



# A University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education, Research and Service

## Teaching First “Words”

A Parent and Caregiver Resource

Parent Home Training Program

Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities Division

### **Why Do Some Children with ASD Have Trouble Learning to Talk?**

One of the earliest signs of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a delay in the development of spoken words. It is very common for children with ASD to have trouble with language and the reasons for this are not very well understood. Current research suggests there are different reasons why children have trouble learning to talk. Some children have difficulty making the motor movements needed for speech. Other children have trouble with understanding the symbolic nature of language (i.e., understanding that words are symbols for the things in their environment). Other children are learning to talk, but do so in different ways such as repeating (echoing) words and phrases. We do not yet understand the reasons why some children have trouble learning to talk, but we do know that there are some very effective methods for teaching children to use words.

### **Do All Children with ASD Learn to Talk?**

We do know that most children with ASD will learn to use language, including most of those who are late talkers. However, a small percentage of children do not learn to talk or only use minimal language, even after receiving lots of very good language intervention. Unfortunately, we do not yet understand why. We cannot reliably predict who will acquire language and who will continue to have trouble. We do know that getting involved

in early intervention is the best predictor of later language. Even if a child has difficulty learning to use speech, all children can learn to use some form of communication (such as sign language or pictures). We also know that learning another form of communication while they are young will not interfere with a child's ability to one day talk.



### **What Are the Best Practice Interventions for Language Delays in ASD?**

There is a great deal of research supporting a group of language interventions called Naturalistic Teaching Strategies. Parents or clinicians can use these strategies. They are among the most well supported approaches for helping young children learn first words. The approach presented in this handout is an example of a Naturalistic Teaching Strategy. Best practice for addressing early language delays involves the use of these strategies in the home as well as therapy provided by a Speech-Language Pathologist or a Board Certified Behavior Analyst.

## Choosing “Words” to Teach

Selecting the right words to teach is an important first step of intervention. There are a few things to consider before selecting the first words to teach.

- First words should be words that are **requests**. Choose simple words that your child can use to request their very favorite items. These may include favorite foods (e.g., juice, banana, goldfish crackers, pizza bites), favorite activities (e.g., bubbles, television, being spun in a circle), or favorite toys (e.g., racing cars, puzzles, trampoline). Teaching a request can help to motivate a child to communicate by connecting words with their purposes. A child is more likely to use a word if saying the word leads to getting what they want.
- First words can also be those that are **practiced often throughout the day** or used many times in a row within a preferred activity. We suggest making a list of all the strong preferences that your child has so that you can consider which ones might be easy to practice requesting throughout the day. Some strong preferences are hard to practice throughout the day. For one child, taking a bath was a favorite activity and a very strong preference. But, getting a bath set up several times a day in order to practice requesting bath time is not feasible for most families. Instead, the family selected to teach two other words first. They chose the word ‘popcorn’ to request a snack that is easily available, can be given in small amounts, and is available throughout the day and the word ‘ring’ to request that they family sing the song “Ring Around the Rosie,” which can be requested several times in a row.
- Initially, select only 1-2 words to work on. These should be the **only words** that you require communication from the child before they receive access to the item. Once they master those, you can introduce others.

Note: At times, the first “words” that a child with ASD is taught to use are not vocal “words” at all. Instead, they may be a picture (as in the Picture Exchange Communication System known as PECS), sign language, use of an iPad, or use of speech generating device. There is research to show us that using an augmentative communication strategy such as these does not prevent a child from learning to talk. In fact, there is now substantial research evidence to suggest that the opposite is true!

Children with language delays who begin to use another method of communication earlier in intervention often learn to talk more quickly than children who did not receive exposure to pictures, sign language, or a device. This is because we know that working any form of communication actually works to strengthen all forms of communication. So, if it is hard to prompt the use of verbal speech with your child, a therapist or consultant working with your child may recommend beginning to use another form of communication.

milk



MILK



## 4-Step Naturalistic Teaching Procedure

1. **Notice or Create Motivation:** The first teaching step is to make sure there is some motivation for communication already in place. This is the most natural time to work on communication, when your child is already motivated for the item or activity that you want them to request. The best time to teach a child to request milk is when you see them opening the refrigerator looking for milk on their own.
2. **Prompt Request:** If your child will attempt to imitate your speech, prompt the child using a verbal prompt (e.g., “milk”) to say the word that you are working on. If your child is not yet imitating your verbal language, then use physical prompts to help them use a picture or make a sign to communicate.
3. **Immediately Give the Item or Activity:** As soon as your child tries to communicate using the target word (e.g., imitated some part of word you are working on; gave you a picture card), give the item and praise them for their attempts at using words, or signs or pictures. Initially, reinforce all attempts at using the word, sign, or picture by giving the item, even if they do not pronounce the word clearly or the sign in only an approximate.
4. **Plan:** Set up the environment for another teaching opportunity.

Teaching Procedure	Example	Example	Example
Notice or Create Motivation	Sarah is reaching for popcorn bowl that is out of reach on the table.	Jacob is playing with a puzzle. His younger brother has taken two pieces of the puzzle and is playing with them.	Lucia runs up towards her grandmother and grabs her hands as though she wants to swing.
Prompt Request	Her mom prompts her to request by saying “popcorn”. Sarah repeats “popcorn”.	When Jacob begins to reach for the puzzle pieces, his father physically prompts Jacob’s hand towards his picture communication book and prompts him to give the card to his brother.	Lucia’s grandmother models the sign language for “up”. Lucia makes a good effort at the sign for “up” though the sign she makes is not a perfect match.
Give Item/Activity Requested and Provide Praise	Her mom gives her 5 pieces of popcorn. Says “Nice job!”	Jacob’s brother hands him the 2 pieces of the puzzle. His father says, “Great job asking!”	Her grandmother says “Good try!”, and picks her up and swings her around 2 times.
Plan for the Next Opportunity	Sarah’s mom leaves the popcorn out of her reach on the table so that Sarah will continue to be motivated to request popcorn.	The next day when Jacob is playing with a puzzle, his father takes a few of the pieces and puts them in a difficult to open container so that Jacob might be motivated to request them.	After she puts Lucia down, her grandmother puts her hands out to let Lucia know that she can ask again to swing.

## Tips for Success

1. The most important step is to ensure that there are enough opportunities to work on requesting throughout the day. A child will be more motivated to request when they need help accessing the desired objects. Kids who have access to everything in the kitchen are not going to be motivated to request food items. Kids who have access to all of their toys all the time do not have any reason to request them. To enhance motivation for objects, restrict their access while letting a child know they are available. This can be done in many different ways so get creative (e.g., you can put food and toy items on higher shelves or in difficult to open plastic containers).
2. Always wait for some sort of indicator that your child is truly interested in obtaining the object (e.g., tries to open the plastic container, opening refrigerator). Then you can hold up the object and give the child a prompt to engage in the desired requesting behavior (e.g., say “milk”, physical prompt to hand over PECS card, demonstrate milk sign). Try not to teach when a child is not showing interest in the item or activity. Simply wait for another opportunity when they are motivated.
3. Create a language rich environment during the rest of the day using the “1 UP” rule. The “1 UP” rule states that children learn best when most of the language that they hear throughout the day is 1 word longer than the language they are producing on their own. So, for a child who is using very few words, use single words to comment about things they want or see (e.g., dog, music, ball). Once a child is beginning to use one word, move up to using 2 words (e.g., brown dog, loud music, big ball).



### Some Useful Resources on Early Language Development

*More Than Words* by Fern Sussman

*A Picture's Worth: PECS and Other Visual Communication Strategies in Autism*  
by Andy Bondy & Lori Frost

*The Verbal Behavior Approach: How to Teach Children With Autism and Related Disorders*  
by Mary Barbera & Tracy Rasmussen

*Jumpstarting Communication Skills in Children with Autism: A Parents' Guide to Applied Verbal Behavior* by Mary Jane Weiss & Valbona Demiri

For more information about this resource or to inquire about the Parent Home Training Program call (505) 272-1852 or 1-800-270-1861.



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