

Improving language skills

I need help!

For some children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), language can be limited to naming objects or other non-functional situations. Many youngsters have difficulties with echolalia, where they repeat phrases they have heard before. In these children, the mechanics of speech are to some extent in place; however the real use of language to communicate is missing.

An important activity for improving functional communication involves setting up situations where a child needs to ask for your help. Youngsters with ASD can be very self-sufficient, helping themselves to snacks or devising clever ways to reach the toys that they need. However, with some forethought, you can set up situations where the child needs to ask you for help.

Follow these steps to encourage the child to use language to meet their needs:

- 1.** Make a list of the items the child regularly uses. These can include favourite toys, books, snacks, or other objects.
- 2.** Find a spot in a room where the child cannot reach these objects but they are still well within his/ her sight. Place one of the items there, and then wait for the child to notice.
- 3.** Model the correct way to ask for help, such as saying "Will you help me please?" Have the child say the words after you.
- 4.** Place another item in the same spot and wait to see what the child does. You might need to prompt them several times, but eventually, they will begin asking.
- 5.** Next, try to incorporate this activity in more general situations and other settings.

Hints & Tips

As you promote a child's language skills, keep the following tips in mind:

- Remember that some children with autism have trouble understanding verbal instructions. If possible, give the activity instructions in a variety of formats.
- Introduce these activities gradually to avoid overwhelming the child. It is best to work on one language-related game at a time.
- Make language activities fun and full of praise, no matter how small the progress. This is hard work for the child, even if you are making it fun.
- Read often and for long periods of time. This exposure to language is important for all children and essential for youngsters with autism.