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Working with autistic students: language and communication

It is perhaps somewhat surprising that I, an autistic woman (and therefore with differences in how I interact and communicate), have ended up working as an advisory teacher for speech, language and communication needs.

'But you have good eye contact', people tell me. 'And you can understand idioms. Isn't that what autism is all about?' It is true that my communication differences may not be immediately noticeable in general conversation but this is the case for many autistic females. Often their autism is missed or misdiagnosed because they can take part in reciprocal conversation and have, on the surface, effective communication skills.

When talking to education professionals about autism, most are usually aware that autistic students may have difficulties with eye contact and taking things literally. However, some of the less obvious differences in autistic communication are not yet as widely recognised. So, what are some of these difficulties and how can you help?

Say what you mean and mean what you say

In general conversation neurotypical people often say things that they don't really mean, for a number of reasons:

- out of habit
- politeness
- not wishing to show disagreement
- having to 'think on the spot'
- wanting to fill a gap in conversation
- because they are simply thinking aloud.

Some may also forget much of what they have said.

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Autistic individuals can often take things literally and remember conversations verbatim, so this can be incredibly frustrating for them. They may think the neurotypical person is lying to them or is not to be trusted.

Tip: Say what you mean, and mean what you say! Apologise if you make a mistake, be honest if you change your mind and admit it if you have forgotten you promised or said something previously.

Don't be so polite

Autistic students are often taught conversational skills explicitly. So for example, they may be taught how to recognise when somebody is bored in a conversation:

- the listener will yawn
- take on a glazed look
- glance at their watch
- fidget
- become monosyllabic in their responses.

All sounds good on paper but the problem is that in real life people are simply too polite to do these things! People feign interest and do their best to show enthusiasm. They ask questions; '*Oh, that sounds interesting*'. And yet it is often the autistic person who is told that they were delivering a monologue and not picking up on indicators of boredom!

Tip: Try not to make communication any more difficult than it already is! Are you actually following the 'rules' of communication that you are teaching your students?

It's not just what you say, but how you say it

Autistic people often have differences in how they interpret tone of voice. Some staff believe that this means that they have to emphasize and exaggerate, using the following voices:

- the '*let's-speak-very-slowly-and-clearly-so-they-understand*' voice
- the '*very-loud-to-show-this-is-important*' voice
- the '*super-over-enthusiastic-special-needs*' voice.

However autistic students often have a heightened sensitivity to sound in the first place. The sing-song enthusiastic voice comes across as grating, patronising and fake. The loud voice is already amplified and sounds like angry shouting and the slow and clear voice gives the impression you must think us stupid.

Turn off the echo

Evidence indicates that many autistic people find it much easier to process [just one stream of input at a time](#). This is valid in conversation and communication too. A scenario that frequently occurs in school is that of several members of staff talking to one student at once, often in lessons (for example, teaching assistants re-phrasing and repeating what the teacher is saying)

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or in behaviour management situations (a member of staff backing up another – ‘*Say sorry to Mrs Smith, I’m not happy you are speaking to sir like that*’).

Although intending to be helpful to either the student or a colleague, these situations can actually make it more difficult for the autistic student; suddenly there are two people to deal with, meaning they are unable to concentrate on either leading to increased anxiety levels.

Take nothing for granted

Don’t be fooled by external appearances. Some autistic students report that they were considered ignorant or not interested in educational settings due to their apparent lack of facial expression or difficulty in expressing themselves. This meant they missed out on opportunities that they wished to pursue, or that their intentions were misunderstood.

Conversely the opposite is sometimes also true. Autistic students may use a form of echolalia (repeating words, phrases and whole sentence that they have heard others use) which means they may come across as having more understanding of a topic than they actually do.

Autistic students pick up on things in a literal way

Young people in general are sponges, picking up subconsciously on attitudes and beliefs that the adults around them reflect. Autistic students can be particularly affected due to their literal understanding.

A particular bugbear of mine is the almost constant talk of diets, weight and body shape pursued by some groups of women. ‘*You look good, have you lost weight?*’ ‘*I was very naughty, I had a big desert.*’ ‘*I must be good and have a salad*’. An autistic girl will very soon believe that a eating healthily makes them a ‘good person’ and eating unhealthily makes them a ‘bad person’. Indeed, the links between autism and eating disorders are [now well-researched](#), so this example is one to avoid.

Tip: Think before you speak. What message are you really giving? Also remember that you might not be speaking directly to an autistic student but this does not mean that they are not picking up on what you are saying.

Mirror, mirror on the wall: eyebrows, mascara and botox

Yes, you read that last subheading correctly: eyebrows, mascara and botox! Let me explain. The fashion for heavily-plucked, artificially-shaped and drawn-on eyebrows does not make communication easy for those of us on the autism spectrum.

Almost on a daily basis I encounter women who appear to be in a constant state of mild shock, surprise or disbelief. ‘*What is going on?*’ I think to myself, ‘*Have I said something I shouldn’t have? Have I been tactless? Have I offended?*’ It is (usually) none of these things; merely that drawn-on eyebrows make facial expressions much more difficult to read correctly!

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The same goes for heavily made-up eyes which tend to make the person look tired or unhappy, and botoxed foreheads which just leave the person devoid of any expression at all!

Tip: If you work a lot with autistic students it might just be worth taking a peek in the mirror; make sure you aren't inadvertently making communication any more difficult than it already is!