

My Words Are Important

ACTIVITY HIGHLIGHTS

- Developing attentiveness to communication
- Learning to value your words
- How to speak so you are listened to

Summary

How often do you become frustrated because you have to repeat yourself over and over again?

Many Novices in the Autism Spectrum do not listen well. They are easily distracted and require the speaker to repeat himself and do all the work of making sure that the communication is received. In this exercise, we emphasize, in a subtle way, that both the speaker and listener have responsibilities during communication.

In this exercise, Novices learn to use indirect cues to increase their attention to the speaker. It is important for them to not rely on prompts ("Pay Attention! Look at me! Are you listening!"), to know when to pay attention. Such direct prompts result in increased "prompt dependence;" always waiting for someone to provide a cue. To listen, before shifting attention to the communicator. The indirect prompts we use in this activity do not create the same type of dependency. The novice perceives himself as voluntarily choosing to take an orientating action, rather than being requested to do so. The perception of voluntary action leaves him less prompt dependent and more likely to pay attention in the future, without any cues or prompts. The emphasis on developing voluntary action is a theme that you find in all of our activities.

You will notice that the first activities in this initial stage do not fall under the heading of "exercises." Rather they encourage you to make changes in your communication style. Think of these activities as new communication habits we would like you to develop.

Participants:

The exercise requires participation from all of the significant persons in the environment.

Getting Ready:

Remember that this is not an activity to reserve for a specific time or place. It is an on going method of communication that you should employ, until the Novice pays attention to your communication without prompts.

Coaching Instructions:

Do not provide any formal explanation. You will be observing and gauging your actions based upon whether the Novice is listening carefully and visually observing you when you speak. There are three basic steps in this exercise:

STEP 1: DELIBERATE SPEECH

The first step requires everyone, communicating with the Novice slow their rate of speech and, when they do speak, they should leave more deliberate pauses between words and sentences. This will take extensive practice and feedback. Do not underestimate the importance of changing your language style, even for very verbal Novices. By speaking slower and with clearer enunciation, you increase the value of each of the words spoken and you make it simpler for them to process the information.

STEP 2: BALANCING

The next step is to keep your communication in “balance.” “Balancing” your communication has two elements. First, try not to use more words in any utterance than the Novice uses. This means that if he normally speaks in two or three word phrases, you should also keep your phrases at this length. If the Novice is completely non-verbal, you should use very short phrases. The second part of balance entails not adding further words until the Novice provides a meaningful response the first set of words you have spoken. Don’t continually repeat yourself and don’t add more information if your initial information has been ignored. If we are aiming to make our words valuable to the listener, it is important that we do not continue to provide more words, if the words are not attended to. If you do, it will devalue your words.

STEP 3: SPOTLIGHTING

The third step is to insert “spotlighting” elements into your speech. These are indirect but powerful signals that some important information which requires attention is being presented. Spotlighting helps the Novice perceive the words you chose to stand out. Spotlighting is much more effective than “cueing” in creating generalisation and the perception that the Novice has “chosen” to focus attention. You will need to experiment with what alterations in your speech pattern produce the most effective “spotlights” and have the most impact on attention. You may insert a deep breath, a sigh, or a “stutter” when coming to a critical point in a sentence. Stuttering in critical moments usually results in a gaze shift and rapidly increased focus. If a stutter on its own does not work, we will often make a significant shift in voice volume to accompany the stutter.

Variations:

Other options for providing indirect cues include, changing voice tone, slowing down your rate of speech, pausing, coughing and clearing your throat.

Obstacles / Opportunities:

Occasionally, someone with autism appears oblivious to these methods. They may monitor their communication environment so poorly that they do not even notice your highly emphasized, indirect prompts. Initially, they will require a behaviour modification approach to learn how to respond to direct prompts. Then, this exercise should be applied as a second step.