

or frowning and planting her fists on her hips. Without the ability to interpret gestures and facial expressions, the social world can seem bewildering.

Many people with autism have similar difficulty seeing things from another person's perspective. Most five-year-olds understand that other people have different thoughts, feelings and goals than they have. A person with autism may lack such understanding. This, in turn, can interfere with the ability to predict or understand another person's actions.

It is common – but not universal – for those with autism to have difficulty regulating emotions. This can take the form of seemingly “immature” behavior such as crying or having outbursts in inappropriate situations. It can also lead to disruptive and physically aggressive behavior. The tendency to “lose control” may be particularly pronounced in unfamiliar, overwhelming or frustrating situations. Frustration can also result in self-injurious behaviors such as head banging, hair pulling or self-biting.

Fortunately, children with autism can be taught how to socially interact, use gestures and recognize facial expressions. Also, there are many strategies that can be used to help the child with autism deal with frustration so that he or she doesn't have to resort to challenging behaviors. We will discuss this later.

Communication difficulties

Young children with autism tend to be delayed in babbling, speaking and learning to use gestures. Some infants who later develop autism coo and babble during the first few months of life before losing these communicative behaviors. Others experience significant language delays and don't begin to speak until much later. With therapy, however, most people with autism do learn to use spoken language and all can learn to communicate.

Many nonverbal or nearly nonverbal children and adults learn to use communication systems such as pictures, sign language, electronic word processors or even speech-generating devices.

When language begins to develop, people with autism may use speech in unusual ways. Some have difficulty combining words into meaningful sentences. They may speak only single words or repeat the same phrase over and over. Some go through a stage where they repeat what they hear verbatim (echolalia).

Many parents assume difficulties expressing language automatically mean their child isn't able to understand the language of others, but this is not always the case. It is important to distinguish between expressive language and receptive language. Children with difficulties in expressive language are often unable to express what they are thinking through language, whereas children with difficulties in receptive language are often unable to understand what others are saying. Therefore, the fact that your child may seem unable to express him or herself through language does not necessarily mean he or she is unable to comprehend the language of others. Be sure to talk to your doctor or look for signs that your child is able to interpret language, as this important distinction will affect the way you communicate with him or her.

It is important to understand the importance of pragmatics when looking to improve and expand upon your child's communication skills. **Pragmatics** are social rules for using language in a meaningful context or conversation. While it is important that your child learns how to communicate through words or sentences, it is also key to emphasize both when and where the specific message should be conveyed. Challenges in pragmatics are a common feature of spoken language difficulties in children with autism. These challenges may become more apparent as your child gets older.

Some mildly affected children exhibit only slight delays in language or even develop precocious language and unusually large vocabularies – yet have difficulty sustaining a conversation. Some children and adults with autism tend to carry on monologues on a favorite subject, giving others little chance to comment. In other words, the ordinary “give-and-take” of conversation proves difficult. Some children with ASD with superior language skills tend to speak like little professors, failing to pick up on the “kid-speak” that's common among their peers.