests instrument from adult
- Adult requests from child

Puzzles

**Instead of watching child put puzzle together and helping when a piece does not fit...**

- Adult and child alternate putting pieces in the puzzle
- Child requests some pieces from adult
- Adult requests some pieces from child
Drawing

**Instead of watching the child draw or drawing pictures side by side...**

- Take turns drawing lines/circles/scribbles on the same paper
- Child requests some crayons from adult
- Adult requests some crayons from child

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**COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS**

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**Some Common Misconceptions about Achieving Communication...**

*It seems like:*
If I just say it right or ask a well thought out question, they will understand

*But really:*
The use of complex language can actually decrease the chance of comprehension
Some Common Misconceptions about Achieving Communication...

It seems like:
If I just say it many times or make my voice louder they will finally understand

But really:
Repeating my words or using a loud voice does not provide any additional information and is likely to create overload and shutdown

Some Common Misconceptions about Achieving Communication...

It seems like:
If I repeat my direction clearly they will listen up and do what I say

But really:
It is almost never helpful to repeat a verbal instruction - instead gently guide child to follow direction then once completed quietly re-state

Some Common Misconceptions about Achieving Communication...

It seems like:
If I talk a lot and expose the child to lots of language then they will eventually start to talk

But really:
Too many words can be overwhelming and hard to imitate
Some Common Misconceptions about Bilingual Communication...

It seems like:
It is hard enough to learn one language, much less two

But really:
Being exposed to two languages will not interrupt language learning

DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNING IN ASD

Early Dual Language Learning

- Children all over the world learn more than one language at a time
- There is no evidence to suggest that early exposure to two languages is detrimental
- There are often advantages (cognitive, social, cultural) to dual language learning
What About ASD?

- No evidence that bilingual exposure causes additional language delays for children with speech and language impairments and Down Syndrome
- In ASD, the concern is related to the social impairments that are critical to language learning
- Little research has focused on bilingual children with ASD
  - Several of these studies have been conducted in Canada (languages include English and French)

Research on ASD and Bilingualism

- Limited data with small samples suggest:
  - A survey of parents that children with ASD are exposed to multiple languages and parents perceive their children to learn two languages
  - Bilingually-exposed children with ASD do not experience more delays in language compared to monolingually-exposed children with ASD
  - Early stages of language development are not compromised in children with ASD with different levels of exposure to different languages
  - Bilingualism does not affect language development in young children with ASD
- More research is needed to address bilingualism in ASD

Same Rules Apply

- No matter what language is used, communication continues to be an exchange of information between individuals
Creating an Effective Dual Language Environment

- Focus is on providing a strong foundation for language
  - Early years are the best time to lay the foundation for dual language learning
  - The communication partner should use the language they are strongest in
  - A monolingual interventionist can provide valid assessment and intervention in all aspects of communication that do not require fluency

Assessing Exposure

- Identify contexts of language exposure to increase opportunities for meaningful communication
  - Example
    - Caretaker’s language use, television, books, music, siblings and peers
- What language is being used to send/receive messages in various social contexts

Creating an Effective Dual Language Environment

- Collaboration between family and provider
- Identify roles and functions for using each language to facilitate growth in social communication
- Provide resources/support for linking language experiences in multiple environments
Some Common Misconceptions about Bilingual Communication...

It seems like:
- The focus should be on learning vocabulary in one language

But really:
- The focus is always on back and forth communication

Some Common Misconceptions about Bilingual Communication...

It seems like:
- Code switching is evidence that the child might be confused

But really:
- Code switching is a natural part of using two languages so we can accept meaningful responses in either language

Some Common Misconceptions about Bilingual Communication...

It seems like:
- Since the school language is English, parents should start using English at home

But really:
- It is critical to encourage families to use the language that they are most comfortable using at home in order to support optimal language development in the child
The important idea is that children have a strong foundation for language!

Online Information

- Autism Society of America
  - http://www.autism-society.org/
- Autism Speaks
  - http://www.autismspeaks.org
- Autism Resources
  - http://www.autism-resources.com

THANK YOU

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