

This newsletter is written by  
Applied Behavior Consultants  
- ABC Center Singapore.

It documents the journey and  
achievements of the children  
in our care.

Every day, each parent, each  
child, and each staff member  
in our team work with such  
painstaking dedication to  
reach the next milestone of  
success.

This is our way of saying  
Thank You to all of them.

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# Autism Milestones

Celebrating achievements with autism therapy in Singapore.

## Helping a child communicate independently

We focus on one of the most basic needs of children with autism – the need to communicate their wants and needs independently. Children need to learn to initiate communication and ask for things on their own. ABC Center Singapore's Clinical Supervisor and Senior Behavior Analyst, **Ms Hui Ling Loh, M.A., BCBA**, shares her thoughts on this. She uses the framework written in an article by **Margery Rappaport**, published in the **Behavioral Intervention for Young Children with Autism, A Manual for Parents and Professionals** (all in *italics* are words directly lifted from M. Rappaport's article).

### Why is it important to help children be more independent in communicating?

Communication is a critical aspect of every child's educational program. Communicating what you want is a basic human need. Each child should minimally learn to communicate at a level that will allow him/her to appropriately and effectively request his/her wants and needs throughout the day and across environments.

Children who are not able to communicate do not get their needs met and this leads to frustration. That is why it is important for children to be independent and initiate communication.

### How can parents help their children communicate effectively?

The biggest help parents can offer is to create many opportunities for communicating, and to expect their child to ask for what they want. For example, a parent can identify what the child is likely to want given an activity (for example, the child needs a pencil if he wants to write something). The parent can arrange for the item to not be initially available so as to encourage the child to ask for it.

Once the parent has arranged the environment to encourage communication, the next step is to expect the child to communicate. If we are always doing things for the child and pre-empting what he/she needs, then we cannot teach the child to want to communicate.





### **What can discourage a child from communicating independently?**

Pre-empting what a child needs is the biggest factor that prevents a child from initiating communication. As parents, we are accustomed to providing for our children, with the intention of making them as comfortable as possible. Unfortunately, this results in children that do not need to make any effort to ask for what they need. There is less reason to initiate communication independently.

### **What are the tips that you can share with parents so they can better help their children?**

#### 1. Commenting

For parents with children who don't speak too much, or don't speak at all, one useful tip is to do *Commenting*. This means, as you see your child doing daily activities, you provide a commentary on what he/she is doing. It is almost like 'broadcasting' *the child's internal dialogue*.

#### **Why does Commenting help?**

It helps because it exposes the child to a richer language experience. He/she hears more words, and sees how this is linked to the activities being done. There is a higher chance that the child will begin imitating this, and eventually want to express his internal dialogue and share it verbally.

#### 2. Minimizing direct questions

Direct questions are those that prompt a child to answer directly, for example, 'what is this', 'what do you want', 'what are you doing'. I know minimizing these direct questions seems counterintuitive initially, as we normally want to *ask our children a lot of questions as we think it encourages our children to talk*.



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However, whenever a parent asks the question, the parent has taken the 'driver's seat' and has initiated the conversation. If a parent does this too often, the child will not see the need to start the conversation himself/herself, as he has become used to just waiting to be asked.

### **How can a parent minimize direct questions? It seems difficult to stop yourself from asking your child 'what do you want' for example.** This leads to another tip for parents below, which is *Waiting and Signaling*.

#### 3. Waiting and Signaling

Instead of doing a direct question, the parent can try to wait and signal for the child to initiate the conversation.

For instance, when you know that your child wants a certain favorite toy, instead of asking a direct question like 'Do you want to play with your train set now?' the parent can instead stand expectantly beside the toy cabinet and wait for the child to ask for the toy. Sometimes the child may ask for it non-verbally (like pointing to the train set), or verbally (saying 'train'). *Waiting* can work well, particularly if it involves the child's favorite toys, as he or she is really incentivized to ask for it.

If the child is not making any effort to communicate, the parent can signal (for instance, by opening the toy cabinet and looking at the child with an 'I am waiting' expression.) Once the child makes the effort to communicate (whether verbally or non-verbally), the child has become the initiator of the conversation. This is an important skill to be learned.

Also, when asking questions, it is important to wait for the child to respond, rather than answering or deciding for the child. Then, *when the child responds, make sure you reward him/her by giving the desired item*.

### **That involves a lot of patience for the parent, right? Waiting and signaling will make most chores take much longer.**

This is always a possibility. Parents need to allocate enough time in their schedule to anticipate this. If parents do this, then there is less stress for everyone.





Contrive a situation for the child to ask: like giving a coloring book but waiting for him or her to ask for the crayons.

#### 4. Setting up situations that will force your child to communicate

The other important tip for parents is to *try and contrive situations that will force your child to communicate with you*. This is the exact opposite of anticipating your child's every need. In this case, you deliberately withhold something that your child needs, so that the child asks for it.

For example, if you have set up a coloring book activity for your child, you give him or her the coloring book, but not the crayons. So, the child is encouraged to ask for the crayons.

#### **Won't this be frustrating for the child?**

The parent will have to gauge child's engagement (and frustration) level. Obviously, the parent should not do it to the point that the child becomes too tired because he or she needs to ask for everything.

#### 5. Use abundant gestures and facial expressions

Gestures and facial expressions are very important. They make it easier for the child to understand what the parent is trying to say. *This is because whatever you are saying is supported by a visual cue.*

Beyond the visual cue, the facial expressions and gestures also make the communication more interesting and engaging. So, the child is more involved.

#### 6. Modeling

This is particularly important for children who have already begun to say a few words, but may not yet be using them in the correct order, syntax or grammar.

*By modeling, the parent shows the right response*, instead of correcting the child sentence structure or grammar if he or she makes a mistake. For instance, if the child says 'cookie give I want'. Instead of correcting the child's wrong order of words (by saying 'No. You should say 'I want a cookie)'), the parent should just model the response positively, 'Oh, you want a cookie', and give the cookie to the child. This will make your child feel more successful in communicating. It also makes it clearer to the child that you are interested in what he/she is really trying to say, rather than just how he/she is saying it.

#### 7. Reduce the complexity of your language

Use the language that is within the child's level. If the child is not yet using words, then speak in single word utterances. If the child is able to use 2-3 words in a phrase, then speak in short phrases or sentences as well. *This maximizes comprehension for the child, and the parent is able to model what is expected from the child at the right level.*

#### 8. Use exaggerated intonation/ volume and rate of speech

This is to *capture the attention of children who have trouble communicating spontaneously*. Using this type of exaggerated tone or volume can make communication more interesting. Try using a sing-song voice when asking a question, or using an exaggerated 'storytelling voice' when commenting on what you see around you ('Wow, that is a biiiiiig bus!') This will be more engaging for the child.

#### 9. Eye contact

This is a crucial part of communication. It is important for the parent to look at the child whenever he/she is talking. This helps establish a connection and also models the right behavior for the child. If the child does not automatically look at the speaker, keep trying to establish eye contact. This can be done by calling the child's name or by physically moving closer/ bending down to the level of the child's eyes so that it is easier for the child to look at the parent.



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Reinforce by responding to the child whenever he initiates communication, even if non-verbally: If the child is pointing at a flower, the parent can say: 'Oh yes, that is a beautiful yellow flower'.

#### 10. Reinforce

To reinforce means to give credit or acknowledgment to the child for initiating communication. If the child is able to spontaneously communicate, then reinforce him/her by responding to him. *Don't ignore any attempts to communicate whether verbal or non-verbal.* Every attempt done by the child to initiate communication is a great thing.

#### **What are the best ways to reinforce?**

The most natural way to reinforce is by *responding to the child immediately* and appropriately. If the child is asking for something, then quickly give it to him/her. You can also add 'Thank you for asking' or 'I am glad you asked!'

If the child makes a comment about what he/she is seeing, then respond to this. For instance, if the child is pointing at a flower, the parent can say: 'Oh yes, that is a beautiful yellow flower'. This makes the child feel successful that he/she has been heard and that what he/ she is trying to say is important.

#### 11. Make it Fun – Talk in a pleasant voice.

*Smile a lot.* I know that sometimes, it is stressful for parents. This stress can make parents sound overly strict, or exacting, or frustrated. But if the child associates communication with negative emotions, this will discourage the child from communicating.

Instead, *the parent should associate communication with warmth and joy. Stay relaxed.* No one wants to communicate with someone not fun. Be fun!