

Autism and Communication

UNDERSTANDING MY CHILD'S COMMUNICATION



STEP 1: WHAT IS COMMUNICATION?

Communication involves exchanging information between people.

The ability to **communicate** is different from the ability to **talk**.



What does it mean to communicate?

For communication to take place, there must be at least two people: a sender and a receiver. Communication is a process, or a series of steps, carried out to achieve a goal. The process of communication starts with a desire to communicate or a need to be met.

Everyone communicates.

We all use many ways to communicate our wants/needs/feelings/thoughts to others. Your child may communicate differently than his or her siblings or peers, but he or she is still communicating in their own unique way. It is important to recognize how and why your child currently communicates so you can work with your child's team to determine the best next step in their communication development.



YOUR CHILD MIGHT COMMUNICATE USING

- » Spoken words and phrases
- » Gestures, such as reaching or pointing
- » Sounds or vocalizations
- » Facial expressions and eye gaze
- » Pictures or line drawing
- » Written words
- » Physical behaviors, such as leading you by the hand, giving you an object, or turning away
- » Emotional behaviors, such as crying or melting down
- » Unsafe behaviors, such as pushing or hitting
- » Echolalia, such as repeating back your words
- » Augmentative or alternative communication, such as using an iPad or voice output device

YOUR CHILD MIGHT COMMUNICATE TO LET YOU KNOW

- » What they want (e.g., a snack or to go outside)
- » What they need (e.g., help)
- » What they like (e.g., a favorite show or song)
- » What they do not like (e.g., doing homework or putting on shoes)
- » How they are feeling (e.g., sad, sick, frustrated)
- » What they want to know (e.g., where is mom?)

Understanding your child's communication is the first step to helping them expand their ability to express themselves in ways that are understandable to others.

In addition to helping others understand your child's communication, you will be an important part of your child's team to help determine the best next steps to teach your child new communication skills that are safe and meaningful.

STEP 2: COMMUNICATION AND AUTISM?

The two main traits of autism include difficulties with social-communication and repetitive behaviors/focused interests. These traits may impact how your child communicates.

Do all children with autism communicate the same?

A common quote you may have heard is: "When you've met one person with autism, you have met one person with autism." The meaning of this quote is that all autistic people are unique and may present their skills differently.

YOUR CHILD'S COMMUNICATION MAY PRESENT IN A VARIETY OF WAYS, INCLUDING:

- » Limited or no vocal speech
- » Difficulty using and/or understanding nonverbal communication (e.g., body language, eye contact, etc.)
- » Struggling with initiating and/or maintaining conversations
- » Talking about a particular topic a lot with little to no interest in talking about other things
- » Scripting (or repeating sentences that they heard from an outside source)
- » Having meltdowns when others do not understand what they are trying to communicate



What if my child does not ever communicate with me?

Even if your child does not engage in full conversations with you, they are still communicating their wants and needs. You may even have your own “translation” of your child’s behavior!

As the expert of your child, you know better than others what they are trying to say when they act in a certain way. For example, if your child expresses joy through making loud noises, you may have to explain to others that your child is happy!

What if my child can talk but it seems like they choose not to communicate?

Sometimes autistic children may not know how to communicate their wants/needs in the right words. It is likely that your child is not **intentionally** withholding information, but rather may have difficulty expressing their thoughts OR assume that something does not need to be said aloud.

WHY DOES MY CHILD COMMUNICATE DIFFERENTLY?

There are likely several reasons why autistic children communicate differently.

It could be because they need explicit instructions rather than relying on a lot of our unspoken rules.

It could be because how they are currently communicating works for them and changing may be seen as too difficult or not worth it.

Or, it could be because they feel they are communicating fine; it is **others** who are having difficulty understanding **them!**

Once we recognize that communication can look different for everybody, we will start to understand more of the ways your child communicates with you and others!

Reflection

Think of the last time your child had a difficult day and you found out that it was because of something in their environment that they did not tell you about, like a cut on their finger. Was this a big deal to them? Did you notice right away, or did it take time? Sometimes when changes happen in the environment, it can be hard to concentrate on anything else. When that change is so noticeable to the child, they may not communicate this because they either 1) do not realize you do not see the change too and/or 2) are trying hard to regulate their reaction to this change. If your child does not tell you right away, it is not because they are keeping it a secret or not telling you on purpose. Instead, it is more likely because it may be hard to 1) say what is wrong, 2) concentrate on communicating, and/or 3) realize that others may not be aware of what they are currently experiencing.



Reflection

We all show our love in many ways! Even if your child does not say “I love you” aloud, what are the ways they show their love for you? Something to consider: if your child communicates vocally but does not say “I love you” very often, could it be because they feel like that is a given in your relationship and therefore does not need to be said?

You know your child better than anyone and can help others understand how to communicate with them!

Once you recognize the patterns of how/why/when your child communicates, you can better understand your child’s language.

This is powerful information to help guide your child on how to communicate with others successfully by feeling understood and getting their wants and needs met.

Note: If your child is not hurting themselves or others, then there is nothing wrong with them communicating in their own way! But if you are the only one who can understand them, then it would be more beneficial to help your child learn additional skills so that others can understand them as well.

This will also help provide your child with more opportunities to advocate for themselves, as well as make more social connections and gain independence!

STEP 3: UNDERSTANDING YOUR CHILD’S COMMUNICATION

The first step toward helping your child communicate successfully across people and environments is to understand how and why he/she communicates now. This helps you determine what the best next steps are for your child’s communication growth and development.

The best way to understand your child’s communication is to consider the how, why, and in what context your child is currently communicating. The more we can understand these aspects of your child’s communication, the more effective we can be in teaching them other ways or behaviors to communicate for that same reason.



Review the examples below.

CONTEXT	CHILD BEHAVIOR	POSSIBLE UNDERSTANDING
It is time to take a bath.	Crying and trying to leave the bathroom	She does not want to take a bath right now.
We just came in from playing outside.	Handing me an empty juice cup	She is thirsty and wants a drink.
Sister is playing with cars.	Grabbing toy out of sister's hand	He wants to play with the cars.
Computer login has changed.	Pulling adult to the computer and pointing to the screen	They need help to access the computer.
It is time to do homework.	Crumpling up paper	She does not understand what she needs to do.
It is 2-3 hours after breakfast.	Pulling to kitchen and looking at me	He is hungry and wants a snack.
He just arrived home from school.	Repeating lines from a favorite movie about dogs	He is sharing that there was a dog at show and tell today.
Mom was blowing bubbles and stopped.	Gave bubbles back to mom and looked at her	They want mom to blow more bubbles.

Think about your child and fill in a few examples of how and why your child communicates.

CONTEXT	CHILD BEHAVIOR	POSSIBLE UNDERSTANDING

Now that you are starting to better understand your child's communication, you can access additional TRIAD resources to learn how to determine the best next step for your child's communication, as well as how to begin to teach your child to communicate successfully and safely across people and settings.



Resources

TRIAD, the autism institute at Vanderbilt Kennedy Center, and ATP, the Assistive Technology Project, are proud members of the Tennessee Technical Assistance Network (TN-TAN) through the Tennessee Department of Education. TN-TAN provides school districts, administrators, educators, and families access to high-quality training, resources, and supports designed to improve outcomes for students with disabilities, ages 3-22. For general inquiries, contact TN-TAN at TN-TAN@utk.edu.

- ❑ Autism

 - TRIAD, triad.vumc.org

- ❑ Assistive Technology

 - The AT Project, <https://at4kids.com>

Project Core is an implementation grant directed by the Center for Literacy and Disability Studies. The Project Core implementation model is designed to empower teachers and classroom professionals to provide students with access to flexible Universal Core vocabulary and evidence-based communication instruction.

- ❑ Quick Start Guide

 - www.project-core.com/quick-start-guide/

- ❑ Professional Development Modules

 - www.project-core.com/professional-development-modules/