



How to create enabling communication environments for Autistic children and young people

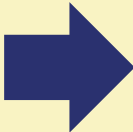
A talk for The Centre for Autism Wellbeing Hub,
University of Reading

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Divergent Perspectives

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Topics

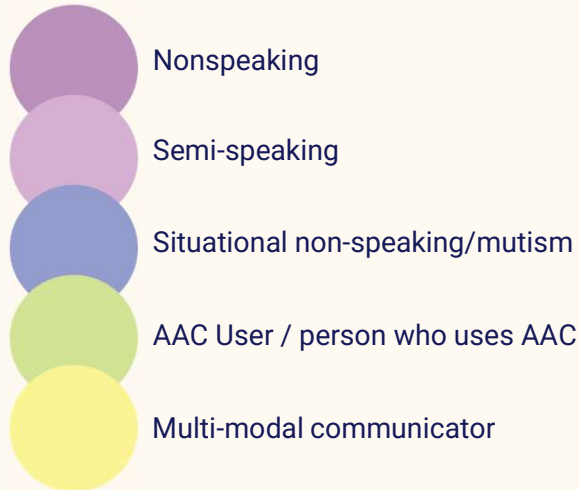
01. An overview of Autistic languaging
02. The role of the communication partner in enabling communication:
03. Practical strategies that can be used right away



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“Yet, how we describe who we are, our hopes, our fears, and the future we want to create is vital. And the words we use must be our own.”

CommunicationFIRST (July, 2023)



People who cannot rely on speech alone to be heard and understood.

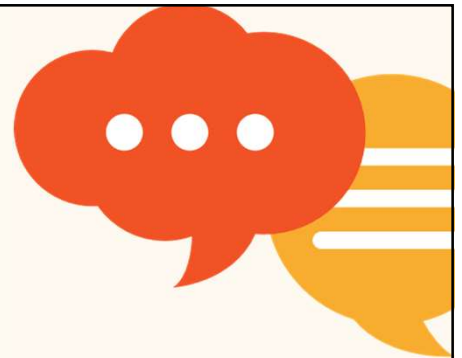
CommunicationFIRST

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Autistic experiences of speaking

Zisk and Dalton (2019)

01. Intermittent speech: the person can speak sometimes, but not always.
02. Unreliable speech: the person may say things that don't match their preferences or intended meaning.
03. Insufficient speech: the person can speak orally and accurately, but not completely.



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“Use your words!”

Forced speech

“I was in speech therapy through a segregated special education program until I was 10.

My speech was exhausting, and didn't feel natural.

I did it because it was the only thing people would respond to. It was tiring to speak a lot, and I couldn't access all of the words in my head and make them come out of my mouth.

I would have frequent periods where speech would not work or would not work properly.

I learned to outwardly appear to speak well because there was a lot of social pressure to do so, but I was frequently being forced to speak when it was difficult.”

(participant in Donaldson et al. 2021)

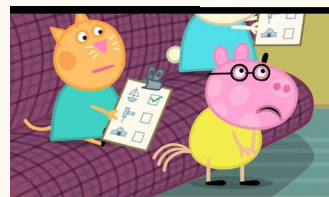
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Gestalt language

“...if I try consciously and voluntarily to remember what was said to me, it may all be floating and I may remember a few keywords but have little idea how they are linked or what the significance of that linking is. If a mental replay of a serial memory relating to a certain time or place is triggered, however, I will re-experience the placement of people in different parts of the room and replay a kind of mental audiotape of what was said as it related to where people were in relation to the objects around them when they said things.”

(Williams, 1996, p.148)

“I think I've lost my ticket”



“When I was young... my brother barked at me out of a closet, and I got a horrible startled feeling in my stomach. Ever since then, I referred to that feeling as “the dog,”...our metaphors deal with connecting one direct experience to another.”

(Baggs, 2012)

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Non-spoken languaging

“We have mapped all these things together so much that we don’t need words. Words could never come close, anyway. This all happens at a level below words, below concepts, all the way down close to the experience of the world.

And, there are so many details, so many forms and sensations, that move through our bodies, shaping our movements, which we are aware of in each other, which translates back to the original perception.

This happens without effort or intent. Because this is our language. This is the language we already spoke fluently before we learned that words existed...And even after we learned words, this other language remained our strongest means of relating to the world.”

(Baggs, 2012, p.325)

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Crip Linguistics:



A framework based on the idea that all language variation is acceptable and that all people are competent co-participants in constructing meaning



Languaging is relational, interdependent, and intimate



Linguistic care work requires

- working together to create and provide optimal environments and material conditions for language to take place.
- patience
- multi-modal languaging
- seeking mutual understanding

“Disabled people do really cool things with language if people would pay attention.”

Henner & Robinson (2023)

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All language variation is acceptable.
All people are competent co-participants in constructing meaning.

“Seeing the child or young person, not as a problem, but in terms of their strengths and as needing an accessible environment & discrete support strategically applied only when necessary...”

(Conn, 2019 p.107)

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Listening well so that we hear and understand our young people

-  Listen with our whole bodies - be attentive to sensory languages, know about the yp's sensory needs and preferences
-  Listen literally - respond to the expressed need
-  Avoid tone policing
-  Ask accessible questions, in accessible modes to fully understand and allow for processing time

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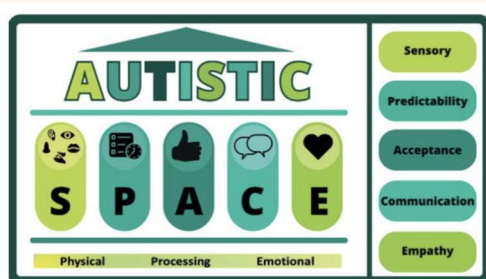
Languaging is relational, interdependent, and intimate

“No-one really made any attempt to ask about how I was doing. They [teachers] didn’t really notice... If there wasn’t enough of something, it was like ‘she won’t mind’... I was quiet and during exams I was meant to get extra time, but I had to tell the teachers this repeatedly. This was very nerve-wracking for me.”
(Ro in Goodall, 2020)

- Build a trusting relationship
- Form positive relationships with the autistic children to model acceptance and engagement for all pupils” (Wood, 2019)
- Be approachable and welcoming
- Get to know the child/yp well
- Be proactive in checking in and offering support
- Be thoughtful & non-judgemental
- Seek to understand needs rather than impose our agenda
- Support children to express boundaries, including saying no, setting limits

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Provide optimal environments and material conditions for language to take place.



Autistic SPACE, Doherty et al. 2023

“Freedom of embodiment is also an access need. A student who must constantly exert her energy & attention toward passing for “normal” is a student who has less energy & attention available for the tasks of learning & creative participation.” (Walker, 2021, p.154)

- Accept and accommodate the very varied and valid ways that children engage their attention
- Avoid conditioning “good listening” or “quiet hands” etc
- Provide and use multi-modal communication

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Provide & use multi-modal languaging

Enable communication autonomy -
being able to express what I want, how I want,
whenever I want to whomever I want."

- Children should be able choose the communication methods that best suits them according to their needs & context
- Non-speaking & semi-speaking children should know about and have experience of all modes of communication
- Never insist a child uses a particular type of communication modality
- Respect all communication, including non-spoken communication
- Respect bodily autonomy

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"For humanity to flourish, we need to both conserve diversity and to support divergence (p.132)."

The end goal is one where people are provided for and valued regardless of their individual ability (p.160)."

(Chapman, 2023)

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Questions?



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