

Language-Building Activities for Students with Autism

The following ideas can be used to promote language in children who know how to speak, but need work on using their language functionally and in natural settings.

1. Look for opportunities to prompt language. For example, if you see your student having trouble with something (such as opening his lunch containers or unzipping his jacket, prompt him to ask for help: "Help me." Lunchtime or snack time are also good times for teaching language, since food is often very motivating. Example: "I want pizza please," "Can I have more chips, please?" or simply "pretzel," depending on the child's current verbal skills. During snack, you could give each child a small amount of snack at first, and prompt them to ask for more.
2. If you have a student who repeats exactly what you say, when prompting language, just say exactly what you want him to say ("Help me.") Don't say, "Ask for help" or even "Say help me" because that is exactly what will be repeated.
3. When prompting language, use the same words for each situation each time. For example, always prompt "help me" not "I need help" sometimes and "help me" at other times. Once your student has completely mastered one phrase with no prompts, you might think about adding other phrases.
4. Determine how many words your student is able to easily repeat at a time, and begin your language program using phrases with that number of words or less.
5. At first, prompt every time (don't wait for the student to say something – prompt immediately). After your student is successful with this consistently, try a "time delay." This means that you hold the object that your student needs or wait to help him until he says the correct phrase. If your student does not respond within about 10 – 20 seconds, go ahead and prompt him and continue to prompt at least the rest of the day, possibly longer. Try the time delay again at a later time.
6. Use this language-building procedure with activities that your student knows how to do and that are not unpleasant for him. For example, work on asking for glue if he knows that he is supposed to be gluing something and he is reasonably motivated to complete the gluing project.
7. Other ideas for language: when your student is supposed to cut out something, hold the scissors where he can see them, and say, "I need scissors." When he repeats this, give them to him and say something like, "Good job telling me that you need scissors." You can do the same thing with glue (have him say "I need glue" for each piece that he must glue to complete the project, so he has many opportunities to practice).

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