Communication Spot •

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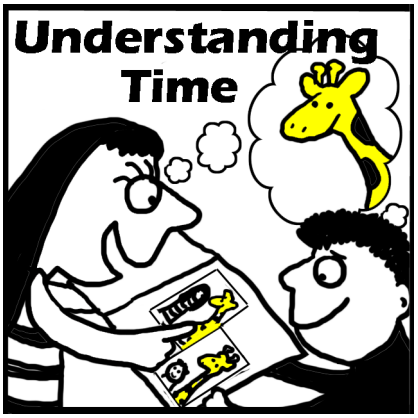


UNDERSTANDING TIME CONCEPTS

"Christmas is in 25 more sleeps!"

As parents, many of us have made comments like this, and we do it because time is hard for young children to understand. In fact, many of us don't realise how hard it can be. We take much of our understanding of language for granted.

Try reading through the following phrases and have a think about the time frame in which they are set. You'll find that you can slot them into past, present and future quickly…

1. Yesterday I went iceskating.

2. I'm eating chocolate icecream.

3. We'll go to Nanna's this year for Christmas.

4. He was sick.

5. I was running for the bus.

6. I brush my teeth every morning.

7. I climbed the biggest tree on the block.

(You should have got 1. past 2. present 3. future 4. past 5. past 6. past, present and future 7. past . Right?)

Now think about *how* you figured out your answers. For example, Sentence 1 gave you two hints – you had a time word ("yesterday") plus you had the word "went" which told you that it happened in the past. Easy right? Not necessarily…

Look again at Sentence 4.

Like Sentence 1, there is a word there that tells you it happened in the past ("was"). So it would follow that in a sentence like "*The man **was** Japanese",* he was Japanese in the past, but possibly not now? This is where language gets tricky. We of course know that the man was Japanese in the past, is in the present and will be in the future, because of the nature of the word after the "was".

So maybe it's better to rely on time words/ phrases. These are words like "Yesterday, tomorrow, in a hour, next week, last night, this morning etc..."

Have a read of the next sentence…

"Last year Mum made our lunches."

It obviously happened in the past because we can easily see the time phrase "last year", but did it just happened *one single time* last year, or did it happen *every day of last year*? It's tricky to tell. We would need some other words as well as the time phrase to really understand:

"Last year Mum always made our lunches".

or

"Last year Mum made our lunches once".

Most of us have never needed to think much about tense or time. Understanding of time concepts usually develops naturally, but if your child has ASD you should get thinking about them quite carefully. In English, we have a number of different ways to "mark" when something happens, and for children with language impairments it can be extremely difficult to master. For kids with ASD, it is particularly important to acknowledge the confusion that time concepts can cause. We know that change can be difficult for these children so it is important to be able to talk about what is going to happen now, what may have happened in the past, but what may happen in the future.

Usually children up to three years, don't think much about time. They think and communicate mainly about themselves in the "here and now". This is what makes sense to them, so they will learn most of their language from talking about what is happening NOW.

If your child is not trying to talk about events that happened or will happen, you should take this as a clue that time concepts may be tricky for them at their stage of development. Keep your speech mainly about the "here and now".

I remember one mother I worked with, whose child had very little memory of things that had just happened. Hide a ball and he would lose interest almost immediately. This mother was brilliant in that she took her child to all sorts of wonderful stimulating places - the children's farm, the beach, the aquarium - and reported that her child always *loved* what he saw and was extremely animated and chatty. She would continuously talk about these past events thinking that they would stimulate language, but truthfully, the language meant very little to him when the actual things were not present.

Taking photos can act as a bridge between the past and present thinking, however, just because your child loved the Giant Jumping Castle at the fete doesn't mean he'll get as excited about the photo!

Wendy Lawson, an adult with ASD writes that time concepts are very tricky for her because they are very difficult to visualise. Like many autistic individuals, Wendy thinks mainly in pictures which presents a major hurdle when you are dealing with abstract concepts (such as time).
For this reason, I encourage parents of autistic children to make time as "visual" as possible.

WAYS TO HELP

1. When they are ready, help your child learn to refer to visual schedules, calendars and clocks. Use time words in conjunction with these. For example, "You've finished the puzzle, what's **next** on your schedule?… Oh look, **after** the puzzle you choose a book". (And then while reading the book)… "Remember before we did a puzzle? That puzzle was fun!"

2. I also use a gesture -a sweeping hand over the shoulder- to stress that something happened before and a forward sweeping hand to stress that something will happen in the future. It doesn't really matter what gesture you use as long as it is consistent between all people interacting with your child.

3. Stress words that help children locate the time frame and teach these explicitly. (These are listed in the grey box below).
Be aware of "hazy" time words such as "soon", "later" and "in a while". Some children with autism can become stressed by these and prefer time-related language that is more specific.

Instead of saying “We’ll go to the park soon”, try:

- “We will go to the park **in** five minutes” – and then show the time on the clock and where the hand will be when it’s time to go.
- Set a timer and explain. “The timer will beep and then we **will** go to the park”.
- “Finish your yoghurt and **then** we will go to the park”).

WORDS TO STRESS/ TEACH

Next After Before Then Now Soon Later First

In a while In five minutes (in _____ implies future**)**

Five minutes ago

Will go (will _____ means future**)**

Right now (immediately**)**

Tomorrow, yesterday, today

Tonight, Last night, Last week, Last year

This morning, This afternoon, This year

Next year, Next week

When you were three (past**) , when you are a big boy (**future**),**

When you are at Pop’s (could be past or future**)**

4. *RIGHT NOW* is a useful concepts to model and teach because sometimes when your child is demanding something, you may have to say “Not right now… we will do it _____”
5. The phrases *THIS MORNING* or *THIS AFTERNOON* could be past or future, so beware. Children with autism can learn the meaning in one context and then get confused. For example:

   “This afternoon we made play-dough”

   “This afternoon we’ll go to the park”
6. Calendars are really useful. Choose calendars that have a clear box for each day and draw in events that are upcoming. Have a sticky arrow or a ball of Blu-Tak that you move on each day. Comment about what happened “yesterday”, “last week” and what will happen in the upcoming days. Point to the corresponding places on the calendar as you do so.

7. Time can sometimes be shown quite successfully on time lines. I often use a “bed” picture as a clear division between days. An example of a time line is shown at the end of this article and a template can be downloaded from www.pelicantalk.com .Time lines can be as LONG as you want.
8. Teach children days of the week. Also teach them about growing older. “Now you are four, next birthday you will be five and then the next year after that you will turn six”. These can be used as handy time references as your child develops in their understanding.
9. Some children rely on the order of sentence to get the meaning. So putting things in the order that they will happen can be useful.

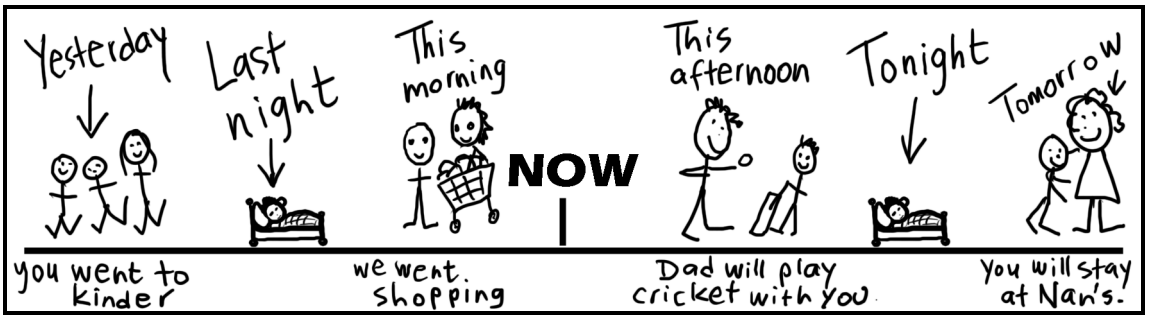
For example, Instead of “You can play computer after you finish your colouring,” try:

“Finish your colouring and then you can play computer”.

10. Carry out sequencing activities that promote the use of time phrases. “Fun with Sequences” is one such example. ($30 from www.pelicantalk.com)

A TIME LINE – You don’t have to be an artist. Draw in some things that happened in the past and will happen in the future. Stress words that highlight the tense.

(Eg. Tomorrow you *WILL* stay at Nan’s).



I hope these ideas will help your child in understanding about time. Of course, all kids are different and what might work for one child, may not work for another. The most important thing is that you, as a parent, understand how difficult these concepts can be, and adapt your language accordingly.

Please contact me with any questions.

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