



# Social Communication and Language Characteristics Associated with High Functioning, Verbal Children and Adults with ASD

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Individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) who are fluently verbal are not free of language and communication challenges. The purpose of this article is to assist others in recognizing and understanding the subtle and not so subtle problems that do occur. The presence or intensity of the following social communication and language characteristics of high-functioning individuals with autism spectrum disorders may vary by age and by individual. Some of these characteristics are found in others who do not have an autism spectrum disorder, for example, in individuals with language or learning disabilities. With increasing age and increasing communication competency, most of these characteristics lessen or disappear for those who do not have an autism spectrum disorder. It is the frequency and persistence of some of these characteristics from childhood into adulthood that exemplifies the syndrome of autism.

## Language Characteristics

Although the ability to exchange meaningful messages is the heart of communication, it is important to look at the characteristics of the language used to convey the messages. Individuals with autism spectrum disorder may:

- Appear to have a good vocabulary and a sophisticated command of the language system based on their verbal utterances.
  - In some instances sophisticated language may reflect repetition of bits of dialogue heard on television or in the conversation of others. This mitigated echolalia may or may not be used in appropriate contexts.
  - For the majority of individuals, the depth of meaning for specific words used may be restricted and/or the breath of vocabulary may not be as expansive as utterances may suggest. Of course, some individuals may have an excellent verbal repertoire.
- Appear to have difficulty with figurative language such as idioms, metaphors, similes, and irony.
- Appear to have difficulty recognizing in contextual (conversational) or text (print) situations that certain vocabulary words may have alternative meanings.
- Appear to respond to suggestions, directions, or information in a very literal manner.
- Appear to have some difficulty grasping the main idea, drawing conclusions and making other inferences from conversation, text, TV programs, and movies.
- Appear to have difficulty understanding humor in television programs, movies, cartoons (animated and static), and everyday interactions.
- Appear to have difficulty with WH question forms such Who, What, Where, When, Why, How and others.
- Appear to understand basic sentence structure but may have more difficulty with more complex sentences that contain embedded and subordinate clauses.
- May primarily attend to key words rather than to the message conveyed by the grammar; may also have difficulty understanding the grammar and thus resort to the key word strategy.
- Will experience difficulties in reading comprehension if comprehension of oral language is poor.
- May not be connecting idea to idea from conversation or text, e.g. not connecting the content of one sentence to

the next.

## Social Communication

Communication is a social act and unless one is conducting a monologue with one's self, it involves at least one other person. Communication within a social situation can be more challenging than just understanding the words of others. There are unwritten rules that govern interactions and these may change depending on the circumstances and whom one is talking to. The individual with an autism spectrum disorder may:

- Have difficulty seeing another person's perspective; tendency to interpret from own point of view. This impacts social interaction and the understanding of perspective in narratives whether in text, movies, or TV format.
- Have difficulty understanding that other people have unique thoughts, ideas, and personal motivation.
- Give no or minimal eye contact during an interaction; eye contact may be distracting or provide more sensory information than can be useful or processed by the person with ASD.
- Speak too loudly or too fast unless taught about the needs of his or her communication partner.
- Have difficulty staying on topic; may be distracted by associations cued by his or her own words or the dialogue of others.
- Deliver monologues, lectures, or lessons about a favorite topic rather than allow/participate in reciprocal involvement with a communication partner.
- Talk aloud to self in public situations and be unaware that others can hear the content of the self talk and will make judgments about them based on what was heard.
- Have difficulty attending to an auditory message if stressed, agitated, or highly stimulated.
- Make statements that are factually true but socially inappropriate because of lack of awareness of the impact of his or her statement on others.
- Not know strategies to initiate, terminate, or facilitate a conversation.
- Have difficulty understanding the significance of another's role and the need to adjust topic, the vocabulary, grammar, and tone of conversation accordingly. May address an authority figure in the same fashion as a peer or as a TV/video character might do.
- Have difficulty knowing that he or she has the responsibility to give the communication partner sufficient information to understand the message. In addition, he or she may have difficulty surmising what information the partner already has and what new information is needed.
- Not monitor his or her own comprehension of incoming messages and therefore does not seek clarification, when needed.
- Seek to promote an inflated or positive self image by using pseudo-sophisticated language; sometimes this strategy is used to mask the degree of underlying comprehension problems that the person really experiences during daily living situations or within school activities.
- Lie with the intent of getting people to leave him or her alone rather than with an intent to deceive or manipulate. In general, is not effective at deception.
- Exhibit good recall of people's names, facts, and/or trivial information; often the depth of knowledge about a topic may be superficial.
- Utilize, on occasion, old behavior or communication patterns for more appropriate verbal social communication. This might include nonverbal means of communication such as aggression, passivity, pacing, self stimulation, self abusive behavior, or echolalia.
- Talk about unusual topics such as fans and The Weather Channel because he or she finds the topic fascinating; the display of knowledge may take place irrespective of the interest of the communication partner in the topic.
- Be nonselective about appropriateness of time, place, and person with whom to discuss certain topics.
- Be perseverative or bothersome on limited topics. May ask repetitive questions.
- Desire social interaction, but has difficulty knowing how to initiate and maintain a friendship.
- Experience difficulty recognizing the lies, deceptions and mischief of others.

- Miss nonverbal cues of others and nuances in social situations; may be taught to recognize some instances.
- Lack a repertoire or have difficulty selecting/applying appropriate social communication strategies in everyday situations.
- Recognizes and identifies basic emotions of others and self (mad, happy, sad) but has more difficulty with recognizing more subtle expressions of these feelings or emotions.
- Have difficulty recognizing, identifying and understanding various other states of emotion expressed by others and knowing what to say in that situation.
- Have difficulty making predictions about the consequences of a situation and understanding the motivation of others; will usually be very concrete and socially naive.
- Have difficulty multi-tasking, i.e., talking or listening while doing something else at the same time; may need to do one thing at a time.

## Other Characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder that May Be Present

Characteristics other than language difficulties may also be evident during interaction opportunities and impact the communicative exchange in an indirect way. Sometimes actions or comments during an interaction may provide clues regarding the need for additional support in other life areas of the person with ASD. Sometimes knowing about other characteristics promotes more patience and understanding in the communication partner. The individual with an autism spectrum disorder may:

- Appear very egocentric in terms of concern for others, their feelings, their needs, and their ideas.
- Prefer that experiences or events be interpreted in black and white or very concrete terms; this expectation is at odds with the complexity of most situations.
- Have difficulty getting the gestalt or big picture of a situation rather than just the details.
- Engage in repetitive activities and/or rituals.
- Can obsessively persist in mulling over past, present, or future events or ideas.
- Be resistive in varying degrees to changes in routine or environment.
- Have splinter skills (e.g., unusual abilities in music, math).
- Exhibit clinical anxiety, varying degrees of depression, or other mood disorders.
- Express thoughts about suicide; may not have a clear understanding of the finality of death.
- Exhibit clinical obsessive-compulsive disorder.
- Exhibit seizures.
- Act like a perfectionist- does not like to make mistakes.
- May have sensory issues; be under responsive or sensory seeking; can get overwhelmed by sensory overload.
- Experience encounters with law enforcement and the judicial system as a consequence of social challenges and emotional regulation.
- Be physically as well as socially awkward.
- Have difficulty with fine motor skills, especially handwriting.
- Not perform well when under pressure or stress.
- Have difficulty utilizing relaxations strategies to reduce stress.
- Have difficulty with executive function skills- planning, organization, flexibility, monitoring, etc.
- Have difficulty with reading comprehension but be able to decode and fluently read aloud.
- May have excellent memory for detail but not working memory, i.e., keeping ideas in mind while manipulating them and problem solving.
- Need some degree of supervision, support, and/or advocacy to be employable or to live independently in the community.
- Be very naive and vulnerable to social/sexual abuse.
- Become more socially isolated as his/her negative experiences in social situations increases.

For insights into the language and social communication problems of children and adults with autism spectrum disorder, consider reading some of their biographies, autobiographies or novels. Selective possibilities include:

Baron, J., & Barron, S. (1992). *There's a boy in here*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

Grandin, T. (1995). *Thinking in pictures and other reports from my life with autism*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

Haddon, M. (2003). *The curious incident of the dog in the night-time*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

Wiley, L. H. (1999). *Pretending to be normal: Living with Asperger's syndrome*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

## Other relevant books include:

Attwood, T. (2007). *The complete guide to Asperger's Syndrome*. Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Winner, M. (2002). *Thinking about you thinking about me*. San Jose, CA: Think Social.

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