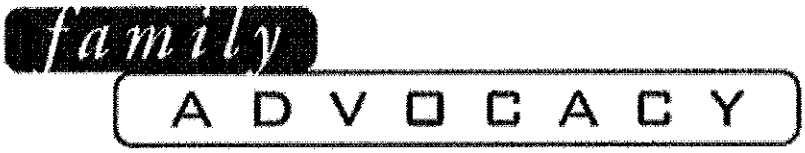
Institute for Family Advocacy and Leadership Development



PO Box 502
Epping NSW 1710

204/16-18 Cambridge Street
Epping NSW 2121

Phone (02) 9869 0866
Facsimile: (02) 9869 0722
Email: familyadvocacy@family-advocacy.com

File number: 11131

Author: Kluth, Paula

Title: A Supportive Communication Partner'

Original Source: www.paulakluth.com

Publication date: 2005

Publisher information: Dr. Kluth is an independent education consultant and independent scholar. She is also an adjunct instructor at National-Louis University in Chicago, Illinois. Her professional and research interests center on differentiating instruction and on supporting students with autism and significant disabilities in inclusive classrooms. She has a M.Ed. in Educational Policy from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and a Ph.D. in Special Education from the University of Wisconsin. She is a former special educator who has served as a classroom teacher, consulting teacher, and inclusion facilitator.

Abstract:
The strategies described on this article may help any teacher, family member, or support person as they work to understand, listen to, and communicate with students with autism. While there is much literature about how to improve the communication skills of students with autism, there is not much about how to improve the communication skills of the people who communicate with these students; this is the reason why Paula Kluth decided to write this article. The document gives some tips about eye contact, voice volume and tone, indirect communication and language.
By supporting students' communication, we are encouraging the students to participate more and therefore facilitate the process of inclusion.
Keywords: Education, Communication, Autism, Inclusion

A Supportive Communication Partner

Open any textbook on autism or disability and you will find several pages and perhaps several chapters dedicated to improving the communication skills or capacities of students with autism. Less common, however, are pages and chapters dedicated to the necessary skills, attitudes, beliefs and abilities of his or her communication partner.

This paradigm or view of seeing "communication improvement" as a task for only one person in the communicative act is puzzling as communication is undoubtedly a social act. Therefore, supporting a student's communication involves more than engaging in an assessment or encouraging their participation in a small group discussion. Supporting communication also involves reflection, self-examination, and collaboration with each individual student. The following strategies may help any teacher, family member, or support person as they work to understand, listen to, and communicate with students with autism.

Don't Insist on Eye Contact

In schools, in the work place, and in society in general, eye contact is understood as a "tool" that aids communication. Unfortunately, many with autism find use of this "tool" irritating or even painful. This inability to use (or preference to avoid) eye contact can cause a myriad of problems for the individual with autism. Because eye contact is an expectation for most communication partners, those who do not use it may be seen as impolite, sneaky or distrustful, uninterested, or incapable of attending to a communication act.

Of course as many with autism will share, eye contact for these individuals is not related to listening or attention, except, of course, that avoiding it (for some) can *increase* their ability to listen or attend. Wendy Lawson (1998), who has Asperger's syndrome, claims that making eye contact with a speaker can make the interaction confusing and cause comprehension difficulties:

How much easier it it to hear someone if you can't see his or her face. Then words are pure and not distorted by grimaces and gestures. I can listen better to the tone of someone's voice when I am not confused by the unwritten words of their facial expressions. (Lawson, p. 97)

Jasmine Lee O'Neill (1999), another woman with autism, offers similar advice and insight about the use of eye contact:

Autistic people often glance out the sides of their eyes at objects or at other people. They have very acute peripheral vision and a memory for details that others miss. Gazing directly at people or animals is many times too overwhelming for the autistic one. (O'Neill, p. 26)

In fact, some individuals purposely avoid eve contact as a strategy for enhancing communication. As one man told me, "I can only participate effectively in conversation if I'm looking at the floor".

Consider Voice Volume and Tone

Any teacher can attest to the powers of the voice. When I taught high school, I often found that the best way to get the attention of a noisy room of teenagers was to sing. When I taught kindergarten, I often gave directions in a silly falsetto voice. Both of these variations in my voice caught students off guard and appeared to capture their interest.

Playing with voice volume, quality, and tone can be a tool in connecting with any student, including those with autism.

One variation in voice that seems unusually helpful is whispering. Many individuals autism and many parents of learners with autism have reported that whispering (Gerland, 1996; Gillingham, 2000) is a useful communication tool that can be used both for conversing and calming an individual. As a teacher,

I often used whispers to give individual students directions or to reinforce key points. I also used it, however, whenever a child was struggling emotionally, physically, or behaviorally. Oftentimes students could be calmed by reassuring words shared in a hushed tone. Gunilla Gerland (1996), a woman with autism, indicates that whispers are extremely helpful in connecting with others: "[Unlike loud voices,] whispers came rushing at me from a long way off, always straight into my head, easily passing through all the passages in my ears, sliding directly up into my mind and rousing it. (Gerland, 1996, p. 31-32)

Experiment with Indirect Communication

Many individuals with autism feel uncomfortable having direct conversations or engaging in direct interactions (Williams, 1992; 1998). For example, I once worked with a student, Buddy, who hated to be greeted directly. If he happened to answer the door when I visited his house, he would often slam the door in my face or run directly into the bathroom and lock himself in. His behavior would change dramatically, however, if I avoided greeting him, looked at the floor, and handed him a card that read, "Hi Buddy". In these instances he would step aside, let me enter, and join me in the family dining room.

Donna Williams, a woman with autism, shares that she prefers to interact and socialize in ways that are more indirect or detached: "The best way I could have been given things would have been for them to be placed near me with no expectation of thanks and no waiting for a response. To expect a thank-you or a response was to alienate me from the item that prompted the response" (1992, p. 216): Williams (1998), suggests that teachers use costumes, foreign accents, conversation-songs, rhymes and puppets to cultivate interactions that "encourage expression in a way that allows some degree of personal distance". Williams suggests that these props and activities help students "develop self-awareness in a self-controlled and self-regulated way" (p. 306). Indeed, Junee Waites (2001), the mother of a man with autism, shared in her book, Smiling at the Shadows , that she couldn't get her son to engage in household routines until she sang to him. If she was sweeping the floor, for example, and wanted him to help, she would croon, "We're sweeping the floor, sweeping the floor!" Waites reported that she used this strategy across situations and environments and that it was wonderfully successful.

In addition to singing, there are a variety of other ways to make communication less direct. If a student does not want to read in front of the group, perhaps giving her a toy microphone or a special hat will give her the confidence and inspiration to do so. If a student does not like to answer peers who wish him a good morning, the entire class might say hello through handshakes, high-fives, or by learning greetings in other languages. Written communication (e-mail, communication cards) and gestures (sign language, holding up a hand to indicate "wait") can also be used for students preferring indirect communication.

Help Students Understand Language

Many students with autism have difficulties understanding some types of language. For instance, students may interpret language quite literally. I learned just how literal some students are when I took one of my students swimming. As Tom entered the pool area, he began walking straight for the deep end. I shouted at him to "turn around" as he got to the edge of the pool, thinking that he would know to turn his back to the water in order to climb down the metal ladder leading into the water. I was puzzled, but quickly understood when Tom began twirling in circles. He was "turning around" as I had asked.

Another young woman, Rio, had a difficult time hanging out in the school cafeteria because all of off her teenage peers spoke in slang. She often had to ask peers to "interpret" their conversations. On the suggestion of one of her homeroom classmates, she began keeping a diary of all of her translations and added to the volume whenever she encountered a new word or concept. While the diary began as a communication tool for Rio, it had the unintended benefit of bringing her closer to her peers; students often approached Rio to share new terms they had learned or to review the diary for language they themselves didn't understand.

Students with autism may need help interpreting figurative language like idioms (e.g., sitting on the fence, hold your horses), jokes or riddles, metaphors (e.g, he was on fire), phrases or slang expressions with double meaning, and sarcasm (e.g., saying, "good work" to someone who has just tripped). Teachers might offer support in the following ways:

- Double-check with all students to make sure directions or questions are understood
- Providing opportunities for students to learn about language (e.g., present a "metaphor of the

week")

- Use visuals help students remember the meanings of figurative language (e.g., draw a picture of an angry person literally "flying off" of a handle)
- Encourage the student to keep a personal dictionary or encyclopedia of puzzling language, every time the individual is confused by a word or the use of a phrase, explain it and have them add it to their dictionary

References

Gerland, G. (1997). A real person: Life on the outside. Souvenir Press, London , UK

Gillingham , G. (2000). Autism: A new understanding. Edmonton , Canada : Tacit Publishing.

Lawson, W. (1998). Life behind glass. Philadelphia , PA : Jessica Kingsley.

O'Neill, J.L. (1999). Through the eyes of aliens: A book about autistic people. Philadelphia , PA : Jessica Kingsley.

Waites, J., & Swinbourne, H. (2001). Smiling at the shadows: A mother's journey through heartache and joy. New York : Harper Collins.

Williams, D. (1992). Nobody nowhere: The extraordinary biography of an autistic. New York : Avon .
