

## [www.autismhelp.info](http://www.autismhelp.info)

### Language difficulties

#### Why does this happen?

- A large percentage of children with autism do not acquire verbal language skills; some only use language to communicate their needs.
- Children with high functioning autism may be articulate and have an extensive vocabulary but these skills may mask serious language difficulties. A particular area of difficulty is in the social use of language, known as *pragmatics*. For example, he may have difficulty initiating and maintaining a conversation or using correct modulation in his voice. His language may sound very rigid or formal. He may talk at people rather than with them.
- The child may also have limited ability to convey and understand the meaning of words, known as *semantics*. He may interpret language in a very literal and concrete way. He may have difficulty understanding metaphors, sarcasm or jokes because he may not grasp the underlying meaning (inference) or intention in someone's speech.
- The child might sometimes use words or phrases that seem inappropriate. He might make comments that are very blunt or even rude because he lacks the social awareness of when and to whom such comments would be appropriate.
- Repeating words, phrases or questions is known as *echolalia*. It is a common characteristic of children with autism. It often indicates the child has poor receptive language skills and has not understood what has been said. Echolalia can be immediate or delayed. It is considered positive as it shows the child is 'tuned in' to language.

#### What you can do

- Use the child's interests to practice starting and maintaining a conversation.
- Be aware that an extensive vocabulary can mask serious comprehension deficits. You may need to repeat and simplify instructions. Keep your language as precise as possible and avoid abstract concepts. Allow the child time to respond to instructions, then check he has understood. Use visual schedules or cards to reinforce your message.
- Teach the child a standard phrase to use when he has not understood an instruction.
- Be specific. "In a minute" is an abstract concept to a child with autism that may be interpreted literally. The phrase "It's getting a bit too noisy in here" carries an implied meaning that you want the class to quieten down. A child with autism may miss the point of this completely.
- Be aware of the language that you use. Ask yourself whether instructions could be interpreted in a way other than intended, such as an instruction that may be misinterpreted as a question. Sarcasm and irony should be avoided.
- Use role play to develop the child's social language skills. These scenarios can be used to help the child understand when someone is joking or teasing, how to initiate a conversation and how to respond to the emotions of other people.

- Discuss some common metaphors and explain what they mean. Eg. “Pull your socks up!” and “I’m feeling a bit under the weather today.”
- Sign language may assist some children, even those with mildly delayed language skills. For example, in a noisy classroom, you notice the child across the room in difficulty and becoming frustrated. You could say, “Do you need help?” while signing ‘help’ to reinforce your question. Speech pathologists can provide examples of useful signs.