

Communicating with non- speaking children

Many autistic children have some level of language delay, meaning that they learn to speak later than their peers. Some may only start talking years after their peers; others will never speak at all, and will communicate in other ways throughout their lives. This resource answers some common questions from parents of young autistic children who aren't speaking, and provides some alternate forms of communication to try.

Frequently asked questions

Why doesn't my child speak?

There are a variety of reasons for an autistic child to learn to talk later than their peers, or not at all; some of the more common are:

- Language delay due to developmental differences. Autistic children often have skill delays and then hit several milestones in quick succession, as if a switch has flipped in their brains. Some children will walk, learn to count, or talk later than their peers, and then catch up very quickly.
- Lifelong neurological differences. For some autistic people, speech will always be difficult or impossible; other autistic people's ability to speak may come and go depending on their stress levels or environment. This does not mean that they cannot communicate, or that they cannot understand what is being said around them – see the end of this resource for different forms of communication that are used by non-speaking and partially speaking autistic people.
- Difficulty with fine motor skills. Speech uses an incredibly complex and difficult set of muscle movements – for children who struggle with their motor control, it can be difficult or impossible to make the sounds come out the way they intend.

How can I tell if/when my child will learn to speak?

The short answer to this is that unfortunately there is no way to tell if an autistic child will suddenly learn to speak; if they will figure it out slowly and always struggle to speak; or if they will never speak at all.

If your child seems to be trying to speak but struggling to form the correct sounds or be understood, a speech language therapist may be able to help; but if they don't seem to have any interest in using spoken words at all, it may be time to try out different forms of communication.

How much spoken language does my child understand?

Most children's receptive language (their ability to understand) is much better than their expressive language (their ability to make themselves understood). Even if your child shows no sign of interest or understanding when you speak to them, it's important to keep talking to them – children need to be exposed to as much language as possible when learning to communicate, and even if your child never speaks and uses alternate forms of communication instead, being talked to will still help to build their communication skills.

It's also important to avoid talking about negative feelings towards your child where they can hear you. All parents need to express frustration, guilt, sadness, irritation, and other negative emotions sometimes – but if you wouldn't say it in front of a child who could speak and understand you, it shouldn't be said in front of any child, even a non-speaking one.

How can I tell what my child needs if they can't speak to me?

Learning your child's non-verbal signals is the best way to work out how they're feeling and what they might need. This can be particularly tricky with autistic children, as their body language and non-verbal signals might not match what you expect – they might have few or no facial expressions, for example, and use gestures like hand-flapping to express emotions instead. Keep an eye on what your child's hands and body are doing, and how that lines up with things they're definitely feeling. For example, is there a specific body movement your child seems to do when a meltdown is building up inside them? Or is there something they do to respond to a favourite toy or TV show? It can help to write down your child's movements over the course of a day, and then note whether they had a good day, a bad day, or in between – this can help you find the movements that seem to keep happening on bad days and probably mean your child is upset; and the movements that keep happening on good days and are expressing positive emotions.

If your child uses any sort of non-verbal behaviour to ask for things – leading you by the hand, pointing or flapping their hand at an object they want, or even just staring at something they like or want – it helps to respond as soon as you notice the behaviour. Like providing food choices on cards, this is about reinforcing to the child that interacting with you works, and gets them what they need. (Seeing that a child is non-verbally asking for something by leading you or pointing, and refusing to provide it until the child tries to say the word is not helpful; it teaches the child that communicating with you leads to more effort and difficulty, and is likely to discourage them from trying.)

Other forms of communication

AAC devices

AAC stands for augmentative and alternative communication. An AAC device is any device that allows someone to communicate without having to speak, most commonly a tablet with words and symbols that the person can tap to have the device speak the word for them, and/or letters that the person can spell out words with, which the device then reads aloud.

If you think this method of communication might work for your child, you can find more information (including referral forms) on the TalkLink website here: <https://talklink.org.nz/>

Sign language

If your child finds speech too difficult, but has good motor control when using their hands, NZSL (New Zealand sign language) may be a good option to look into. If you would like to give sign language a try, Learn NZSL is a free language portal that you can access here: <https://learn.nzsl.nz/#/id/co-01>

Starting with Makaton can be helpful for young children – Makaton is a communication programme based on NZSL, that uses signs for key words paired with speech. You can find more information about Makaton here: <https://makaton.org.nz/>

Communication cards and boards

Making your own cards illustrating commonly used objects, people, or concepts can be very helpful for communicating with children who don't speak. Presenting a child with dinner options on cards, for example, lets the child communicate what they want to eat without using language, as well as reinforcing the idea that communicating is a way to get what they want or need, which can encourage children to communicate.

If this sounds like something that could work for you and your child, there are some good starting point templates here: <https://www.fluentaac.com/communication-boards>