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Literal interpretation of language

Why does this happen?

- Children with autism have language difficulties that cause them to interpret what others say in a very literal way.
- Confusion can arise where indirect and polite forms of speech are used. Instructions may be treated as questions when they are phrased in certain ways, for example, "Can you tidy your desk?" The child may answer the question but does not realise that you are actually expecting him to do the requested action. A teacher who does not understand the student's difficulties may think the child is being disrespectful or rude.
- This confusion can be attributed to difficulty interpreting the motivations and intentions of the speaker. Children with autism have trouble understanding what others think and feel.
- Figures of speech, humour and sarcasm may also cause problems. The child may be ridiculed by his peers when figures or speech are interpreted literally.

What you can do

- Monitor your language; try to be aware of phrases you are using that could be interpreted in more than one way. A child with autism may miss the intended meaning, even if it seems obvious to the neuro-typical mind.
- Be specific and state what you want, rather than what you don't want.
- Phrase your questions as a directive, eg. instead of saying "Can you pass the textas?" say "Pass the textas"
- Teach the child the meanings of some commonly-used phrases and figures of speech.
 - "Pull your socks up!"*
 - "Stretch your legs."*
 - "Get a wriggle on."*
 - "In a minute."*
 - "Under the weather."*
 - "Cat's got your tongue."*
 - "Drop everything."*
 - "Catch you soon."*