



Teach Me As I Am

COMMUNICATION RESOURCE BOOKLET

Developed by SLT ASD SIG in partnership with AsIAM.

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COMMUNICATION STAGES

The foundation of supporting children on the autism spectrum in preschool is ensuring the child is feeling well regulated (calm & alert) as a precursor to social participation and accessing learning. One important factor in fostering regulation is that the child's communication partners modify communication to make things more easily understood and predictable, and to support the child's own expression.

The SCERTS model www.scerts.com outlines the following Communication Stages. However, like all of us, an autistic child's ability (at any stage) to understand and use language is impacted if they are feeling dysregulated, for example feeling under stress or experiencing excitement. Communication partners need to tune into the regulation of the child and adapt accordingly.

The SOCIAL PARTNER stage	The LANGUAGE PARTNER stage	The CONVERSATION PARTNER stage
 <p>Social Partners communicate with body language and vocalisations. They may use speech to repeat things they have heard but don't usually direct that speech to others to send a message. They may have a very few words or signs that they use spontaneously in all settings and with all communication partners and may make a choice of pictures when offered.</p> <p>SPs benefit from building interaction skills with a trusted, responsive adult who joins them in their preferred activities and adapts their communication to be closer to the child's own.</p> <p>Communication partners may augment their speech with sign, pictures & gesture to help SPs to understand. They may give extra time for processing & responding to language.</p>	 <p>Language partners use a growing number of verbal words/signs/pictures spontaneously in a range of settings to send messages to a range of communication partners. Mostly they use single verbal words/signs/pictures or are beginning to combine them together.</p> <p>LPs benefit from extending interaction with a trusted, responsive adult who adapts their own communication (see below). Following the child's attention and talking about what they are interested in allows LPs to extend their vocabulary. Simple games with peers, where the LP can see what to expect can be fun.</p> <p>Communication partners may augment their speech with sign, pictures & gesture to help them to understand. They give extra time for processing & responding.</p>	 <p>Conversation partners are confidently and flexibly using language (verbal words/signs/picture symbols) though their skills may be delayed compared to peers. Even if a CPs language skills are within the expected range on an assessment they may need support to use their language with adults & with their peers in interaction and play - often via modelling from a trusted & responsive adult.</p> <p>CPs continue to need adaptations to understand and process verbal language and communication partners need to show as well as say. Visuals help CPs to understand the plan and extra time is needed for response to instructions. CPs need communication partners to decipher the 'hidden' aspects of interaction, e.g. how another might be thinking or feeling.</p>

OBSERVATION CHECKLIST

While observing, consider the following questions. The term 'Communication Partner' refers to any adult who interacts with the child.

Following observation, choose 1 - 3 areas to emphasise. Talk through & leave the corresponding handouts.

Is the communication partner supporting the child's interaction skills?

Is there a balance between directing the child & following his/her lead?
Is the communication partner getting down to the child's level?
Is there a balance between questions & comments?
Does the adult imitate the child's actions and words where appropriate?
Is there evidence of turn-taking?

See handout
1

Does the communication partner support the child's understanding?

Is an effort made to get the child's attention before talking to them?
Is verbal language paired with visual supports signs or gestures?
Is sufficient time provided for children to process what has been said to them?
If a child does not understand are steps taken to assist them?

See handout
2

Does the communication partner interpret the child's message & model universally understood alternatives?

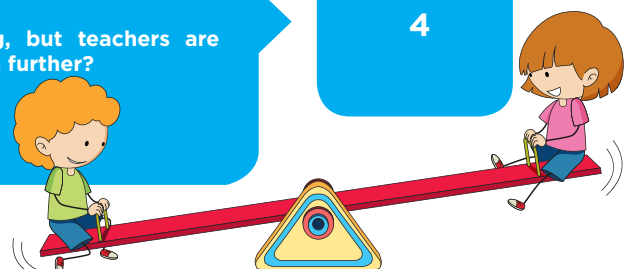
Is a model of appropriate language for the situation provided for the child?
Are the adults talking to the child using incorrect grammar, or oversimplified language?
Are the adults talking to the child using language that seems to be far more advanced than the child's language level?

See handout
3

Does the communication partner expand on the child's message?

Is the child involved in limited language based interactions?
Are adults unsure how to communicate with the child?
Are interactions happening, but teachers are unsure how to develop them further?

See handout
4



Does the communication partner create opportunities for communication across the day?

Is the child given a reason to communicate or are all his/her needs pre-empted?
Are consistent models being provided of communication that the child could use?

See handout
5

Does the communication partner interpret hidden information such as preferences & emotions?

Do you hear adults talking about how they are feeling?
Do you hear adults label and identify how the children and others are feeling?
Do the adults discuss people's preferences and validate them?

See handout
6

Does the communication partner make things predictable for the child?

Are there dedicated areas in the classroom for certain activities?
Are there activities that occur just before transition to prepare for it?
Is a routine established in the classroom? If so, is this available and understandable for the child?

See handout
7

Does the communication partner facilitate peer interaction?

Is the child interacting with their peers?
Are adults supporting peer interactions?
Do the teachers support the peers to interact with their autistic classmate?

See handout
8

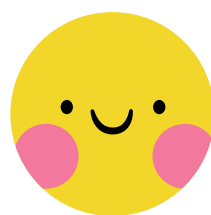


Language development happens in the context of interaction between people. When supporting language development, the first place we need to focus on is building interactions. A number of strategies can help to build interactions. These are useful with children of all language levels.



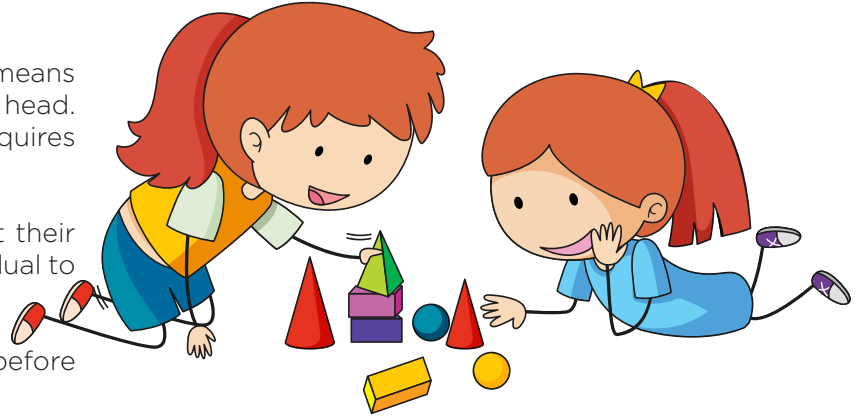
1. Think about the position of your body. Get to the child's level as much as possible. Position yourself and your body so that you are at the same level as the child. If they are sitting on the floor, then you sit on the floor too!
2. Follow the child's lead. Observe what the child is doing and what they are interested in. Join in with them. This may just involve sharing the space together. It may involve playing alongside one another. Try imitating what the child is doing. This is a way for you both to share interest and attention together.
3. Be responsive. When the child sends a message (which may not necessarily be a verbal message) try to respond immediately. This rewards communication attempts and the child learns that they can have influence on their environment through communication.
4. Comment about what is happening. Talk about what the child is interested in. Provide the words and language for the items that the child is looking at and the activities that the child is engaged in. In doing so, children hear language that matches the focus of their attention. Refrain from asking lots of questions. Instead, just talk about what is happening.
5. Ensure that there is a balance between you directing the child and the play, and you following the child and their play.
6. Taking turns. Look for opportunities to take turns. Sometimes imitation can become a turn taking activity. The child does something, then you do it, and so on. This is an important way to develop conversational skills, as communication involves taking turns. This might involve you imitating the way a child plays with a toy animal, for example, the child makes the dog jump. Then you make the dog jump. Then the child does it, then you do it. In this way the child is sharing attention with you, and learning about taking turns.

References: Harjusola-Webb & Robbins (2012); Sussman (2012); Wong et al (2015)



TOP TIPS:

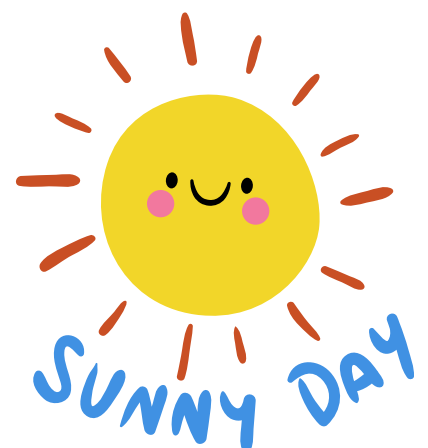
- Get down to the child's level. This means your head is at the same level as their head. If the child is sitting this often requires adults to lie on their stomach.
- Get face to face. As well as being at their level it is important to face the individual to support them in attending to you.
- Call their name to get their attention before starting an interaction.






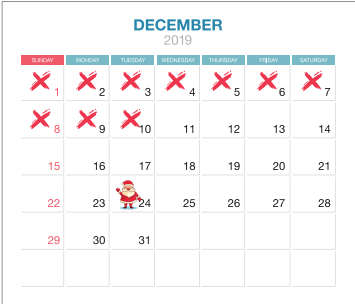
- **Say less** - Use short clear labels and sentences. Speak to the individual at their language level by using roughly the same number of words/sign/symbols they. Use simple phrases and sentences that are grammatically correct.
- **Stress** - Stress key words by saying them louder or with intonation. If possible, put important words at the end of the sentence.
- **Go Slow** - Leave natural pauses in between words and phrases. Pausing is vital to allow individuals process language and formulate a response. Count to 10 in your head and if there is no response repeat or use a new word or phrase.
- **Show** - We use visuals for many reasons. One of these reasons is to support understanding of language. Types of visuals that can be used to support understanding include real objects, gestures, pointing, actions, sign and pictures. Many pre-school teachers use a keyring with core visuals to support their understanding. Core visuals can vary from setting to setting but may include: break, finished, help, change, wait, toilet. What's useful about using visuals for these messages is that unlike our words, visuals do not change or disappear.

*Be aware of what type of visual support an individual requires by consulting a hierarchy of visuals. Remember some children do not have symbolic representation (understand that something stands for something else).

Also keep in mind that in stressful situations an individual might require more support to understand than usual.



See the table below for some examples of how you could use these strategies:

<p>Social Partners Augment speech with sign, pictures & gesture to help understanding.</p>	<p>Language Partners Augment speech with sign, pictures & gesture to help understanding.</p>	<p>Communication Partners Show as well as say as much as possible using visuals, gesture and facial expression.</p>
<p></p> <p>You are telling a 3-year-old (who does not understand signs or pictures represent things yet) that it is time to try to go to the toilet. When saying 'toilet' use a sign and a photo of it as well as an object of reference e.g. towel or toilet roll.</p> <p>You are telling a 3-year-old (who does not understand signs or pictures represent things yet) it's time to go outside. Hold up a coat and gesture to the outside area saying 'outside'.</p> <p></p> <p>A 4-year-old is struggling to open their lunchbox and getting frustrated. Show them a 'help' visual (perhaps on a core visuals keyring), say 'I'll help' and sign 'help' before opening it for them.</p>	<p>You are telling a 3-year-old that you are going bouncing on the trampoline and then to the garden. Show a first/then board with trampoline (first) and garden (then) pictures. Point to 'trampoline' during the first activity. When it is over take trampoline off and say 'trampoline is finished'. You could also use a lámh sign or show a symbol for 'finished'. Point to 'garden' and say 'next garden'.</p> <p>Use a visual of 'who' during the role call asking 'who is in today?' Use the same 'who' visual at snack time asking 'who's lunchbox is this?' And 'who is finished their snack?'. Use it again when asking 'who's turn it is during a game?'.</p> <p></p>	<p>A 3-year-old is asking about Santa coming every day. Get a calendar and mark Christmas. Then each morning cross off a new day together and count the days left until Christmas. School holidays, school tours and sports days are also important to put in calendars to prepare the individual.</p> <p></p> <p>A 4-year-old really wants to play with their toy car all day at school. Show them a schedule with the mornings plan e.g. first circle, time then snack, then car.</p> <p>Use comic strip conversations to highlight how others might be thinking or feeling e.g. another child wanting a turn of a game.</p> <p>Use social stories to help prepare them for significant change e.g. change of teacher.</p>

Reference: Sussman (2012)

HOW TO INTERPRET A CHILD'S MESSAGE

HANDOUT # 3

Interpreting a child's message involves putting yourself in the child's shoes and giving them a model of what they could say.

What to do:

- Interpret what your child is trying to say or what would be useful for them to say if they could in that situation. Give them a model of this (say it for them).
- When appropriate interpret from the child's point of view e.g. 'I want to go to the Monkey Maze'.
- Use correct grammatical phrases or sentences.
- Add an action or a gesture if appropriate.



When to use:

- If a child uses an incomplete sentence e.g. 'dolly sleep' you could say 'the dolly is sleeping'.
- When a child is struggling to express himself or herself e.g. if they are showing you they want a drink by reaching for the glasses and looking at you could say 'I want a drink' or 'give me a drink'.
- When their actions are telling you something, e.g. they are pushing away their snack or lunch you could say 'I don't want (insert food here)'. If they are covering their ears you might say 'it's too loud.'
- If the child uses echolalia and repeats your words, e.g. when you ask 'what drink would you like?' and the child repeats 'what drink would you like?' while reaching for the water, you could interpret and say 'I want the water.'

Then:

- If it is a request, give it to them right away where possible.
- If not a request, say something related to what they just said.
- Do not wait for (or expect) the child to repeat what you have said; if they do, that is great but do not expect it.

*Important note: Try to provide a model that is just beyond the level of language that the child currently uses. For example, if the child does not use words to communicate, then interpret their message using one word. If your child uses sentences with 2 or 3 words try to not to use more than 4 words when interpreting for them.

Reference: Sussman (2012)



At all communication stages children are sending us messages. Communication partners (anyone communicating with the individual) can build on these messages.

- Speak to the individual at their language level, using simple sentences and roughly the same number of words/sign/symbols they use.
- However, it is important to use grammatically correct phrases. Here are some examples of what to do and not to do:
'~~want drink~~' 'you want a drink' '~~bear walking~~' 'the bear is walking' '~~Teacher help~~' 'Teacher will help'
'~~cup full~~' 'the cup is full' '~~John jump~~' 'John is jumping'.
Ask yourself would your words sound ok to another adult.
- If the child is uses AAC (Augmentative Alternative Communication) use the same strategies with the communication aid (e.g. lámh, communication board, high tech communication device) as well as using words.
- These strategies can be incorporated into most tasks used throughout the day. Like all of us, autistic children's ability to attend and learn is optimum when they are regulated and during motivating activities so incorporating special interests is a great idea!

Use the following strategies to expand on communication:

Commenting -Provide a running commentary of what the child is attending to. Comment on what the child is doing and what you are doing.

Try to comment a lot more than question (use the guideline 5 comments for every 1 question). This can be a difficult habit to get into.

Some tips:

If you ask questions try to answer them yourself e.g. 'what is that? It's a helicopter'

Turn questions into comments with phrases such as 'I think' 'I wonder' e.g. '~~Where are the children going?~~' 'I wonder where the children are going'.

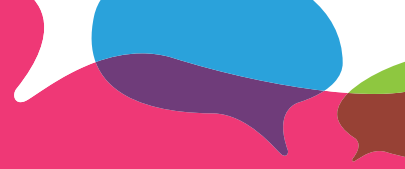
Support each other in classroom environment to implement this - counting the questions versus comments you use in an interaction can also be helpful.

Expanding- When expanding on the child's message acknowledge their message and use their word(s) so they feel heard and expand their phrase by using 1 extra word.

Modelling/ say it as they would if they could- this means repeating what the child has communicated using clear and grammatically correct words or phrases. If a child uses grammatical or speech errors, you can model back what they have said.

When using these 3 strategies it is important to also leave a PAUSE so the child has a chance to process and respond.





	Social Partner	Language Partner	Conversation Partners
Commenting	The child is engaging in a repetitive play sequence putting a ball on the table and knocking it off. Adult might comment 'the ball is falling'.	During a painting activity the adult might comment 'Mary is painting a green tree'.	Reading a book – 'I think that man is feeling sad because he lost his dog' 'John doesn't like this book'
Expanding	At snack time the child is reaching for the crackers and says 'crackers'. The adult might say 'more crackers'.	Child: Dolly eating Adult: Dolly is eating an apple	Child: It's a big box ball Adult: Yes it's a big heavy box
Modelling	If the child gives teacher yoghurt to open the teacher might model 'open the yoghurt'.	Child: 'punny pace' Adult: 'ya that's a funny face, a very funny face'. If a child takes a toy from another child an adult might model say: 'you want to play too you can say 'can I have a turn''	Child: I saw'd the ducks Adult: yes you saw the ducks at the park If a child interrupts 2 adults having a conversation. Adult might model 'excuse me'.

References: Sussman (2012); Bredin-Oja & Fey 2014)



CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR COMMUNICATION

HANDOUT # 5

When you have communication difficulties, life can be difficult. Adults supporting children with communication difficulties often pre-empt the child's needs to ensure they don't become frustrated. Once a routine and trusting relationship has been established, set up a specific communication opportunity by deliberately not pre-empting one of the child's need as you previously would have.

For example, don't zip up the child's coat straight away as usual. Observe his/her communication and provide a **model** of another way to communicate the same message before responding, e.g. 'Oh you want **help** with that!' (sign the word help or point to the symbol for help). Next time, **model** and **pause** before you respond as you normally would. By pausing, you give the child a chance to extend their communication skills perhaps by imitating your sign or point.

Remember: None of us learn when we are upset so even though you create an opportunity, model and pause to give the child a chance, always respond before he/she becomes frustrated.

1. Support the development of important gestures

Some social partners don't always approach others for help & it is important to teach them to begin to seek out other people and use the **give gesture**. The **pointing gesture** is also very useful.

- Give the child something that is difficult to open, such as a snack or a see-through container with a favourite toy inside. When the child struggles to open, place your outstretched hands nearby to encourage them to give you the item. Open the container immediately. Do this at the same time every day and gradually step back to encourage them to look for you before giving.
- Encourage the pointing gesture by holding up two objects from which to choose.

2. Support the use of alternative methods of communication - such as pictures and signs

Social and language partners benefit from modelling with pictures and signs. The adult always speaks at the same time, thereby providing a model of the verbal word too. For example:

- Model the Lámh sign for finished when a child indicates that he's had enough. Model the Lámh sign for open when the child needs help with his lunchbox. Next time model & pause briefly.
- Rather than simply direct the child to the next activity, or sing any song, offer the child a choice with pictures or drawings. Pause and model choosing if the child is unsure what to do.

3. Teach useful phrases

Rehearse useful phrases with conversation partners by drawing out the scenario and suggesting what they could say. Write out the phrase even though they cannot yet read, so that you model the same phrase each time you talk about it.

Remind the child of the phrase when you know they are going to need it in their daily routine.



VALIDATING AND TEACHING PREFERENCES AND EMOTIONS

HANDOUT # 6

To ensure that **all** children can advocate for themselves successfully their communication partners **validate** their preferences and feelings, and model language that they can use themselves. For example:

A 2 year old gets cranky when playing. Her mum tunes in and realises she is tired. Mum says: 'Oh you're tired, let's have a cuddle'. She is validating her daughter's feelings as well as teaching her that this is what tired feels like.

A 3 year old falls, hurts his leg and starts to cry. His dad tunes in and while helping him to stand up says, 'Oh that looks painful!'. He is validating his son's feelings and teaching him some useful vocabulary to use.

A 4 year old begins to shout at his younger sibling when she grabs his Lego. His mum approaches him and says 'I know you're frustrated. We have to remember she is only a baby'. She validates her son's feelings and teaches him a useful word to use in the future.

Some autistic people find it particularly difficult to identify and respond to their own feelings and the feelings of others. Others can find it difficult to express physiological states such as tired, hungry, thirsty, cold or hot. Some autistic people find it difficult to express their likes and dislikes.

You can help by noticing, talking about and validating likes and dislikes, physiological states & emotions.

Tune into and talk about everyone's preferences & emotions – the child's own, your own, other people in the environment and those of characters you come across in books or through play.

Top Tips:

Acknowledge emotions even when you can't respond to them by 'fixing' the situation. For example, if a child is finding it hard to leave a favourite activity but it is time to go, you can still validate their feelings, e.g. 'Oh it's hard to finish up. You love this. You don't want to go. C'mon, I'll help you tidy up'. Or if a child shows frustration you can say 'I know this hard. Let's try one more time'.

Don't forget to talk about positive emotions such as happiness and excitement and the child's and other's preferences, e.g. 'Look John is building too. He loves blocks just like you!'.



Talk about how you feel and what can help, e.g. 'I'm very hot today. I'm going take off my cardigan. I need a drink. You look hot too! Do you want to take off your jumper? Do you want a drink?'

When labelling a feeling such as tired, happy, upset, show the emotion briefly in your own facial expression and body language so the word is meaningful for children at all communication stages.



Consistent routine is comforting for all children. People with communication difficulties particularly benefit from predictable routines as they often find it hard to ask about the plan and may therefore feel uncertain.

Establish the routine

Be sure that all staff members know what the plan of the day is. Then brainstorm how to communicate this to the children. A whole-group visual timetable can be talked through at the start of the day. It can be made up of printed photographs or pictures, or you can simply draw on a whiteboard as you talk. Don't forget to mark home time on your timetable!

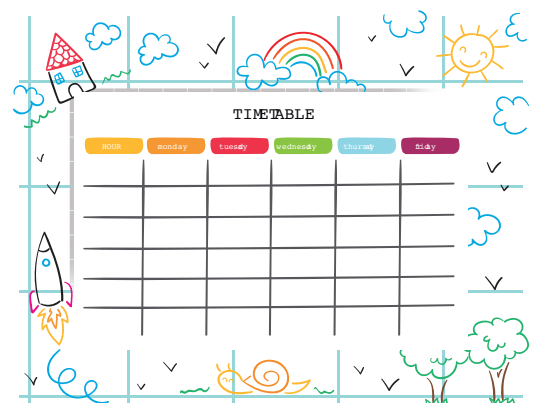
Songs and rhymes are another great way to establish routines. Try to have different ones for transition times such as tidying up, putting on coats or getting ready for snack time.



Take the time to acknowledge a change of plan

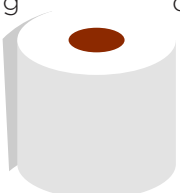


Plans inevitably change. Take the time to acknowledge this by referring back to the timetable, for example if you can no longer go outside because it is raining.



Augment your speech with objects at times of transition

Although an adult might have announced what's next, some children may have been focused on something else or found it difficult to process or understand the information. Transition objects can be great to help at these times, for example hold up a helmet to show you are going out on the bikes, a carpet square to show it is story time on the carpet, or a toilet roll to show it is toilet time. Some children like to carry transition objects with them until they get to their new destination.



Give a clear purpose to tasks.

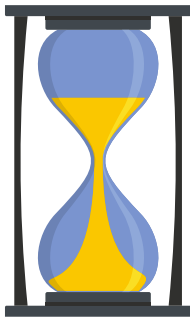
For some children, being presented with a blank page & paints, a basket of blocks or a dress-up box might be overwhelming as it is not clear what they are supposed to do. Be sure to include activities that have a clear beginning and end such as puzzles into free-play time.

When open-ended activities are presented, provide an example of what the finished outcome could look like, such

as a pre-painted rainbow, a picture of a garda to correspond to the garda outfit in the dress-up box or a pre-built tower of blocks.



Show a clear end time

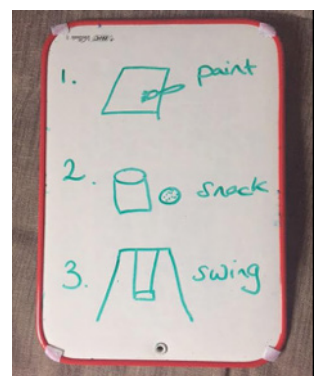


Sand timers can be useful to show children how long they can expect to stay at a less preferred activity. Be sure to start with brief periods & let them leave when time is up!

individualised visuals

Further break down the steps of the day or an activity into manageable chunks by using photos or a mini whiteboard and pen.

Some children understand just two steps best, with the words First and Then. Others respond to more than two steps that can be crossed out as you go along.



For visual timetable resources see www.do2learn.com

Children learn so much from each other, but they may need your support to facilitate interaction with their peers.

Children can become isolated in a busy classroom. Their peers may not know how to interact with them and so they might need guidance and support from you. You can help peers to interact with their friends who find interaction difficult in the following ways.

- Encourage them to **STAY** near the child. Play alongside them. Share space together. Companionship is a key building block of friendship.
- Encourage them to **PLAY**. Look at what the child is interested in and prompt the peer to play with them, imitate them, or play with similar toys alongside them. For example, if the child is painting a picture, encourage the peer to paint another picture alongside them.
- Encourage them to **TALK** about what is happening. This increases the amount and variety of language input for the child. They can talk about what is happening, compliment their friend, or ask play related questions.

Provide positive and direct praise for the children. For example, 'I like how you are playing together', 'good job playing with your friend'.



Adult support may be helpful to get peer interaction started but when the interaction has begun make sure to back away, and only help when needed. Children's play develops in new and exciting ways when it is child led.

It is important to set up structured opportunities for play. For example, a play area set up with all of the kitchen toys, or a play station with musical instruments. This kind of designated play area supports peer interaction for children on the autism spectrum.

Children may benefit from learning how to play a game with an adult, and then playing it with a peer. Peers may not be as patient, and predictable as adults.

Praise children when they are playing well together, and praise when you see children try to play together, even if it does not go exactly to plan.

Sometimes children may want some alone time. This can be important for self-regulation. Try to support at least one peer interaction every day.

Reference: Ledford, Osborne & Chazin (2016)

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