

Language Development in Autistic Children

Key Points

- Autistic children might need support to develop language skills.
- Providing opportunities to use language can enhance their development.
- Playing, modeling language, and responding positively to language can improve communication.

How Autistic Children Develop Language

- Children develop language through relationships and play.
- Autistic children may struggle with language development because they focus on details in their environment, missing key language-learning opportunities.
- For example, a baby distracted by a ceiling fan may not engage in social interactions necessary for language learning.

Creating Opportunities for Language Use

- Autistic children need **regular, meaningful, and motivating** opportunities to use language.
- Strategies to encourage language use:
 - Place their favorite toy out of reach so they need to ask for it.
 - Take turns during activities (e.g., opening picture books, playing with puzzles).
 - Pause and give them time to express thoughts or feelings.

Progressing Language Skills

- Gradually increase language complexity:
 - Start with single-word responses (e.g., "Ball").
 - Move to short phrases (e.g., "Push the ball").
 - Introduce social greetings (e.g., waving, saying "Hi").
 - Transfer these skills to different people and settings.

Using Play to Support Language Development

- Play helps children learn language in a natural way.
- Examples:
 - If doing a jigsaw puzzle, only hand them a piece when they ask for it.
 - Engage in pretend play where they communicate needs or make requests.

Modeling Language for Autistic Children

- **Modeling** involves demonstrating how to use language with words, facial expressions, and gestures.

- Strategies:
 - Comment on actions: Say "Open" while opening a door.
 - Label experiences: Say "Stuck" when they struggle with a zipper.
 - Provide words they may need: Say "Help" when they try to open a packet.

Encouraging Speech & Language Growth

- **Follow the child's interests:** Engage in conversations about topics they enjoy.
- **Adapt communication:** If they use 1-word phrases, model 2-3 word sentences to expand their language skills.
- **Respond positively:** Reward communication efforts by giving them what they request or by smiling and engaging.

When to Seek Professional Help

- If concerned about a child's language development, consult:
 - Child and family health nurses
 - General practitioners (GPs)
 - Pediatricians
 - Speech pathologists

Alternative Communication Methods

- Some autistic children use **gestures, Key Word Sign, PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System), or other augmentative communication methods.**
- You can support language development by building on their preferred communication style.
 - Example: If a child pulls your hand toward an object, model how they can use words to ask for it.