

Autism Speech Development- An insight for parents

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It is said that the moment a baby is born, a mother comes to life. Motherhood is innate as well as a learned task. I remember my mother singing a song, a lullaby very often while cuddling with me. The meaning of this song goes something like this- "If the god meets me somehow and asks me what I would want, in a fraction of second I will answer – O' Lord, I don't want anything for myself but instead, give my whole life to my child. Let my child be happy throughout her life. That's all I ask for."

This is very true. Every mother or father thinks the same way. As a parent, we want to give the best of this world to our children. The birth of the child brings a ray of hope and blessing in the parent's life. When the child grows physically, mentally and socially well, it brings boundless happiness to the parents.

But sometimes, somewhere something goes wrong..which shatters these parental dreams and child gets diagnosed with Autism- A mysterious neuro-developmental disorder.

So what exactly is this Autism?

Autism is marked by three most predominant characteristics those are-

1. Lack of communication
2. Poor socialisation skills
3. Repetitive behaviour.

What exactly do I mean by the bullet (3)? Repetitive behaviour means repetition of a single action. For example, banging head again and again or moving hands in an unusual way repetitively.

Theory has a lot to say about autism. But, as a Speech Language Pathologist my interest lies in practicality. Child diagnosed with autism faces problems in speech and language areas.

Now, language has got two parts.

1. Comprehension of spoken language.
2. Expression of spoken language. This is nothing but speech.

Comprehension (understanding) of language always precedes the expression of itself i.e speech. This clearly means that in the process of language development, child always understands more than what he can express.

Efforts should be made in such a way that the child understands what is spoken to him.

Let me give you an analogy for the same. Let us assume that we have an empty vessel with us. As we pouring water into it, the water reaches up to the brim of the vessel and thus the vessel gets full with water. Once completely filled, any excess of water would just simply spill out of that vessel, right? This spilling of water is nothing but 'speech' – that is, child's verbal output. Here, in order for water to spill out, it is essential for the vessel to get completely filled with it first. To put in simpler words, the child should primarily understand the language from all aspects till there is no space left for any doubts regarding what is spoken to him. And thus will the speech start flowing from the child.

This is to highlight the fact that speech is an automatic process. You need not teach the child to speak. You should put efforts towards enriching his understanding.

What are the ways to enhance child's understanding?

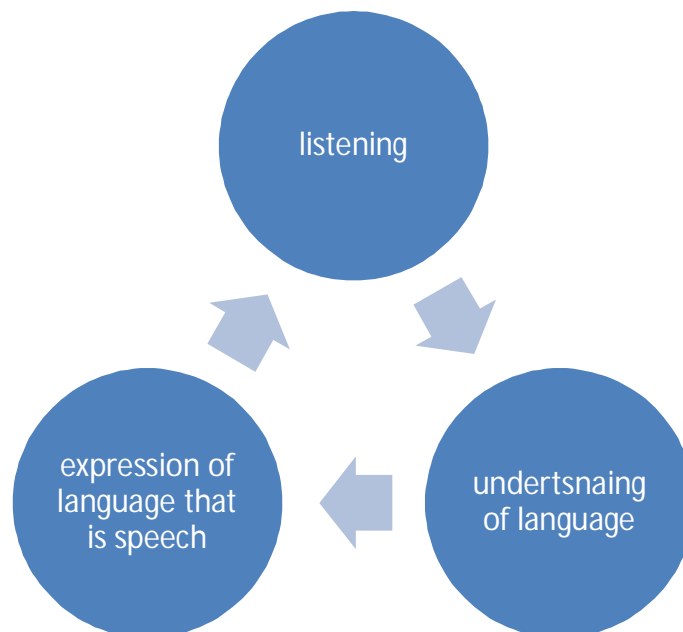
The only key to do so is- to develop listening skills within the child. Listening is a continuous and an ongoing process. Child keeps on listening throughout the day even if he is not paying entire attention to the speaker.

Good listening skills form a concrete fundamental basis to language development.

We will see one example.

The human cochlear (the internal ear) is fully developed in the twentieth week of gestation, that is, around four months of pregnancy in the mother's womb. When the baby is born, it continuously grasps information through listening from his environment. This listening process fosters the language development. Within the first year of life, the understanding of the spoken language is facilitated majorly by listening. Then around one year of age, the first meaningful word comes.

Here we must understand that in order to bring out first meaningful word how much work is being done by just listening process. We can represent this in the following way.



Our focus primarily should always be on “How much does my child understand?” and definitely not on “how much can she speak?”

In summarisation, we can say that : first active listening →

Then enriching the understanding of language —————>

This would result in helping or fostering the speech to come out.

Now the question comes, how to enhance the understanding of language through good listening?

1. Mother's approach : For a child, mother's voice means everything. The child is highly responsive to mother's voice most of the time. Mother should execute good intonation in her voice as to facilitate good listening. Intonations mean the 'up and down' in the voice while speaking (that is, rising and lowering your voice periodically). A good voice modulation helps the child to pick up words with their meanings easily. At the same time, it also helps in developing good attention skills in the child.
2. Parental Verbal Output Should Not Be Complex: The sentences that you use should be simple, short and repetitive. For an example, on completion of any certain task, if you are saying "Very good" as a praise to the child, then you must stick to saying "Very good" after every task completion. Avoid replacing and changing the words. In this case, don't replace the word good with its other synonyms like 'excellent' or 'great', etc.

To begin with, one must focus on command-following skills. What do you mean by "command"?

It is a verbal expression that the child should follow. But honestly speaking, no child likes to follow just commands. All your commands have to be in an entertaining and playful manner. They should not be given in what seems a commanding way. For example, you ask the child to throw the ball on the bed and then gently ask him to get it.

To begin with, select simple set of instructions. Here is the list of some instructions/commands which would help you to start.

- i. "Hey baby, it's good morning! Please get up.."
- ii. "My phone is on the table. Please get my phone.."
- iii. "Please open the door.."
- iv. "Here, have your milk.."
- v. "Remove your shoes.."

In case the child is not able to follow the command, give him physical cue to complete the task.

For an example, if the command is "Dear, open the door." If the child is not able to perform the task, then you gently hold the child's hand, take him to the door, again instruct him and help him out to open that door.

Repeat the task periodically. Remember, by doing this, you are not only working on his understanding but also on strengthening communication bond between you and your child.

After completion of task, give the child reward by hugging, kissing or cuddling your child. Remember, this is very important.

To begin with you select 50 commands that the child cannot follow. Let them be simple, short and repetitive.

You should practise these commands throughout the day whenever possible. Keep your child busy in these activities.

What kind of commands you should select? The commands must be child friendly.

Suppose if the child is interested in kitchen related activities, then select commands related to the kitchen. If the child is interested in garden work, let the commands begin from garden.

KNOWING "THE HOME"

Every child must know his/her home in detail. Knowing home in detail means-

- 1) The structure of the home. The names of the different rooms. For example, dining room, bedroom, study room, kitchen, balcony, terrace, etc.

ACTIVITY- Everyday hold your child's hand and take a tour of the home. Keep on telling him about different places in the home.

- 2) Knowing where different objects are kept.

Example,

- Sofa in the living room/hall.
- Bed is in the bedroom.
- Fridge is in the kitchen.
- Cupboard is in the dressing room.

By doing this, you are making the child aware of the household objects.

- 3) Making use of actions (commands involving child do a particular thing) while making the child aware of household objects.
 - Sit on the sofa.
 - Sleep on the bed.
 - Open the fridge.
 - Shut/close the cupboard.

Simple commands given in mother's loving and caring voice will show following results-

- 1) Improved self awareness of the child.
- 2) Improved understanding of "HOME" concept.
- 3) Improved understanding of language.
- 4) Improved mother-child communication bond.

MUSIC

Music plays an important role in development of listening skills.

Which music is useful for my child?

We all know that a day comprises of several different segments such as morning, afternoon, evening and night. In every segment, the child's mood and likings, interests vary to great extent. So accordingly the music patterns should be selected.

For an example, at the time of waking up in the morning, the soft instrumental music should be played. It has got a soothing impact on the child's morning.

Evening should be full of fun. A rocking music will add on to the child's enthusiasm to celebrate the day.

Music has a healing effect on child's everyday physical as well as mental wear and tear. Music and dancing to that music connects the child with you.

Here are some simple activities you can take with the music:

- 1) Standing up and sitting down on musical beats.
- 2) Pushing and pulling on the musical beats.
- 3) Climbing upstairs or downstairs on the musical beats.
- 4) Moving forward and backward on musical beats.

These are few simple things that you can do with the help of music playing in the background.

At the same time talk to the child about the actions you are doing. This will definitely help in enhancing the understanding of the child in a playful manner.

Now I am going to discuss the simple techniques which will help you to work on understanding of language as well as on the speech outcome.

- 1) Incidental teaching: it is a very important technique. Here you are going to talk about the incidents that are taking place in child's surrounding.

For example, child wakes up in the morning and sees his daddy getting ready for the office. At this point you should keep on telling the child about various things daddy does before he heads to work. Questions like- How is daddy getting ready for the office? What is he wearing? Where is he going? - These can be used too.

- 2) Self Talk : Simple talk about the things which you are doing in very loving way.

For example, suppose you are cooking in the kitchen and your child approaches you. Simple start by talking about what you are cooking, how you are cooking it, who is going to be the one to enjoy this dish that is being cooked.

- 3) Parallel talk: Simply talk about things that the child is doing.

For example,

1. Consider that the child is looking out the window. Talk about things he is looking at. Describe the things that he is seeing in a very light, easy and understanding way.
 2. If the child is playing with his favourite car then talk about it. How does the car go? Where does the car go? What's the colour of this car? Whose car is it? And so on.
- 4) Playing in 'turns' or 'turn' taking: Every time you with the child, it must be practised over and over.

"This is your turn, dear", "you throw the ball", "It is my turn so I will throw the ball." These are a few examples.

These "Your turn", "My turn" are very important concepts that should be practised with the child.

Here are a few examples-

1. It is your "turn" to brush the teeth. My 'turn' is over.
2. It is your 'turn' to eat the breakfast. The 'turns' of your sisters and brothers are over.
3. During the play..
 - o Pass the ball, it is your turn..
 - o It is your turn to catch the ball..
- 5) Role playing: it comprises of a lot of enactments.

You can consider making particular animal sound for acting like that animal.

For example, how does a lion roar? How does he walk?

How does the bird fly? What sound does it make?

Enactment of a cat or a dog.

Form small stories and present them in the form of small plays with a lot of enactment.

6) Extension and Expansion-

Child keeps on making sounds most of the time. These are called Jargon. (In Speech Language Pathology, Jargon is referred to the strings of sounds or babble that children use or make but don't have any meaning) You can keep giving meaning to their jargon.

For example, suppose on the dinner table, the child is making jargons or some sounds, then according to the situation, you can talk about the activity going on with the child.

Sometimes child comes out with single word, then add something (such as description) and form a meaningful phrase which has that word in it.

For example, if the child says 'apple' then you can say 'a red apple' or 'eat the red apple.'

WORKING ON 'SOCIALISATION' SKILLS.

This is one of the few techniques you can practise at home.

According to me, socialisation with family members should come first. Children diagnosed with autism lack in this area.

Remember, Family is the biggest support. To foster child's socialisation skills, one should practise the 'celebration' technique.

As a parent, you must celebrate child's success every day. You can do so in the following ways.

- i. Gather all the family members after the dinner.
- ii. Let the child meet all the family members one by one.
- iii. Shaking hands, cuddling, hugging or kissing will encourage the child and boost confidence level as well as joy in him.
- iv. Let the family members dance with the child, turn by turn.
- v. It is important that these activities are done on every day basis.

Dear Parents,

Read this story very carefully. There was this child of age six years, diagnosed with autism. His language age was about 2 years. That is, this six year old spoke on the same level as a normal two years old kid.

His parents started all kinds of therapies in order to develop the child. Wherever this child went, he got labelled as the 'six year old autistic kid'.

In spite of having consistent therapies, the child did not show any improvement. Now the question arises, where are the things going wrong?

The answer to this question lies in the statement- Six year old autistic kid. This is a very negative and depressive statement.

So my question to all such parent goes- how would you like to label your child?

"A six year old autistic kid" OR "A two year old normal kid"

The latter gives me his developmental age. It gives me a very positive insight that yes, my child is normal and I have to work on his development in some areas.

The later statement takes away my depression and stress that I have related to this case. It also boosts my confidence as a mother. It helps me accept the fact that yes, my child is of two years (speaking from point of view of his developmental age) and I am going to be with him, support him thoroughly on this journey.

This is going to be a mother's story...

This is *YOUR* story....

Successful communication outcome depends on 3 factors:

- 1) Realistic Imagination (Positive Perspective): Imagine that your child is progressing step by step. Lot of positivity in thoughts is needed.

- 2) Realistic Observation: You will practically observe the child, note his progress and carry out therapeutic techniques time to time.

- 3) Realistic Decision Making: For the child's developments, you may have to take certain firm decisions. These decisions could be personal or family oriented. This will aim the child's progress at all times.

Last but not the least, I would like to say a few things.

Dear Parents,

The communication between you and your child is solely supported by three MAIN pillars, those are, TRUTH, LOVE and HAPPINESS.

With relentless determination and unconditional support, you would be greeted with the best of best results.

My best wishes to all of you for strengthening successful communication starting from today....till forever.

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