

Communication & Autism

Typical communication profile of a person with ASD



Strengths

- ✓ Articulation
- ✓ Rote learning of vocabulary (not necessarily the meaning of words)
- ✓ Grammar
(Although some students might have a language impairment on top of a diagnosis of ASD)



Weaknesses (A student may show some but not all weaknesses, and these may vary between students)

- Poor use and comprehension of
 - Gestures
 - Facial expression
 - Feelings
 - How to make inferences
 - Social nuances
 - Humour/teasing
- Atypical prosody or rhythm when speaking (e.g. slow, saccadic rhythm, rising intonation even when not asking a question).
- Inconsistent response to auditory stimuli, especially when the child is asked to process more than one sense at a time.
- Lack of eye contact/body positioning.
- Limited conversational topics, repetitive use of language
- Difficulty respecting the rules of conversation (e.g. talking too little/too much, not staying on topic)

Ways to address communication difficulties in students with ASD

Visual schedules... Help the student feel more organized and prepared, and help lower anxiety around hearing and remembering at the same time.

- ✓ Even with verbal students, a visual schedule can help because...
Pictures last longer than spoken words!
- ✓ Some students might need their own schedule to manipulate (not just the class schedule).
- ✓ It can be made up of objects, photos, line drawings or written words.
- ✓ You will likely repeat yourself less often.
- ✓ A schedule can help with transitions or with unexpected changes.
- ✓ Students can even be involved in making their schedule.



Asking for better body orientation vs. eye contact... Helps the student feel less pressured to process information, and therefore make him more “ready” to understand what you’re saying.

- ✓ People with autism say that it is difficult and sometimes impossible to process a face and auditory information at the same time.
- ✓ Instead of asking for eye contact, try requesting that the student turns his/her body toward you. Don’t be afraid to explain this conversational rule.

Drawings and Photos... Help students understand your words better, and help them make a mental image of the explanation (which is often clearer than remembering the verbal explanation).

- ✓ Pair a clear, literal explanation with visual support to improve comprehension of situations.
- ✓ Drawings and clear pictures can be used to explain **figurative language**

Examples:

Have a ball!
I have butterflies in my stomach.
It’s raining cats and dogs.
To be “kicked out”



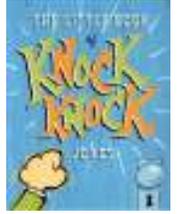
- ✓ Visual supports can also be used to explain **hard-to-understand situations** (E.g. batteries that no longer work, screeching pipes, a skipping CD player)

- ✓ A sequence of photos and pictures in books can be used to help build **inference skills** (I.e. What will happen next? Why do you think X?)



Using the computer as a instructional tool... Helps motivate students with ASD learn information that is otherwise uninteresting or threatening to them.

- ✓ Pictures/videos from the internet can be used to improve understanding of social situations, humour and perspective of others (e.g. Just for Laughs gags).
- ✓ Again it allows you to work with visual and auditory information together.



Charades... Helps some students understand and practice non-verbal communication.



- ✓ You can start by using pictures and a mirror to help students see themselves and what they are supposed to be copying at the same time.
- ✓ You can TEACH students to play charades by doing and talking at the same time.

Social Stories... Help students better understand a particular social situation, and help them change inappropriate or harmful behaviour related to that situation.

- ✓ A social story is a carefully written and based on only one situation at a time.
- ✓ It is NOT a list of rules, but instead a gentle way of explaining information.
- ✓ Social stories are very personal and individualized.
- ✓ Examples of social stories include:
 - Why it is important to do "number 2"
 - Not filling up the bathtub to the brim.
 - What should be done when there the fire alarm sounds.
- ✓ Anyone can write a social story. See a speech pathologist and/or psychologist for help brainstorming and writing one.

Emotion meters... Help students understand their range of feelings and what they can do about them.

- ✓ Emotion meters can range from very simple to very complex.
- ✓ Again, the students can be involved in coming up with situations that fit the severity ratings.



Guided play (both pretend play and games)... Help students develop creativity and understanding of how to play with their peers.

- ✓ Some students with ASD lack symbolic play skills.
- ✓ Others know what to do with objects, but lack creativity/ideas of what to in play.
- ✓ Often students with ASD will participate in play situations if they are first guided.
- ✓ It is important to use students without ASD as models for social language and play skills.

