

Communication is the process by which a message is exchanged between at least two individuals through a symbolic system. Individuals can share ideas, feelings, or knowledge. The process of communication is often taken for granted because acquisition occurs so easily and naturally for most individuals. When problems arise, the complexity involved in an exchange of ideas becomes more apparent.

A qualitative impairment in communication is one of the diagnostic criteria for autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Deficits may include an inability to verbally communicate, initiate or sustain conversation, as well as unusual or idiosyncratic use of language. Echoing, jargon, and unusual language patterns are common examples of expressive output. Language processing and comprehension problems are evident when listening to other people speak or when reading text. Apraxia, or poor motor programming to produce spontaneous speech, also occurs with high frequency.

The Autism Spectrum Disorders IEP Companion is not intended to comprehensively address all aspects of communication. There are many published resources that address how to teach skills such as answering questions, initiating conversation, vocabulary and concept acquisition, and syntactic structures. This unit highlights several aspects of communication that are typically challenging when working with ASD clients. The goals and progression to teach the targeted communication skills address the learning style of individuals with ASD.

Conversational Discourse – Negotiation

Negotiation is a social skill used primarily to resolve disputes by coming to an agreement with another person. Early negotiation progresses from an exchange of things to a give and take of ideas. Eventually, these skills are used to resolve disagreements and prevent escalation of arguments. In negotiation, the goal is to reach a satisfactory compromise between the parties involved. Negotiation differs from the discourse of persuasion, in which the goal is to change someone’s mind. Persuasion results in one person sacrificing his ideas for those of another. Negotiation, on the other hand, results in an exchange of thoughts to reach a middle ground. The discourse of negotiation is essential to social harmony.

Long-Term Goal: The student will engage in the discourse of negotiation.

Short-Term Goals

Example Activities

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| 1. The student will recognize a negotiation. | Invite another student into the therapy session, and provide her with a script for a variety of social dialogues (commenting, storytelling, negotiation). Have the peer read the script and act out short exchanges with you while the student observes. Explain to the student that there are different reasons that people talk to one another: (1) people tell each other a fact or an opinion (commenting), (2) people tell about things they have done or things that have happened to them (storytelling), and (3) people communicate to work out a difference of opinion (negotiation). Give the student three cards labeled with types of communication acts (comment, storytelling, negotiation). Act out each short verbal exchange again and have the student label it by holding up the correct card. If the student has difficulty, demonstrate three or four examples of the same type of dialogue in a row. Work to differentiate between two types of dialogue rather than three. |
| 2. The student will negotiate a trade of objects. | Plan a trade of objects, such as items in your lunch. Illustrate the trade for the student as follows. Draw a representation of the student and his intended negotiation partner on opposite sides of a sheet of paper. Draw or write the objects they will trade. Then, have the student state reasons why he wants the other person’s item and reasons why that person might want his item. Write the rationale for the trade under each person’s picture. This visual will allow the student to see and think about the logic behind the trade/negotiation. At the bottom of the paper, offer a verbal frame for the negotiation (I’ll give you _____, if you give me _____. You will like _____ because it _____. You may wish to set up the first negotiations, arranging with the partner in advance to guarantee success. Significant repetition may be required for skill acquisition. |

The sense of smell is based in chemical receptors located in the nasal passages. The environment is filled with different scents. Most individuals become desensitized to smells that are present on a daily basis. A scent might be noticed if it is unusual, strong, or novel. Individuals with ASD often possess an overly sensitive olfactory system, resulting in extreme reactions to routine scents. Individuals with ASD demonstrate qualitatively different perceptual reactions to olfactory stimuli. An odor that is undetectable to most children might be noxious to a child with ASD. The reverse can also be true; olfactory stimuli may effectively calm a child with ASD when a typical peer would show no reaction. In contrast, a typically noxious odor to most children (a skunk) may produce no reaction in a child with ASD. Many olfactory sensory reactions are closely linked to gustatory (taste) sensations. This section will deal only with environmental scents that are not linked to food or taste sensations. Gustatory sensations are covered on pages 113-114.

Long-Term Goal: The student will respond appropriately to environmental olfactory stimuli.

| Short-Term Goals | Example Activities |
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| 1. The student will discriminate pleasant olfactory stimuli versus noxious ones. | Make two columns on the board labeled "Pleasant" and "Unpleasant." Bring in an assortment of items that represent different smells, such as cooking spices, candles, markers, perfumes, and scented lotions. Explain to the student that you are going to ask her to smell a variety of things. Have her close her eyes so a visual stimulus or preconceived opinion does not influence her assessment. Place an item under her nose and ask if she likes the smell or does not like the smell. Record the item under the appropriate column. (If the student is not verbal, observe her reaction and write the item under the appropriate column.) After you have presented all the items, review the list with the student and see if she agrees with how you listed the items. Ask the student to add other items to the list under the appropriate columns. |
| 2. The student will use adjectives to describe olfactory stimuli. | Introduce an adjective that describes a scent and then generate items that you might describe using that term. Adjectives might include <i>spicy, flowery, smoky, putrid, and musty</i> . Try to avoid adjectives that pertain primarily to taste, such as <i>sweet, bitter, or hot</i> . Also avoid nonspecific terms, such as <i>yucky, good, or bad</i> . Then present an item for the student to smell and describe. Encourage the student to be specific in describing the smell. This exercise helps to replace an impulsive negative reaction with an objective analysis. It will also benefit the student when she encounters an unpleasant odor because she will be able to describe more specifically what bothers her. It might be necessary to teach some of these terms by first sorting the items into categories by smell, such as <i>flowery</i> versus <i>spicy</i> or <i>smoky</i> versus <i>fresh/clean</i> . |

School to Work

Beginning a job outside the school setting is an important step for students with ASD. Their intense focus and splintered skills often make them good candidates for specific types of employment. Hyperlexia makes them excellent candidates for jobs that involve paying attention to middle initials and spelling of names, such as sorting mail or filing. Number fascination makes them good candidates for inventory jobs, picking products in a warehouse, data entry, and computer jobs. Sorting skills lend themselves well to stocking shelves or organizing hardware bins of nails, screws, nuts, and bolts. Library and museum cataloging also take advantage of the number skills that are strong in many individuals with ASD. Maps and weather are also intense childhood interests that can turn into occupations as adults. Independent of learning the actual job, an individual with ASD needs some assistance to facilitate successful transition to a work setting. A job coach or adult who helps the person with ASD navigate the employment setting expectations is important. The short-term goals included in this section can be modified to assist in the transition to a variety of work settings, from a sheltered workshop placement to independent employment.

Long-Term Goal: The student will transition appropriately from the school setting to a work setting.

| Short-Term Goals | Example Activities |
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| 1. The student will generate employment options of interest. | Make a list of jobs that interest the student. Explore the feasibility of each job by asking him to compare the skills required to his own performance levels. Discuss the qualifications and requirements for various jobs. Introduce reality checks if some of the student's ideas are not realistic or functional. For example, if the student wants to be a rock star, find out if he has ever played music and sung in public and if he enjoyed that experience. If he wants to be a doctor, does he like studying and does he have the grades to get into medical school? If he wants to be a professional athlete, has he played on a varsity team and did he do well? Help the student discover viable options to pursue. If the school has vocational job placements or established work study options, include some of those possibilities on the list. |
| 2. The student will research an occupational/vocational setting for placement. | From the job list generated in goal 1, have the student research the requirements for several realistic job placements. For each job, make a list of the requirements. A workable format could be specific questions (What will I be doing? Who will I work with? Where would I be working? Is it inside or outside employment? How will I get there?). If possible, visit the setting so the student can determine his comfort level in the environment. For example, if he will be interviewing to work at a fast-food restaurant, go to the restaurant. If he is going to volunteer at the local library or hospital, have him visit prior to the actual interview appointment. |