



Talking to Young Children on the Autism Spectrum Matters, Study Shows

Lauren Lowry

Hanen SLP and Clinical Staff Writer



According to a 2019 study [1], very young children on the autism spectrum who hear more words and have more back-and-forth conversations with their parents tend to have better language skills at age two.

We've known for a long time that talking to young children makes a big difference to their language development. Until recently, though, researchers hadn't studied this connection in very young children on the autism spectrum. It's not easy to study infants and toddlers on the autism spectrum because they are usually not diagnosed until they are older. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that "even though ASD can be diagnosed as early as age 2 years, most children are not diagnosed... until after age 4 years" [2].

The new study avoided this problem by looking at young children who had an older sibling on the autism spectrum, which put them at higher risk for having the diagnosis themselves. Some of these at-risk infants received a diagnosis when they were 2 years old, and others did not. The researchers also included some infants who were not at risk for autism in their study.

All of the infants in the study wore recording devices for two days when they were 9 and 15 months old. The devices recorded:

- how many words the infants heard during the day
- how many opportunities they had for “conversational turns” – these are moments when they vocalized and their parent responded back, or their parent said something and they vocalized back

Then, when the children were two years old, the researchers tested their language skills. They looked for connections between the language they were exposed to at home when they were infants and their later language skills.

The researchers found that:

- Children who heard more words and participated in more conversations early on had better language skills when they were two years old – this was true for all of the children in the study, whether or not they were on the autism spectrum.

They also noticed the following difference:

- While the parents of the children who were not on the autism spectrum were having more back-and-forth “conversations” with their child by the time they were 15 months old, the parents of children on the autism spectrum were having fewer conversations at 15 months.

Why the difference in conversations with children with and without autism?

Interestingly, it’s at around 15 months that typically developing children start to use more speech and speech-like combinations of sounds. This encourages parents to respond more often because these sounds and words are recognizable, creating more opportunities for back-and-forth conversations. On the other hand, children on the autism spectrum are often delayed in their use of speech. Because their parents aren’t getting the same feedback from them, it could lead to fewer opportunities to respond and fewer conversations overall [3].

Encouraging conversations

Encouraging conversations early on is the key to helping your child develop communication skills. When we think of a conversation, we might picture two adults sitting with cups of coffee, chatting back-and-forth for an extended period of time. When it comes to young children, however, early conversations don’t look like that! They can be quite brief, and they don’t even need to involve words.

A conversation happens any time you and your child exchange messages back-and-forth. Your child’s message could be a word or short sentence, but it could also be a sound, gesture, body movement, facial expression, or even a quick glance in your direction.

Children on the autism spectrum often have difficulty with back-and-forth messages. Sometimes their messages are subtle and easy to miss, and they might not direct them right to you. They

may not understand that they need to get your attention and look at you when they send messages. They might not know how to send messages for a variety of reasons (such as to ask for something they want, to show you something they're interested in, or to tell you they don't like something). With an adult's help, however, young children on the autism spectrum can learn to take turns sending a variety of messages and have little back-and-forth conversations, even if they're not using words yet.

Here are a few tips to help you have some simple back-and-forth conversations with your child:

- **Observe your child** – the first step is to figure out what your child might want to send a message about. Watch your child carefully. Observe what they're looking at and touching, and what actions they're doing.
- **Follow your child's lead** – once you know what interests your child, join in with them. Play with them and talk about whatever catches their interest, and avoid the temptation to change the focus. By allowing your child to lead the activity, they will be more motivated to stay in the interaction and potentially send you a message about what they're interested in.
- **Wait for your child to send you a message** – once you have joined in with whatever your child is doing, pause and wait for them to send you a message. Stop what you are doing and look at them as if you expect them to do or say something. Once they do something or make a sound, then it's your turn to send a message back.
- **Respond to your child** – your response should follow from whatever message your child sent. If they show you a fast toy car, make a short comment about it (e.g. "Wow! That car is fast!"). If they look up at you because they are surprised that something crashed to the floor, you could say "Uh oh! Boom!". If they give you a toy because they need help, you can say something that matches their message, putting it into words (e.g. "Let's fix the wheel"). Putting your child's message into words with these types of short comments gives them the language that describes their interests, and it also lets them know you understand their message and want to keep the conversation going. After you respond, look at them and wait again to see if they send another message.

Here's an example of a parent putting these tips into practice:



When Karen tried to play ball with her son Julian, she observed that he was more interested in looking at the spoon. So, she followed his lead and copied what he was doing. Then she waited to see if he would notice her and send her a message. After a few moments he peeked out from behind his spoon and looked at her. She responded by saying "Peek-a-boo!"

What to do if your child doesn't send you a message when you wait...

Sometimes children need extra help with sending messages. If you've followed the steps above and your child doesn't send a message when you wait, try some of the suggestions in these articles:

- Give Your Child a Reason to Communicate with Bubbles
- R.O.C.K.™ in People Games: Building Communication in Children with ASD or Social Communication Difficulties

Your child will learn a lot about language if you help them send messages and talk to them about their interests during little back-and-forth conversations. And by starting early, you will set them on the best possible path to develop their communication skills.

References

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2. Centers for Disease Prevention and Control (n.d.). Retrieved online (March 11, 2020) at <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html>.
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About The Hanen Centre

Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.

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