

Direct Teaching of Non-Verbal Social Communication Skills
***~how to help our students read the nonverbal information that underlies
and precedes verbal language~***

Children who have been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders (PDD, Autism, Asperger's Syndrome) perceive and process the world in a different way than typically developing children. This difference is often noticed (and children are diagnosed) when auditory-verbal language skills fail to develop at the usual time and/or in the "usual" manner. However, communication differences and difficulties in the ASD population precede the onset of spoken language, and go much deeper than difficulty with what we traditionally understand as "language". New studies (Amy Wetherby) show that infants who will later be diagnosed with ASD can be identified well before their first birthday, when non-verbal communication skills (reading of facial expression and tone of voice, use of gestures, ability to engage in a non-verbal interaction with an adult) do not develop normally.

Human non-verbal communication skills usually develop "automatically" through the developmental stages of infancy and early childhood. These are skills that are not directly taught, instead this is more an unconscious learning of "how to read people". Spend some time watching small babies to see how they easily do the social interaction "dance". They respond to the facial expression and tone of voice of others, they can gain the attention of their caregivers with little effort, and they can use their own facial expressions, voice and body to begin to exert control on the world around them. They have the basic communication skills that make the world a comfortable place, and that allow them to maintain their sense of safety and well-being.

Now consider a child who is lacking this "automatic" system to learn the world of people. They don't receive the information that tells them whether a situation is safe or dangerous. They lack the skills to attract and keep the attention of others in a positive way. They miss the social "cues" that would allow them to successfully participate in an interaction with another person. They are "blind" to the non-verbal social world. Even when they begin to crack the verbal language "code", they are missing the more basic information that would allow them to use words in a socially communicative way. So you have children who use their words to make demands or protest, but don't use them to share their thoughts. You also get repetition of language in very non-communicative ways (simple echolalia, self-talk). With more highly verbal children, you get long monologues on favourite topics that allow no interruption or conversation.

In order to normalize communication and achieve true comprehension of social situations, it is necessary to systematically and directly teach these missing non-verbal communication skills. In this workshop, we'll look at how you can do that.

How do I teach something that usually doesn't need to be taught?

So children who fall within the Autism Spectrum have difficulty "reading" the transitory social cues (eg. body language, facial expression, tone of voice) that others use to safely and comfortably navigate the social world. As a result, children with ASD frequently have difficulty coping with even the simplest of social situations. As young children, they often alternate between being totally disconnected, and being completely distraught. As they get older, and have more negative experiences with "the world of people", the isolation and distress-driven behaviour can become much worse.

Fortunately, there are compensating strengths. While children with ASD generally have trouble with auditory-verbal information, their visual processing and thinking skills can be quite strong. The challenge for parents, educators and therapists is to translate key auditory and temporal information into the visual modality, so that these children can understand everyday social situations and respond appropriately (*temporal* refers to information that is coded in transitory sequenced events in time, eg. sequence of facial expressions and gestures that indicate honesty, anger, humour or sarcasm).

1. Connection and Interaction

You must establish a connection with the child before attempting to "teach" him/her anything. The best programming ideas in the world are lost on a child who is not paying attention to you. Here are some ideas for activities that often work:

- ◆ bubbles
- ◆ wind-up or action toys
- ◆ marble tracks
- ◆ balls (large and small)
- ◆ playdough (with "squeezers" and other fun tools)
- ◆ action games like "tickle" or "chase"
- ◆ balloons (blow them up and let them go)
- ◆ car tracks (hot wheels, FP tumble cars)
- ◆ non-verbal turn-taking games (Kerplunk, Shark Bowling, Don't Monkey Around)
- ◆ Mr. Potato Head
- ◆ computer games

Ask the parents about the child's favourite activities and see if you can adapt them to the classroom.

You'll notice that the activities that I've listed don't require language. Your goal is "shared enjoyment". What you're looking for is eye contact (never a goal in itself, but very useful for gauging whether or not you've made a good comfortable connection), relaxed interaction and happy facial expression. If the child is not making eye contact, seems tense and is trying to escape, you need to try something else.

You can make yourself a more appealing communication partner by slowing down, quieting down and generally making yourself less "dangerous" and more predictable.

Remember also that each child needs a slightly different approach. Observation is not confined to the initial stages of getting to know the child - it is an on-going and

integral part of any successful program - constantly observe the child's reactions and modify your methods accordingly. One child might like loud silly slapstick, while another may prefer a much quieter game.

then expand the connection ..

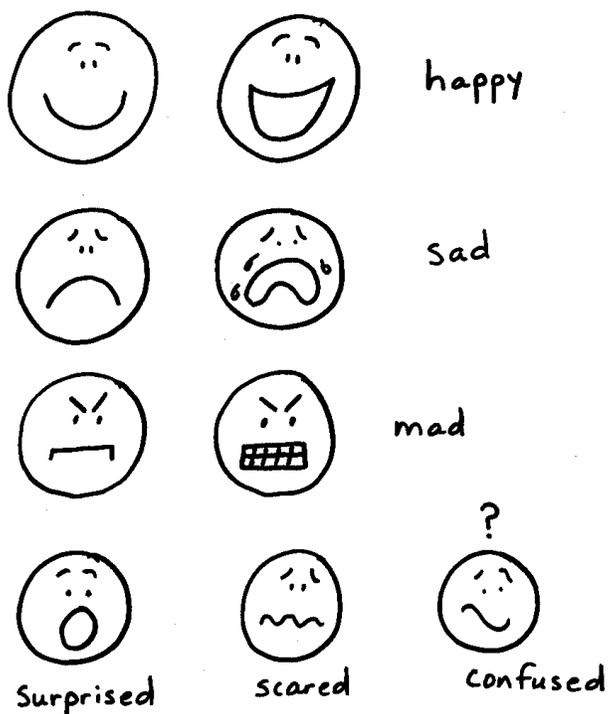
Once you have a connection with the child, your job is to **gently** push the boundaries. Here are some examples of how you can expand on the initial interaction:

- ◆ enjoyment of the Mr. Potato Head CD-ROM leads to playing with the actual Mr. PH toys and then to use of Mr. PH in drawing/reading/writing activities
- ◆ bubbles can be big and small, there can be lots or only one, you can chase them and pop them, you can catch them with wet mitts, you can take turns trying to make the biggest, the most, you can guess where they're going to land, you can pretend you're scared of them and run away in a very silly way ..

Use your imagination and focus on the interaction (reduce/drop requirements for verbal responses if you find they derail the back-and-forth flow). Trial and error - don't let the errors stop you from trying again. You'll find that you're granted more "leeway" as the child learns that you're a person who can be trusted.

2. Facial Expression

Here are some common facial expressions. Notice that most of the emotional information is carried in the shape of the mouth and the eyebrows:



You can also picture "mixed" facial expressions, which can be very difficult for the ASD child to understand:



Once the child can sort emotions into basic "categories", you can introduce the concept of "emotional scales" (this comes from the work of Tony Attwood). Connect degrees of emotion to facial expression, words (use a thesaurus) and situations. Here is an example of an anger scale:



Take photos of family members and close friends making a variety of facial expressions. Sort these into emotional categories, and also arrange them by "degree" of emotion.

Connect visible emotions to the "real-life" situations that they match. You can make "emotion books" that show happy/angry/sad situations for a variety of people (what makes me happy may not be the same thing that makes you happy). This leads into discussion of perceptions and thoughts of others.

3. Body Language

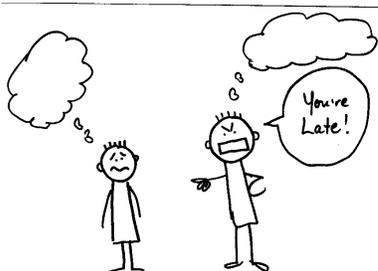
Body language (posture, gestures, movement) also carries information about people's emotions. You can use cartoon figures to represent the body language that matches each emotion or emotional situation. To make the figure represent a specific person, simply put the first letter of the person's name on the body, personalize hair and add features like glasses. Body movement is simple to represent. Remember that you're not creating great art, you're trying to clearly represent "people information" in a visual form. When the figures are simple, you will find that the child can then start to draw their own representations of social situations that they find difficult (they can also learn how to formulate solutions using the drawing mode)

You can do similar activities with emotional voice tones. Use picture cues to indicate the emotion, then play games where you draw a card and say a simple neutral phrase (eg. "it's time for dinner") using that tone of voice - the other person has to guess which tone of voice you were trying to do. Once again, a tape recorder is a good tool to reflect the child's voice back to them.

5. Putting it all together

A good activity to help ASD children to begin to use the non-verbal communication knowledge you've been teaching is something I call "People Puzzlers". You draw a person figure with a certain body shape, and then have the child fill in the facial expression and label the emotion. Once the child has gained some confidence in solving your puzzles, encourage them to make some for you. The interesting thing about this type of activity is that there are often multiple "right" answers (eg. a person standing with their arms crossed in front of them might be angry, but they might also be cold, impatient or simply waiting for someone). You can also add "speech bubbles" to this activity to help the child connect the facial expression, body posture and emotion with the verbal language that might be used in that situation (you're helping them to synthesize the information).

Individuals with ASD have great difficulty guessing the thoughts and perceptions of other people. This is a necessary skill to have when navigating social situations. These thoughts and perceptions are the "invisible" steps that must be understood before many of the cause-effect relationships in "people interactions" make sense. Use "Social Vignettes" to help the ASD child put multiple non-verbal clues together to make good guesses about what another person is thinking (fill in the thought bubbles)

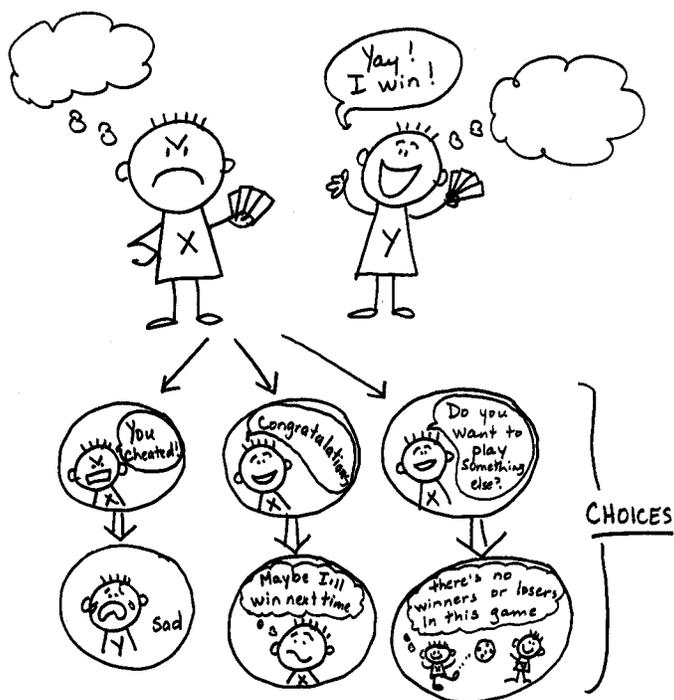


Other drawing activities that encourage the children to apply their knowledge to figure out the "cause/effect" of real-life situations can take the form of comic strips. Play "what next?" and "fill-in-the-middle".

Role-playing can also be useful. You might try using costumes to help the child get "in character". A game called "emotion charades" can be used to express basic emotions in connection with everyday actions. You make one pile of "action" cards (eg. running, sweeping, sleeping, etc) and one pile of "emotion" cards (eg. happy, mad, sad, scared). Take turns pulling an emotion card and an action card and then acting out the "emotional action". This can be a very revealing activity (you will see where the gaps are), but also a good activity to practice using the non-verbal skills that you have been teaching.

. move on to social problem-solving .

- use detailed information about school and home situations to teach these skills directly in a one-to-one situation
- use "social vignettes" to put key information on one page - allow the student to fill in missing pieces (eg. facial expression, thought and speech bubbles) - then work on multiple solutions and their consequences - afterwards, you can mark preferred solutions with a green circle, and less useful solutions with a red circle with a line through it
- all useful strategies for dealing with emotional/social issues can be transferred to classroom situations
- one useful concept is an "emotional toolbox" (from the work of Tony Attwood), with multiple specific strategies that the ASD student can choose to use in coping with difficult social situations - here are some examples of strategies that may be useful:
 - disengage / walk away
 - ignore the other person
 - think about happy things / favourite things / funny things
 - imagine revenge (but don't do it)
 - tell someone you trust
 - call for help
 - take a deep breath
 - wait a minute (and think)
 - hit a pillow
 - use your words



Reference List

1. "Comic Strip Conversations" by Carol Gray, Jenison Public Schools, Jenison, Michigan (1994)
2. "The Social Story Book" by Carol Gray et al, Publication of the Jenison Michigan, Public Schools (1993)
3. "Social Stories: Improving responses of students with autism with accurate social information" by Carol Gray and J. Garand in the journal *Focus on Autistic Behaviour*, 8, 1-10 (1993)
4. "Teaching Children with Autism to 'Read' Social Situations" by Carol Gray in the book *Teaching Children with Autism: Strategies to Enhance Communication and Socialization* edited by Kathleen Ann Quill, Chapter 9, pp. 219-241 (1995)
5. "My Social Stories Book" by Carol Gray & Abbie Leigh White, Jessica Kingsley Publishers (2002)
6. "Asperger's Syndrome: A guide for parents and professionals" by Tony Attwood, Jessica Kingsley Publishers (1998)
7. "Mindblindness: An essay on autism and theory of mind" by Simon Baron-Cohen, MIT Press (1997) * **computer software is now available in connection with the work of this research group - the software teaches through structured video presentation of facial expressions, body movements and verbal language associated with a variety of emotional/interactive situations** *

Please note that the books listed above can be ordered through **Parentbooks**, 201 Harbord St., Toronto, Ont M5S 1H6; **phone** 1-800-209-9182; **e-mail** parentbk@netcom.ca; **website is** www.parentbookstore.com

You can locate the journal article through the university library, or you may be able to order a reprint by writing directly to:

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