



Therapics
Talking with pictures



20 practical suggestions for parents of children with autism.

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 child's 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. Many of my tips are for a child with verbal challenges as that was one of the main ones we faced, feel free to choose the tips which are relevant to your own special set of needs.

- 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. If your child is enjoying the time together then by all means continue on past the half hour!
- 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 label 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, keep a note of achieved words so that you can go back over and revise them on a regular basis. You may wish to share this list with teachers/therapists/carers etc.
- 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. A good selection can also be found at www.pecsforall.com and www.catedu.es/arasaac/ The 4-step system we used to teach picture icons was this:
- First you match the actual object (where possible) with a photograph/picture of it (Search on Google images for photographs, choose clear pictures without distracting backgrounds). Use the instruction "find same."
 - 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 autism 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 someone’s 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 lose graciously. My son’s 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 furthest 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 game in my shop which we found easier to play than the longer store-bought versions. For poor losers teach them to “Take a deep breath and think “It’s OK, maybe I’ll win next time”.
- 13 Keep a small bag of tricks on hand for outings.** Parents who have children with challenges need to have deep pockets (literally!) or a large handbag... Collect a selection of small items for use as motivators/distractors in situations where your child’s ability to keep calm and happy will be stretched. Build up a good selection of items which are kept hidden away in a box and then choose just a few so that you always have a fresh option on hand. Keeping the surprise element is important to the success of the distraction. Good examples include sensory toys, a little notepad and pen, finger puppets, a toy car/animal/doll, a small storybook, snacks (a small pack of raisins/crackers/candy), stickers, Lego or Playmobil figurines, any small item that panders to your child’s special interest, and of course a DS game if you have one. Don’t forget to praise them at the end for their good behaviour.
- 14 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 at the end of this article and practice, practice and practice some more on a quiet road.
- 15 To teach your child to distinguish between good and bad behaviour make a cool and uncool book.** Use the icons at the end of this article as headers and fill a page each with pictures showing cool and uncool behaviour. We found it helpful to use pictures of the heroes and villains from favourite DVD’s and story books, eg. Robin Hood and the Sheriff, Snow White and the evil stepmother etc. Include pictures showing behaviours like being gentle with an animal, waiting your turn, sticking out your tongue, pushing someone etc. to help create the association. Use the terminology (and picture icon when possible) to label your child’s actual behaviour, eg. “Hitting Jane was really uncool, you hurt her” or “Wow, sharing with your brother was a really cool thing to do!” or “That was cool listening, I can see that you’re trying your best”.
- 16 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.
- 17 If your child struggles with certain outings** make time to get them used to the experience in small doses. Starting with short, successful experiences you can gradually extend them. For example, if your child hates going to the shop, instead of waiting until you need to do a full grocery shop - rather make

a short training outing, take some fun distractors with you (for situations such as a queue at the till) and small on-the-spot rewards for good behaviour. Allow it to be a positive experience for your child and make sure you exit while things are going well. This may mean just walking through the shop on the first occasion, or only buying one thing. Try to plan these outings when your child is physically up for it, ie. not hungry or tired. Imagine that you have to train stamina into them, and if necessary have someone to mind your other children for you while you do it.

18 Recognise successes with a victory celebration. Create a dinner-time family tradition around achievements by doing something special for the victor. If someone in your family has done something special in the day, (eg. reaching a goal, passing a test, overcoming a challenge) recognise it and honor them with a little special attention. Suggestions include a victory candle - which is lit at dinner time while announcing the achievement (the victor being allowed to blow it out after the meal) or using a special plate/place setting for the achiever. This is a wonderful way of cultivating a success-orientated focus in your family. If your child is young and non-verbal try to capture a photograph of them as they achieve to help them recognise the reason for the celebration. Make a Victory book where you record the victories to remind each other that you are all achievers.

19 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.

20 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!"

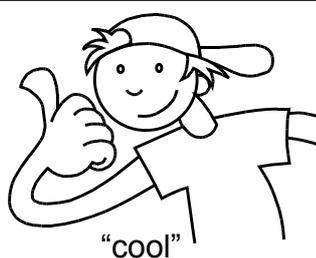
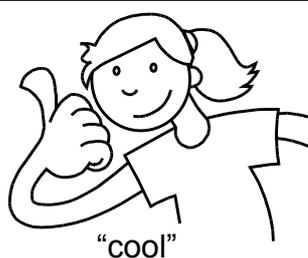
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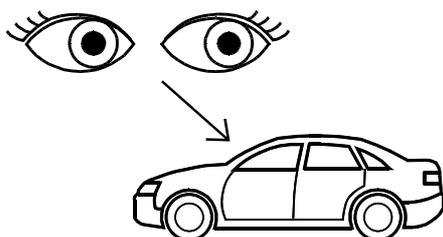
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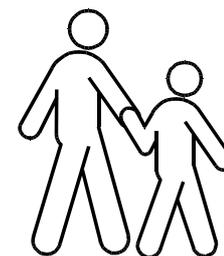
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