Communication Spot •

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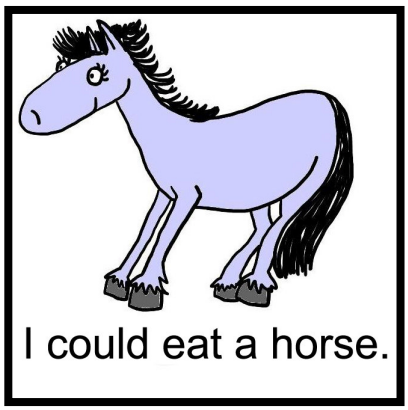
literal language



A mother is getting annoyed. She is trying to stay calm, but says to her child; “If you don’t pack those toys away **now**, I am going to hit the roof.” The child looks at her and then at the roof in wonder. “How?” she thinks “It’s so high…or is she going to hit it with the broom?” The child knows however, from her mother’s tone of voice, that hitting the roof is obviously not a good thing - it might even be a bit scary. She packs her toys away quickly.

When we speak we often use words or phrases like “hit the roof” in a way that is not meant to be taken literally. Young children are often confused by this, but as time goes on, they learn that words don’t always mean as they seem.

This is called **“non-literal” or “figurative” use of language**.
Many children on the autism spectrum find understanding figurative language difficult. In other words, they often take things literally.

Children usually develop an understanding of this type of language by exposure to a particular word or phrase. They also pick up on the context, by the tone of voice and even the gesture that is made along with it. Grandpa might always say “I could eat a horse” when he sits down to dinner. The child sees that he rubs his belly when he says this, and that he never complains when Grandma fails to serve up a horsey casserole. Children with autism may not pick up on the other cues so easily. They may become upset about Grandpa’s comments but may not mention it at the time. They may bottle up their disgust, only for it to resurface later.

There are many examples of how language can be confusing if taken literally. Wendy Lawson, an adult with autism, described her confusion as a child in being told to “Sit down” but also to

“Sit up.” She was also told to “eat with a fork” but also to “eat with your mouth closed.” How on earth do you get a fork into a closed mouth?!

Another example is of an adolescent with autism who was on a tram. When asked by the conductor “*Can I see your ticket*?”, he replied with “No.” The conductor asked again; “ *Are you holding a valid ticket*?” and the man shook his head. After being threatened with a fine for fare evading, the young man, quite distressed, pulled a valid ticket from his pocket. The conductor was annoyed. He grunted and moved to the next passenger.

In this example, the young man with autism was left feeling confused as he had been totally honest with his responses. The conductor *couldn't* see his ticket – and he wasn't *holding* a valid ticket. It had been in his pocket all along.

The way in which even a single word is used can cause confusion, and it may take many years for a person with autism to realise how fluid and versatile language can be. The word “up”, for example, means a skyward direction– or at least this is what a toddler learns. But “give up” , “make it up” “throw up” , “divide it up” all contain that word, but the “up” part is not to be taken literally.

The slang use of words is also confusing and ever-changing. It is an important part of upper primary and adolescent language. This, colloquial use of language, can cause extreme confusion for some children in their social interactions with others. “That's a sick bike.” “He kicked a wicked goal.” “His sister's hot.” This use of language becomes particularly confusing for children with autism when the same word is used in many different ways and the non-verbals, such as the tone of voice, need interpreting to specify which meaning is intended. Take for example;

“He ate a worm – ***that's sick***.”

“He can do 360s on his blades – ***that's sick***.”

Interpretation of non-verbal communication is also something that can be hard for autistic individuals, making comprehension of like phrases problematic.

Finally, many children with autism, take language literally, in that inferences are not made, and only the “surface” words attended to. Once example is a mother asking her autistic child to **watch** his your younger brother as she runs inside to the toilet. She comes outside again, a minute later, to find the younger brother face-first in the worm farm. The child with autism had

watched him, as instructed. He had watched him open the worm farm and then fall forward into a steaming pile of compost! This child, once again, failed to see that there was actually more to this instruction than what was said by the words. The mother would have been better to say "Watch your brother and keep him next to you until I get back."

So what can be done? How can we overcome these hurdles that literal language may cause for our children? Below are a number of tips that I have found helpful.

1. If a child is only beginning to attend to and comprehend language, I would try and be as direct and concrete as possible with my language.

   Don't say: "Have a seat" Instead say "Sit down."

   Don't say : "Hold on" or "Wait a minute" Instead say "Wait."

2. Be careful of using question structures, when you are trying to give an instruction. Often people use a question structure to some less bossy. Children can misinterpret these as questions. You can be direct and friendly at the same time!

   Don't say "Can you come and sit down now?" Instead say "It's time to sit down."

   Don't say "Are you packing up like the teacher asked?" Instead say "The teacher said for you to pack up now. I want you to pack up."

   Don't say "You want to put your seatbelt on?" Instead say "Put your seatbelt on."

3. Listen to your own language use. You may think that you are really good at avoiding figurative language because you know to never say things like "pull up his socks" or "over the moon". Many children, not just autistic children, have trouble with these types of idioms, and naturally, we use them less with youngsters… But *listen closer to yourself* and you may find that you *do* use figurative speech. If your child is young or low-functioning, be wary of this and avoid them. If your child is higher functioning, be aware of them, and understand that you may have to clarify what you mean. After all, higher functioning children will only learn about figurative speech if you explain what each phrase means.

Common phrases that you probably use:

Give us a hand	I can't wait	Have a seat
Make up your own mind	Cut it out	Fed up
Make friends	Go easy	Keep it down
Now and then	Hop in the car	In a minute

4. There are some language resources that target IDIOMS. These are good for older children, and young teenagers. They target classic idioms such as “piece of cake” “feeling blue” “over the moon” etc… Alternatively, you can make your own lists . Ask your child’s teacher to do so too. Include slang that is current for your child’s age.

Go through these words and phrases in small groups or individually with your child. Explain the meanings and practise using them.

5. With some children, you may need to avoid the word “IT”. “Give it up” “Cut it out” “Go for it” “It’s all very well.” After all, what is IT? This may be obvious to some, but not to others. Think about it!

5. Finally, think about the parts of a command that you think can go unspoken, but really need to be clarified. “Watch your brother.” “Check the bath” “See who’s at the door.” Some children may only respond to the actual words you say and nothing more.

I hope that by following these ideas you can help your child in understanding more language.

Please contact me with any questions.

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