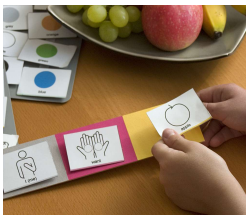
Therapics
Talking with pictures



Suggestions for parents

A diagnosis of autism is not the end of the world..... It's the beginning of a whole new world.

As a parent you are the ideal person to extend your child's therapy time in a natural way and to make a significant difference for him/her. With these tips and suggestions I hope to encourage you to find learning opportunities in everyday life, and to empower you to make your home environment a place that stimulates the development of your childs verbal and social skills. Although I don't claim to be an expert, I have been on this course of action for a few years now and looking back, these are some of the things which would have been helpful to know at the beginning.

1. Set aside half an hour each day of child-focused time. Try to manage all other distractions so that you are able to dedicate your attention fully on your child. Play in a space where your child can concentrate on what they are doing and not be distracted by other sounds or activity (eg. TV or radio). Choose a couple of games / toys which you know he/she will enjoy and set them out. Let your child choose which of these activities to play with. Allow your child to take the lead with how they play and simply play along, giving key word language as you go. For example if they are playing with a doll, say things like "you love your doll, look you are feeding your doll, she is hungry, she is eating her food". Try to keep your language simple, emphasising the main nouns and verbs. Respond positively to any attempt your child makes at communication. Make sure you are at your child's eye level and encourage any eye contact with animation in your own face.

2. Imagine that your child speaks a foreign language and that you are teaching them to speak english. Constantly speak out words relevant to their activity so that they can hear them regularly and in context. For example as you are bathing your child you may say "Let's clean your hands, now your arms... tummy... legs" etc as you go. If you are emptying the dishwasher - say now I'm putting away the cups, now the spoons etc. Try to keep your speech simple but natural. The more the child hears the words linked to the relevant object or action the more it helps the words to sink in. First they need to hear the words and remember them, then they can start to speak them. Constantly look for opportunities to lable everything that their attention is on - whether you are at home or out and about.

3. Imagine that your child comes from a foreign culture and that they have no idea of the social customs in your society. You need to talk through things that most children would pick up naturally, eg. When someone comes to the door we look at their eyes and say "Hello". Or When someone comes to play you let them choose a toy that they want to play with. This should include all the social customs which make them nicer to be around, such as table manners, being polite, sharing etc.

4. Bear in mind that your child may have auditory processing challenges. Try to keep your sentences short and simple. Keep your instructions to one step at a time. Speak clearly and slowly but in a natural tone of voice.

5. Select a couple of words that you want to focus on teaching - we usually choose 5 or 6 at most. Laminate a piece of blank paper and stick it up where everyone can see it, then using a whiteboard marker write down the target words so that everyone can help use them as often as possible. As each one is achieved replace it with a new one, remembering to go back over and revise the achieved ones on a regular basis.

6. When teaching words we found it helpful to work in word themes and to begin with nouns since

they are generally concrete objects that you can show. Some suggestions are: names of fruit; types of transport; toys; animals; things you use in the bathroom; things for eating with; pets; clothing; parts of the body - the list is endless. Try to build activities around your theme to make it as fun and natural as possible. Find some books that show pictures of the objects and talk about them together. Print out a few pictures of each object from the internet and get your child to match them. You can, for example, go to the shops and look for all the objects (eg. clothing); make a fruit salad and taste all the fruit; create a little farm using all your plastic farm animals and spend some time playing with them - just use your imagination. The important thing is to find as many opportunities as possible to say the words out loud while showing your child the object or a picture of it.

7. We found PECS-style picture icons invaluable. These are simple line drawings which represent a word, they should be drawn in a generic way to encompass all options of the word and facilitate generalisation. There are several ways to create a set - you can purchase the software from www.pecs.com or www.widgit.com. I drew a lot of my own but then I was lucky to have a background in logo design to begin with. The system we used to teach picture icons was this: First you match the actual object with a photograph/picture of it. Then you match various photos of the object (eg different apples) to encourage generalisation. You then match the photos to the picture icon and start using the name of the object. Slowly encourage the child to verbalise the word themselves by holding up the picture icon and/or photo and asking “What is this?” It’s a painstaking process but it works because even if they can’t yet verbalise the word they can still communicate with it by using the picture icon.

8. Compliance is an essential starting point when working with a child with autism. To teach compliance use a code of action - we found No, No, Show very helpful. This works as follows: Give your child a simple clear instruction - eg. at dinner time say “Come and sit”, if they respond, great, if not calmly say “No” and repeat the instruction - “Come and sit”. Again, if they respond, great, if not say “No”, repeat the instruction and physically guide (Show) them to follow through. Thus you give them 2 clear opportunities to comply and on the third you help them achieve. Obviously if they respond sooner then give them loads of praise and encouragement. We found that this calm and assertive way of teaching compliance gave a clear boundary, the child knows they will get 2 chances and then you will insist. If your child is messing around simply ignore their behaviour and calmly stand your ground.

9. Help prepare your child for new situations by using social stories. Choose picture-driven stories which talk the child through the new situation and suggest appropriate action and behaviour. We found the Usborne First Experiences series of books very helpful, also the Model me kids dvd’s (see www.modelmekids.com). There are also apps available to help.

10. Many children on the spectrum have difficulty reading emotional responses in others and understanding their own emotions. Teach emotions by labelling your own emotions and those of your child as they experience them. Try to give a reason for the feeling. For example say - You are sad because you lost your toy. Or I am happy because you gave me a hug!

11. Many children with autism give poor eye contact. This gives them the impression of being “in their own world”, lacking the ability to read non-verbal communication such as facial expressions and ultimately having difficulties in social understanding. A great way to help your child become more conscious of the power of facial expression is to play the “Watch my eyes” game. First hide a little treat somewhere in the room, then tell your child - “watch my eyes and I’ll lead you to a surprise”. Now give them a clue where to look by “pointing” with your eyes, changing your facial expression from serious - shaking your head - if they go the wrong way to excited, nodding and smiling as they get closer. In this way you can help them to discover that there are rewards for looking into someones face. Once they are used to playing you can ask them to “watch my eyes” in other circumstances too.

12. Find some turn-taking games that your child will enjoy and play them. Teach them to take turns and also to loose graciously. My sons favourite game at one time was pushing pegs onto the handle of the oven door - they would pop off and we’d choose a colour for each player and see who’s peg went furtherest across the floor. The point is that games can be made from the simplest things, so

long as you each have a go and you make social interaction fun. There is a very simple quick snakes and ladders in my shop which we found easier to play than the longer store-bought versions. For poor loosers teach them to “Take a deep breath and think “It’s OK, maybe I’ll win next time”.

13. If your child has a low sense of danger and is at risk near roads, cut out and laminate the safe road crossing picture icons supplied below and practice, practice and practice some more on a quiet road.

14. To teach your child to distinguish between good and bad behaviour make a cool and uncool book. Use the icons below as headers and fill a page each with pictures showing cool and uncool behaviour. I found it helpful to use pictures of the heroes and villians from favourite DVD’s and story books, eg. Robin Hood and the Sheriff, Snow white and the evil step mother etc. Also pictures showing things like being gentle with an animal, waiting your turn, sticking out your tongue, using bad words etc. help to create the association. Use the terminology (and picture icon when possible) to lable your childs’ behaviour, eg. “Hitting Jane was really uncool, you hurt her” or “Wow, sharing with your sister was a really cool thing to do!” or “That was cool listening, I can see that you’re trying your best”.

15. To encourage positive behavior play a little game with them to catch them being good. When you see them doing something positive say “Caught you being good!” Give them loads of praise, remembering to be specific about why you liked their behaviour. Positive affirmations such as “you came when I asked, you’re a great boy!” given regularly through the day will help boost their confidence and help them to begin believing that they are well behaved.

16. Get enough sleep and take a little time out for yourself. Tired carers have less patience and if you don’t nurture yourself then you won’t have the resources you need to keep giving.

17. Write down a list of things you love about your child, include a list of the little progress steps you notice. When things get tough take it out and read it, it will help you to stay positive and will remind you that things are improving when you go through the difficult stages.

Remember - AUTISM Means I Won't Lead An Ordinary Life.... I Can Lead An Extraordinary Life!"

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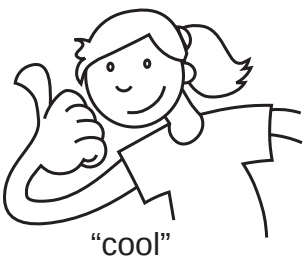
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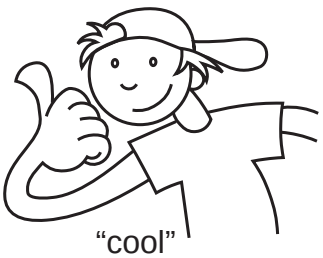
“uncool”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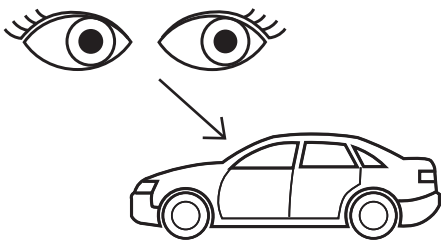
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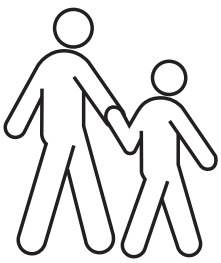
walk together