

# Bring On the Books! 10 tips for Reading with Autistic Children

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You likely know that reading with young children is very helpful for their language and literacy development; this is also true for autistic children. When adults read to their autistic child in an interactive way (sometimes known as “shared reading”), it helps the child to:

- understand and answer questions
- initiate communication and express their ideas
- participate in the book in other ways, such as turning the pages or shifting their attention between the book and the adult [1]

In fact, one study showed that autistic children who read books with their parents tend to have stronger language skills one year later than children who read less often with their parents [2]. The authors summarize, saying:

“For families, the message from this work is clear: spending time reading to your child may help them develop their language skills” [2, p. 10]

## Read “with” your child, not “to” your child

The common advice “read to your child” might give the impression that you should read stories while your child quietly listens to the story. However, there’s more than one way to share a book with your child, and being expected to sit quietly may make it difficult for your child to enjoy the book with you.

Research shows that children learn a lot from books when adults read in an interactive way, providing lots of opportunities for the child to participate and share their own ideas (instead of just listening). Interactive reading involves reading “with” your child, encouraging them to participate in any way they can (touching pictures, using gestures, sounds, words, etc.). By adjusting our expectations and changing the way we read, sharing books can be a time for interaction, learning, and fun!

## 10 tips to make reading more interactive for autistic children

Here are some tips to help you read “with” your child...

### **Be face to face while reading**

Traditionally we think of sitting beside a child when reading, but it’s helpful to face your child while looking at a book together. When you are face to face, you can watch your child’s cues and find out what interests them in the book. This helps you know what to talk about. Facing your child also helps them notice you, including your gestures and facial expressions, which add meaning to your words.

### **Let your child hold the book and turn the pages**

Allowing your child to hold the book and turn the pages will ensure they are actively involved and leading the activity. Don’t worry if they skip some of the pages – it’s more important that they are actively engaged with the book and enjoying it.

### **Let your child move around**

There’s no need for your child to sit still while looking at the book with you. If your child enjoys sitting with you, that’s great. But if your child prefers to move around or to fidget with something in their hands while looking at a book, that’s fine too. Sitting still is not a requirement for paying attention and learning to communicate.

### **Try books based on your child’s interests**

If your child loves music, you might try a book that illustrates their favourite song. Or your child might like a rhyming book due to its natural rhythm. If your child loves to explore things through touch, try a book with different things to touch and feel, or books with interactive flaps or moving parts. If your child is fascinated by a topic like the solar system, look for books about that or about space, including nonfiction books.

### **Observe, Wait and Listen (OWL™)**

Watch your child carefully and listen to their sounds and words. This will help you figure out what catches their attention in the book so you can talk about it. If you pause the reading and wait without speaking for a few seconds, it will give your child more opportunities to show you their interests and send you messages. Waiting after you say something ensures your child can send another message, so the interaction goes back and forth and your child is actively participating.

### **Talk about your child's interests**

Once you've figured out what has caught your child's attention, point to the picture and talk about what is interesting to your child. It's more important to respond to your child's interests and add words to their messages than to try and read through the whole story. Acknowledging your child's interests and messages by responding with interest will keep your child engaged and keep the interaction going.

### **Simplify the text**

You don't need to read all of the words on the page. Children who are learning to communicate benefit when you use simple words and sentences to talk about their interests and the main ideas in the book. For example, if your child points to a picture of a train, instead of reading "Then the station master watched the train approach the station," you could simplify by saying "Here comes the train!" or "Choo choo! There's the train!"

### **Let the pictures do the talking**

You can build your child's understanding by pointing to the pictures as you look at the book together. If you point to a picture that matches what you're saying, the picture helps explain what your words mean.

### **Add interest with your voice**

Use your voice to make important words and ideas stand out. For example, when looking at a picture of a sad mouse who can't find anything to eat, you could make your voice sound sad as you say, "Poor mouse, he's hungry." Or you can use your voice to add sound effects, catching your child's attention with words like "crash!" "boom!" "whee!" or "vroom!"

### **Keep the read short at first**

Your child may not be ready to look at a book for a long time. If that's the case, it's ok to keep the read pretty short at first. Let your child explore the book and open it to pages that interest them. Talk about the pictures that catch your child's attention. The interaction may only last a few moments, but if you keep following your child's lead and reading in an interactive way, it's likely they will start to spend longer amounts of time with books.

The idea is to make reading a two-way street, during which you and your child take turns sharing ideas and interacting. Your child might take their turn by turning the page, making a sound, pointing to a picture, saying a word, smiling at you, or saying a sentence. Acknowledge any of these ways of communicating by responding with interest and adding to your child's message. In this way, the interaction will go back and forth, and the reading will be interesting and fun!

## References

1. Boyle, S. A., McNaughton, D., & Chapin, S. E. (2019). Effects of shared reading on the early language and literacy skills of children with autism spectrum disorders: A systematic review. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities, 34*(4), 205-214. DOI: 10.1177/1088357619838276
2. Mathée-Scott, J. & Ellis Weismer, S. (2022). Naturalistic parent–child reading frequency and language development in toddlers with and without autism. *Autism & Developmental Language Impairments, 7*, 1–13. DOI: 10.1177/23969415221136740
3. Sussman, F. (2012). *More Than Words: A Parent's Guide to Building Interaction and Language Skills for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder or Social Communication Difficulties, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.* The Hanen Centre: Toronto, Ontario.

### About The Hanen Centre

*The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization committed to supporting all the important adults in young children's lives to build the best possible social, language and literacy skills. This includes children with or at risk of language delays/disorders, autistic children, and children who may benefit from social communication support.*

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