

Module 4 : Language and Communication Skills

- How people on the autism spectrum may try to communicate
- The stages of communication and language processing
- Fundamental categories of language delays
- The process of expressive language

In this module, you will learn:

- How people on the autism spectrum may try to communicate
- The stages of communication and language processing
- Fundamental categories of language delays
- The process of expressive language
- The process of receptive language
- The strengths and weaknesses of language, speech and communication in autistic people

4.1 Autism Spectrum

People on the autism spectrum can often have difficulty responding when approached, as well as when initiating interactions or being social in general.

They can also have difficulty using language and communicating with others.

However, as discussed previously, every person is unique, and each individual will have their own strengths and weaknesses when it comes to language and communication skills. Therefore, not all the information discussed in this module will apply to everyone on the spectrum and the difficulties will affect people to varying degrees.

Autistic people may, at times, seem as though they cannot hear you, they may not respond if you call their name, and can seem indifferent to communication in general. Often, a hearing test will be conducted early on to determine whether a child is physically hearing impaired or if there are other issues involved.

Many autistic children have delayed language and communication skills, and some will continue to either have highly limited speech or no speech at all, even in adulthood. In cases where autistic people are pre- or non-verbal communicators, other communication methods can usually be taught and used, such as sign language, making gestures, pointing at pictures, or employing other visual cues. This is commonly known as Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC). It should never be assumed that a child who is pre- or non-verbal is unable to communicate.

Some non-verbal people on the autism spectrum will use gestures or other actions to communicate, such as crying, pulling your hand towards the object they want, looking directly at the object they are interested in, flapping their arms, or reaching out in general for things. This is their way of calling attention to their needs when they are unable to verbalise them.

They may also use echolalia. As discussed previously, echolalia is the condition in which autistic people mimic sounds and repeat words without actually understanding what they mean.

Echolalia is a good sign that communication is beginning to develop in autistic individuals. Through it, they can use repeated words and phrases to develop the building blocks of communication and that effort can be profoundly important to their personal development.

4.2 The Stages of Communication

The stages of communication in autistic people can depend on their initial ability to communicate with others, how and why they choose to communicate, and their actual understanding of how communication is defined or what it achieves for them.

Communication may potentially be pre-intentional, where they say or do something without the purpose of affecting or even catching the attention of other people. This can include speaking to themselves in an effort to self-soothe, cope, or react to something that surprises or distresses them.

Communication can also be intentional, where people on the autism spectrum say and do things with the specific goal of sending a message, protesting, making a request, or otherwise gaining a reaction from other people.

4.3 Language Processing

Language processing is the cognitive processing of spoken and written language. The ability of autistic people to acquire language is influenced by how their brains are able to comprehend and interpret it.

It is not possible for us to change the way the brain of an autistic person processes language, but with the right support and guidance, people can often be taught to learn and produce language. Because communication challenges are synonymous with autism, an essential component of working with autistic people is understanding the source of their difficulties and identifying how to best address them.

This can vary from person to person as, with a condition that has such a wide-ranging spectrum of challenges and strengths, many people will have unique needs when it comes to interpreting language.

4.4 Fundamental Categories of Language Delays

Next, we will look at the two fundamental categories of language delays: expressive language and receptive language.

Expressive language is the language that refers to the use of words to communicate thoughts, needs and wants. It formulates and executes the output of all language. By comparison, receptive language is the process of understanding what people say and comprehending their non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions and body language. It involves comprehending how such language is inputted and interpreted.

Both expressive and receptive language processes are interdependent for a person to be an effective and well-rounded communicator. However, some autistic people can have more receptive than expressive language or vice versa. It should never be assumed that just because someone on the spectrum has no expressive language, they have no receptive language either.

4.5 The Process of Expressive Language

There may be a delay in expressive language if a child has below average communication milestones for their age or if they struggle with putting words and sentences together to express their thoughts and needs.

They may find it extremely challenging to recall names and other words, ask questions, or say how they feel. Furthermore, they may just communicate through sounds, gestures and echolalia instead of a typical manner.

If a child is struggling to use language appropriately in a variety of settings, it may be a sign to seek help regarding their expressive language skills.

Speech therapists can be a tremendous resource in the process of assessing and diagnosing someone with an expressive language delay. They can conduct a series of tests that are typically not stressful and usually completed with both the child and their parent/s in the room.

As mentioned earlier, it may also be worthwhile to perform hearing and auditory processing tests, check for additional, related learning difficulties, and assess overall cognitive function. This can assist further in determining an autistic person's specific needs and challenges regarding expressive language, and help in the development of a plan to assist the individual with their communication skills.

Treatment of an expressive language delay for an autistic person might include one-to-one or group sessions with a speech therapist, enrolment in school-based language programmes, additional help from a special needs teacher, one-to-one support from a teacher's aide within the classroom, or speech therapy sessions combined with additional at-home training and support.

4.6 The Process of Receptive Language

While expressive language is about how language comes out, by comparison, receptive language is about how it is taken in.

Receptive language is the process of understanding language input, including both words and non-verbal cues like gestures and body language. This is more than just developing better vocabulary skills, as it involves the cognitive ability to interpret questions and concepts like "on" and "off", and the ability to follow directions. It also involves accurately interpreting different forms of grammar.

Children on the autism spectrum may have difficulty comprehending language, but they may appear at times to understand because they can pick out certain words, use non-verbal cues to react, or employ echolalia, which may be seen as comprehension.

The diagnosis of a receptive language delay can start early on at home by checking if certain age-related milestones are being met. Some symptoms that may give cause to monitor for a receptive language delay include: not seeming to listen when spoken to, appearing to lack interest when

storybooks are being read aloud, the apparent inability to understand complicated sentences or follow verbal instructions, echolalia, and general language skills below what's expected for a certain age.

It can then be worthwhile to speak to a paediatrician in order to rule out hearing problems by conducting hearing and auditory processing tests. It is also prudent to seek out a speech and language therapist for further assistance.

Just as they can help with expressive language, speech and language therapists can conduct tests for receptive language delays. They will likely start by interviewing the child's parents and will observe and analyze the child's ability to communicate in various situations.

They can also assess if weak communication is one of the factors interfering with a child's ability to keep up with their peers, which is common in autistic children.

An assessment by a neuropsychologist or educational psychologist can help to identify any cognitive problems associated with receptive language delays. From there, different tactics can be employed to assess how a child thought to be on the autism spectrum may respond to treatment, and an effective action plan can be developed.

4.7 The Strengths and Weaknesses of the Language, Speech and Communication Skills of a Person on the Autism Spectrum

While autistic people may have considerable expressive or receptive language delays, they can also have specific strengths in these areas when compared to typically developing children.

Each child on the spectrum may also have unique, individual strengths within their own skill set. These strengths can and should be fully utilised in order to promote further development in this area.

One example that can occasionally be a strength or a weakness is that some autistic children with better language skills seem to speak like "little adults" with a mature tone of voice and formal manner of speech. They may fail to pick up on the "kid speak", slang and tone that's common among their peers.

Autistic children who have speech and communication delays may also develop excellent related skills such as a strong memory and focus, the ability to decode written language, and read exceptionally early. They may also have excellent spelling skills, and honest, direct communication. These skills may be apparent even though they may lack comprehension of what they're reading or what certain words mean.

Some people on the autism spectrum may be highly verbal, but they may have certain differences with regard to communication.

For example, they might speak out loud about things that most of us would choose to keep to ourselves, or engage in lengthy discussions on favourite subjects without realising that others lack interest in the topic.

On the other hand, some autistic people may have considerable communication strengths, including tremendous logic, the ability to speak up without concern for what others think of them, direct communication skills, and the ability to speak in great detail. They can also be independent thinkers and non-judgmental listeners.

Some additional communication strengths of people on the autism spectrum may include:

- Clearly relaying facts
- Remembering what's been told to them after long periods of time
- Highly detail-oriented
- Good at paying attention and recalling small facts
- Good at communicating by using visual information in a meaningful way
- Using unique and interesting expressions when speaking
- Taking in and recalling large chunks of information
- Being highly attuned to sound
- Good logic and decision making
- Honesty and loyalty
- Directness and no hesitation to speak their minds

- Rarely having a hidden agenda when communicating with others
- Excellent at staying on topic in conversation

Some weaknesses in communication for people on the autism spectrum may include:

- Difficulty with following the flow of conversations clearly, especially if the topic changes
- More likely to be involved in misunderstandings
- Difficulty with filtering out distracting sounds when speaking to someone
- Difficulty with being tactful
- Unintentionally hurt others' feelings
- Difficulty understanding unwritten rules regarding communication and social interaction
- Difficulty expressing empathy
- Struggling considerably with small talk
- Difficulty understanding what they hear
- Trouble comprehending the bigger picture when discussing an idea
- Difficulty understanding the emotions or expressions of others
- Difficulty understanding body language, jokes and vague instructions
- They learn language, communication and grammar rules through a vocabulary which expands very gradually.

As mentioned, not all of these strengths and weaknesses will apply to everyone on the spectrum. Some people may only have one or two; some could have many.

As we touched on earlier, there is also the possibility for significant strengths and weaknesses in speech for people on the autism spectrum. While some may be pre- or non-verbal, having little to no speech, others can use complex speech and have a rich vocabulary.

Some people on the spectrum may struggle with speech articulation, which is how words are pronounced. Others may speak too loudly for the setting or in an abnormally high-pitched tone.

There can also be difficulties with fluency, flow, rhythm and ease of speaking, such as getting the words out.

These speech issues are often referred to as the "peculiar speech" of people on the autism spectrum. While they may often possess average to high intelligence, fair vocabularies and the ability to communicate, in doing so, many people on the spectrum may come across as different because of their manner of speaking.

4.8 What We've Learned

In Module 4, we looked more in depth at the strengths and weaknesses associated with language, speech and communication for people on the autism spectrum.

We reviewed that while autism is often associated with delays in speech and problems with communication, many people on the spectrum can, in fact, have significant gifts in this area.

Some of the common communication and language weaknesses include struggling to make small talk, having a hard time comprehending what others say, and unintentionally hurting people's feelings.

Some of the related strengths of people on the autism spectrum include the ability to stay on topic, speak honestly, talk in great detail and take in large chunks of information

We learned more about the stages of communication and language processing, the two fundamental categories of language delays, how delays in expressive language and receptive language can affect people on the autism spectrum, and what may be the signs of difficulties in these areas.

It is important to remember that expressive language includes the ability to speak or express yourself, while receptive language includes the ability to take in and understand what people say and understand their non-verbal cues.

We also looked at the processes in which expressive and receptive language delays may be assessed between parents and health professionals and how they can be addressed for growth and development.

Finally, we reviewed the speech patterns and abnormalities of people on the autism spectrum and how autism can affect the ability to speak, through difficulty with the pronunciation and articulation of words and the flow, volume and pitch of speech.

With the right support and expert assistance, many autistic people will be able to improve their ability to communicate with other people. It's important to remember that people on the autism spectrum may still speak differently in comparison to typically developing people.

Pre- or non-verbal people may experience growth if they master the use of sign language or the ability to communicate through pictures, visual cues or a series of gestures. Others with some verbal skills may expand on them and experience success by being able to ask for something they want or follow a simple set of verbal instructions.

Many skills can be addressed during speech and language therapy sessions and should be consolidated as much as possible in the wider environment.

Because the spectrum and the individuals who are on it are so wide-ranging, every autistic person will have individual growth and accomplishments in their ability to communicate or understand speech, and they should be recognised for their achievements.

Take a Quick Recap Test

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Summary

After completing this module, you should be able to better understand what some of the key challenges are for people on the autism spectrum regarding speech, language and overall communication skills. These include the fundamental categories of language delays and language processing.

You should know the differences between expressive language and receptive language and

understand how each one can be assessed and managed. You should also have a cursory understanding of how autistic people may be affected by the difficulties they have with speaking.

Finally, you should understand the strengths and weaknesses of speech, language and communication for people on the autism spectrum, the considerable challenges they can face, and the unique gifts that they may have in these areas.

While delays and challenges are often the focus when discussing autism, autistic people can possess some excellent strengths and unique abilities when it comes to communicating and can experience personal growth in this regard.

Coming up next...

In the next module, we'll investigate commonly seen autistic behaviour, what it means, and how to manage it.

You may be surprised to learn that many of the behavioural patterns seen in people on the autism spectrum can relate back to their considerable challenges or differences with language, speech, and communication.

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