Communication and ASD

How, What, and Why
What are the Major Components of Effective Communication?

What are the challenges for the instructor as a speaker?

What are the challenges for the instructor as a listener?

What are the challenges for the student as a speaker?

What are the challenges for the student as a listener?
What are the challenges for a person with ASD
On the both sides of Communication?
As a Listener and as a Speaker

What I have observed or experienced that I find most challenging?
1. LISTENING

One of the most important aspects of effective communication is being a good listener.

People do not like communicating with others who are only interested in telling you what they want to tell you, and don’t listen to what you have to say. Effective communication requires active listening, so practice active listening until it becomes second nature to you.

So what is active listening? Active listening involves hearing and understanding what a person is saying to you. Unless you understand clearly what a person is telling you, you can’t respond appropriately. Gain clarification by asking questions or rephrase what you’re being told, so that you’re sure you fully understand the message that’s being conveyed to you. For example, you could say “So, what you’re saying is…”

2. Non-Verbal Communication

The words we choose make up just 7% of the message being conveyed, which makes non-verbal communication all the more important. Body language is an important communication tool. Your body language should help convey your words. Other factors you should consider are things like the tone of your voice, your hand gestures, and ensuring eye contact.

A person is going to be encouraged to speak openly with you if you are relaxed and have a friendly tone. Adopt an open stance position, with relaxed legs and open arms. It is important that you make eye contact with the person you are communicating with, but be careful that you do not stare at them, as this is just uncomfortable. It is just as important that you recognize the non-verbal signals being displayed by the other person. These signals will give you an insight into how that person is feeling.

3. Be Clear and Be Concise

Convey your message using as few words as possible. Whether in person, via telephone, or email, convey your message clearly, concise and direct. If you are excessive with your words, the listener will either lose focus or just be unsure as to what it is that you want. Before speaking give some thought as to the message you want to convey. This will prevent you rambling and causing confusion.
4. Be Personable

When communicating face to face with someone, use a friendly tone with a simple smile, and ask a personal question. These things encourage the other person to engage in honest, open communication. When using written communication (e.g. email), you can achieve this by adding a simple personal message, for example, “How was your weekend?”.

5. Be Confident

Confidence underpins all effective communication. Other people will believe you will do as you say if you sound confident. Making eye contact, using a firm but friendly tone (never aggressive), are all ways you can exude confidence. Remember to always be listening to the other person and looking out for those nonverbal clues.

6. Empathy

Empathy is the skill of being able to understand and share the feelings of another person. Even if you don’t agree with the person you’re communicating with, it’s very important that you understand and respect their view. Simply saying to that person “I understand what you’re saying”, will let them know that you have been listening to them, and that you respect their point of view.

7. Always Have An Open Mind

Being an effective communicator requires that every conversation is approached with a flexible, open mind. This isn’t always easy to achieve, but is very important to communicating effectively. Always engage in active listening, and be sure to demonstrate empathy by acknowledging you understand what the other person’s point of view is. Adopting this approach will always ensure honest, productive communication.
8. Convey Respect

Other people will be more likely to engage in communication with you if you respect them and their ideas. Simply addressing another person using their name, will make them feel appreciated. If communicating via telephone, always keep focused on the conversation and avoid being distracted in any way. When communicating through email, take time to construct and edit your message, taking care to address the recipient by name.

9. Give and Receive Feedback

Giving and receiving appropriate feedback is an essential communication skill, particularly for those of us whose roles include managing other people. Providing constructive feedback, as well as giving someone praise, can greatly increase motivation and build morale. It is just as important that you accept and encourage feedback from others. Always listen to feedback and act positively on it. If you’re unsure about any aspect of the feedback, simply ask a question to gain clarification from the other person.

10. Consider The Best Medium for The Job!

The final item on my list is knowing what the best form of communication is to use. Being mindful of using the best form of communication will result in your response being a positive one. Consider things such as, who it is you’re trying to communicate with, how important the topic is, and how busy that person might be.
“What we see as a failure to behave properly, is actually a failure to communicate properly”

–www.notjustcute.com
Individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) who are fluently verbal are not free of language and communication challenges. The presence or intensity of social communication and language characteristics of individuals with autism spectrum disorders may vary by age and by individual. Some of these characteristics are found in others who do not have an autism spectrum disorder, for example, in individuals with language or learning disabilities. With increasing age and increasing communication competency, most of these characteristics lessen or disappear for those who do not have an autism spectrum disorder. It is the frequency and persistence of some of these characteristics from childhood into adulthood that exemplifies the syndrome of autism.
Language Characteristics

Although the ability to exchange meaningful messages is the heart of communication, it is important to look at the characteristics of the language used to convey the messages. Individuals with autism spectrum disorder may:

• Appear to have a good vocabulary and a sophisticated command of the language system based on their verbal utterances.
  ○ In some instances sophisticated language may reflect repetition of bits of dialogue heard on television or in the conversation of others. This mitigated echolalia may or may not be used in appropriate contexts.
  ○ For the majority of individuals, the depth of meaning for specific words used may be restricted and/or the breadth of vocabulary may not be as expansive as utterances may suggest. Of course, some individuals may have an excellent verbal repertoire.

• Appear to have difficulty with figurative language such as idioms, metaphors, similes, and irony.

• Appear to have difficulty recognizing in contextual (conversational) or text (print) situations that certain vocabulary words may have alternative meanings.

• Appear to respond to suggestions, directions, or information in a very literal manner.

• Appear to have some difficulty grasping the main idea, drawing conclusions and making other inferences from conversation, text, TV programs, and movies.

• Appear to have difficulty understanding humor in television programs, movies, cartoons (animated and static), and everyday interactions.

• Appear to have difficulty with WH question forms such Who, What, Where, When, Why, How and others.

• Appear to understand basic sentence structure but may have more difficulty with more complex sentences that contain embedded and subordinate clauses.

• May primarily attend to key words rather than to the message conveyed by the grammar; may also have difficulty understanding the grammar and thus resort to the key word strategy.

• Will experience difficulties in reading comprehension if comprehension of oral language is poor.

• May not be connecting idea to idea from conversation or text, e.g. not connecting the content of one sentence to the next.
Social Communication…

Communication is a social act and unless one is conducting a monologue with one’s self, it involves at least one other person. Communication within a social situation can be more challenging than just understanding the words of others. There are unwritten rules that govern interactions and these may change depending on the circumstances and whom one is talking to. The individual with an autism spectrum disorder may:

- Have difficulty seeing another person’s perspective; tendency to interpret from own point of view. This impacts social interaction and the understanding of perspective in narratives whether in text, movies, or TV format.
- Have difficulty understanding that other people have unique thoughts, ideas, and personal motivation.
- Give no or minimal eye contact during an interaction; eye contact may be distracting or provide more sensory information than can be useful or processed by the person with ASD.
- Speak too loudly or too fast unless taught about the needs of his or her communication partner.
- Have difficulty staying on topic; may be distracted by associations cued by his or her own words or the dialogue of others.
- Deliver monologues, lectures, or lessons about a favorite topic rather than allow/participate in reciprocal involvement with a communication partner.
- Talk aloud to self in public situations and be unaware that others can hear the content of the self talk and will make judgments about them based on what was heard.
- Have difficulty attending to an auditory message if stressed, agitated, or highly stimulated.
- Make statements that are factually true but socially inappropriate because of lack of awareness of the impact of his or her statement on others.
- Not know strategies to initiate, terminate, or facilitate a conversation.
- Have difficulty understanding the significance of another’s role and the need to adjust topic, the vocabulary, grammar, and tone of conversation accordingly. May address an authority figure in the same fashion as a peer or as a TV/video character might do.
- Have difficulty knowing that he or she has the responsibility to give the communication partner sufficient information to understand the message. In addition, he or she may have difficulty surmising what information the partner already has and what new information is needed.
- Not monitor his or her own comprehension of incoming messages and therefore does not seek clarification, when needed.
• Seek to promote an inflated or positive self image by using pseudo-sophisticated language; sometimes this strategy is used to mask the degree of underlying comprehension problems that the person really experiences during daily living situations or within school activities.
• Lie with the intent of getting people to leave him or her alone rather than with an intent to deceive or manipulate. In general, is not effective at deception.
• Exhibit good recall of people’s names, facts, and/or trivial information; often the depth of knowledge about a topic may be superficial.
• Utilize, on occasion, old behavior or communication patterns for more appropriate verbal social communication. This might include nonverbal means of communication such as aggression, passivity, pacing, self stimulation, self abusive behavior, or echolalia.
• Talk about unusual topics such as fans and The Weather Channel because he or she finds the topic fascinating; the display of knowledge may take place irrespective of the interest of the communication partner in the topic.
• Be nonselective about appropriateness of time, place, and person with whom to discuss certain topics.
• Be perseverative or bothersome on limited topics. May ask repetitive questions.
• Desire social interaction, but has difficulty knowing how to initiate and maintain a friendship.
• Experience difficulty recognizing the lies, deceptions and mischief of others.
• Miss nonverbal cues of others and nuances in social situations; may be taught to recognize some instances.
• Lack a repertoire or have difficulty selecting/applying appropriate social communication strategies in everyday situations.
• Recognizes and identifies basic emotions of others and self (mad, happy, sad) but has more difficulty with recognizing more subtle expressions of these feelings or emotions.
• Have difficulty recognizing, identifying and understanding various other states of emotion expressed by others and knowing what to say in that situation.
• Have difficulty making predictions about the consequences of a situation and understanding the motivation of others; will usually be very concrete and socially naive.
• Have difficulty multi-tasking, i.e., talking or listening while doing something else at the same time; may need to do one thing at a time.
Other Characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder that May Be Present

Characteristics other than language difficulties may also be evident during interaction opportunities and impact the communicative exchange in an indirect way. Sometimes actions or comments during an interaction may provide clues regarding the need for additional support in other life areas of the person with ASD. Sometimes knowing about other characteristics promotes more patience and understanding in the communication partner.

- Appear very egocentric in terms of concern for others, their feelings, their needs, and their ideas.
- Prefer that experiences or events be interpreted in black and white or very concrete terms; this expectation is at odds with the complexity of most situations.
- Have difficulty getting the gestalt or big picture of a situation rather than just the details.
- Engage in repetitive activities and/or rituals.
- Can obsessively persist in mulling over past, present, or future events or ideas.
- Be resistive in varying degrees to changes in routine or environment.
- Have splinter skills (e.g., unusual abilities in music, math).
- Exhibit clinical anxiety, varying degrees of depression, or other mood disorders.
- Express thoughts about suicide; may not have a clear understanding of the finality of death.
- Exhibit clinical obsessive-compulsive disorder.
- Exhibit seizures.
- Act like a perfectionist- does not like to make mistakes.
- May have sensory issues; be under responsive or sensory seeking; can get overwhelmed by sensory overload.
- Experience encounters with law enforcement and the judicial system as a consequence of social challenges and emotional regulation.
- Be physically as well as socially awkward.
- Have difficulty with fine motor skills, especially handwriting.
- Not perform well when under pressure or stress.
- Have difficulty utilizing relaxations strategies to reduce stress.
- Have difficulty with executive function skills- planning, organization, flexibility, monitoring, etc.
- Have difficulty with reading comprehension but be able to decode and fluently read aloud.
- May have excellent memory for detail but not working memory, i.e., keeping ideas in mind while manipulating them and problem solving.
- Need some degree of supervision, support, and/or advocacy to be employable or to live independently in the community.
- Be very naive and vulnerable to social/sexual abuse.
- Become more socially isolated as his/her negative experiences in social situations increases.
10 Tips on How to Communicate with Autistic People…

Guest Post by Steve Summers*

1. Please always keep in mind that communication difficulties are common with Autism. We have difficulties in reading social cues and body language. Be patient and understanding.

2. We tend to take things literally and have often trouble reading between the lines. As a result, we may ask a lot of questions to clarify what is meant by something that you say. I have been told that I ask a lot of questions. Don’t be offended by this. It is our way of being sure that we understand what you are telling us. We may repeat back to you in our own words to try and get on the same page as you.

3. If we misunderstand something that you say, please be patient and expand on what you said and explain what you meant. Don’t assume a negative or hostile intent from us if we misunderstand something that you said. Keep in mind that communication can be difficult for us. Things that come naturally to you take extra effort by us.

4. Please don’t get offended by our communication style. We tend to be frank, honest and matter of fact. Some people may interpret this as blunt or rude. We don’t intend to offend you by not sugar coating the things that we say. We don’t intend to be rude. Please don’t get defensive or assume that we are attacking you. Remember that communicating is hard for us. Don’t make negative assumptions. Too often we get corrected or attacked by someone who fails to give us some slack and the benefit of the doubt.

5. Please don’t expect eye contact. We may be able to force eye contact, but it is not comfortable for us. Making eye contact takes a conscious effort. This effort may take away from listening and understanding what you are saying. I tend to look at a person’s mouth more often than their eyes. Other autistic people will rarely look at your face. This is ok.
6. Please keep in mind that we most likely have been rejected, excluded, ridiculed or bullied in the past. If we seem anxious or insecure this may be due to living in a world that misunderstands us and is often hostile to us. We have to work hard to reach out to others. Please work at reaching back to us with understanding and kindness. If we feel that you are ignoring us we will feel bad about that. We may persist in asking for feedback from you. Please be reassuring and clearly express your support for us.

7. Please don’t speak down to us. Treat us as equals. We may sound flat or have an unusual tone to our voice. We may not speak with our voice at all. We may need to type our words. Please be patient with us. It may take us a while to formulate our answers.

8. Please don’t talk too loudly or yell at us. It is very jarring to us. It makes me jump when someone comes up to me and talks too loudly. It is like having someone jump out in the dark yelling “BOO!” at me. It causes an adrenalin dump in my body. I don’t like this.

9. Please do NOT touch us without warning. It will make us jump. We don’t like unexpected touches.

10. Please don’t assume that we lack empathy or emotion. We pick up on negative or judgmental attitudes. We know when people look down on us or are hostile to us. We will shut down if you show us a lack of respect.

Please keep in mind that we are all different. These issues will vary from person to person. The above tips are written from my perspective as an autistic person. This is just a guide. Feel free to ask me any questions so that I may expand and clarify any areas that aren’t clear to you. Thank you for reading this guide.

I was diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome (part of the Autism Spectrum) as an adult. I was diagnosed following my 11-year-old son’s diagnosis with Aspergers. I am happy to have my diagnosis. It was like a light being turned on that illuminated my entire life in a new way. Now I understand why I never really ‘fit in.’ It is like having a huge weight lifted off of my shoulders to have my diagnosis. I don’t feel that people should make divisions between parts of the Autism Spectrum. I am autistic and I want to work to make the world a better, more understanding and accepting place for all autistic people. We need to work together for the benefit of all on the Autism Spectrum. I wrote this list due to continuing difficulties that I have had with the give and take of communicating with others. Many people seem too easily offended because they fail to understand these things about me. We all need understanding and acceptance. ~ Steve Summers
RESOURCES

For insights into the language and social communication problems of children and adults with autism spectrum disorder, consider reading some of their biographies, autobiographies or novels. Selective possibilities include:


