



Eight Ways to Better Connect with Autistic People

By **Joe Butler**

WE ALL WANT TO BE HEARD AND UNDERSTOOD. OUR ABILITY TO UNDERSTAND OTHERS AND EXPRESS OURSELVES FLUCTUATES DEPENDING ON OUR INTERNAL STATE, E.G., STRESS LEVELS OR TIREDNESS, AND THE CONTEXT WE ARE IN, E.G., PLACE, PEOPLE, OR TIME. FOR AUTISTIC PEOPLE, COMMUNICATING WITH ALLISTIC (NON-AUTISTIC) PEOPLE CAN BE BEWILDERING AND EXHAUSTING. THIS CAN LEAD TO MUTUAL FRUSTRATION AND INEFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION FOR EVERYONE.

ADAPTING COMMUNICATION

In a world where allistic people are in the majority, there is a common and damaging misconception that autistic people are poor communicators. In reality, autistic people may communicate as effectively as allistic people, especially with other autistic people, but their communication needs are simply different. It is the responsibility of allistic people to understand those differences and to adapt their communication style to enable clearer mutual understanding.

I have worked with autistic children and young people in ed-

ucation settings for more than 20 years, and more recently also support autistic adults and their employers/colleagues to better understand any communication differences in the workplace. In that time, I have learned ways to make my communication more successful and less confusing for autistic people. I have recently used this knowledge and experience to co-author *Is that Clear? Effective Communication in a Neurodiverse World*, a short and practical guide offering communication tips for allistic people, inspired and contributed to by autistic people.

I have adapted the following tips from that guide and hope you find them helpful—whether as a family member, friend, colleague, educator, employer, or health professional—in helping you communicate more effectively and to amplify what autistic people are saying they need. You may also find these tips useful in helping younger autistic people to better understand communication differences and advocate for their needs and preferences. These are general tips. It is important to remember any adaptations you make need to be person-centered. What works for one autistic person may not work for another, so ask (or find out) from the individual and keep checking and trying.

1. Slow down

Sometimes receiving information from someone who is speaking too quickly can be overwhelming for an autistic person. Allistic people can find slowing down difficult at first. You may start slowly but then find yourself speeding up. Adding pauses is an excellent way to adjust the pace of your language and gives your communication partner time to process. It is important not to fill these pauses with more language; the autistic person works hard during these silences.

2. Find a quiet location

Try to find quieter places to talk. Be aware that surrounding noise, chatter, or activity can often overload and distract your communication partner. Consider the impact sights, smells, taste, and touch can also have, especially in busy, unpredictable environments, where lots of different sensory information might be overwhelming.

3. Make it personal

Use the person's name so they know you are speaking directly to them. Avoid giving instructions using generic and abstract terms, such as "everyone," "all students," or "Class 4," as these may not resonate with the autistic person. Use, "Samira, sit down now please," rather than, "I need the whole class to sit down."

4. Give clear instructions

It is helpful to give clear and concise instructions, broken down into manageable chunks. Allow the person time to process and respond. Consider asking them to repeat back the instruction, so you can check whether they have understood you correctly. If you need to repeat the instruction, then try to use the same words (unless you were originally unclear), ideally backed up visually. Using new words may add to any confusion and mean your communication partner has to begin reprocessing your request from the beginning.

5. Keep questions clear and direct

People use questions in many different ways, including rhetorically. It can be difficult for some autistic persons to determine which questions need an answer and how much information is being requested from them.

Try to make questions clear and direct and limit the number you ask. Avoid open-ended questions, such as "How was your day?" The autistic person may feel obliged to provide you with every detail of their schedule. If questions involve choice, limit options to make them more manageable. For example, "When do you want to meet—Tuesday or Wednesday afternoon?"

6. Avoid vague language

Allistic people regularly use vague or ambiguous language as part of everyday conversations. One example is in time expressions, where not only might the concept of time be difficult, but also the language used to describe it. Some autistic people may benefit from specific timing rather than phrases such as "See you later," or "I'll be there soon." When precise times are used, they cannot always be trusted e.g., "Just wait a second," so try to give realistic and accurate timings and stick to them.

Language may also be ambiguous because it has unclear or multiple meanings. For example, saying someone is "pretty upset" could be problematic for many reasons. Firstly, "pretty" here means quite or rather, but it can also mean beautiful. Added to that, "upset" refers to an emotional state which might be difficult for some autistic people to relate to. It's hard to know exactly what "upset" means here—is it sad, angry, or both?

Also, phrases such as "jumping to conclusions" or "getting the wrong end of the stick" have figurative meanings, which are very different to their literal meanings.

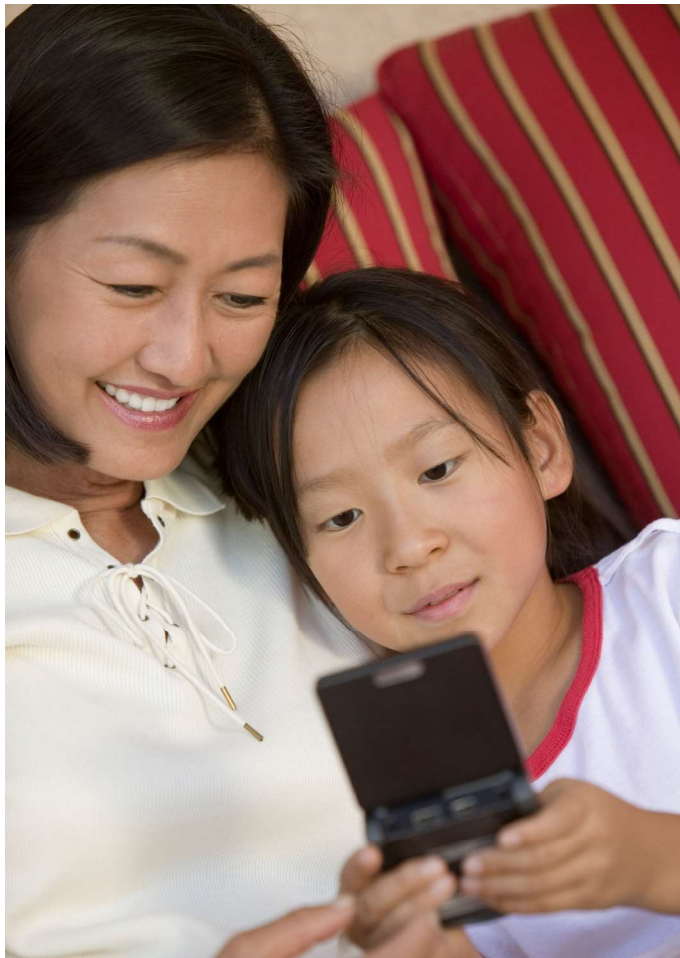
Autistic people can find vague and ambiguous language confusing. Whilst it is impossible to avoid it completely in spontaneous conversation, try to limit its use and check your communication partner has understood you correctly.

7. Don't forget nonverbal communication

Verbal language is one form of communication. We also communicate with our actions, such as body language, eye contact, gestures, or through touch. Our actions often enhance what we are saying. If our communication partner is autistic, they may find allistic nonverbal communication difficult to interpret. If our nonverbal communication contradicts our words, this can be even more confusing.

Allistic people may make eye contact to let others know they are listening to them. However, when autistic people listen, they may find it distracting or even painful to make eye contact. We should never insist on eye contact and instead, adjust our allistic expectations.

Equally, allistic people can misunderstand how autistic people might communicate nonverbally. Repetitive sounds or



movements (stims), such as humming or rocking, some autistic people need to do may confuse an allistic person. However, these might be vital in enabling an autistic person to focus or communicate emotions. Stims may support an autistic person’s self-regulation—that is, how they manage their emotional well-being or balance their sensory needs. Stims should never be discouraged unless harmful, in which case less harmful alternatives should be explored with the autistic person.

Learn from your communication partner about how nonverbal communication works for them and adapt your own style and thinking accordingly.

8. Use visual aids

Many autistic people find visual information easier to retain than spoken information. Diagrams, planners, schedules, and mind maps can all be useful visual aids to support understanding. An autistic person may find it helpful to refer back to these aids to remind them what was discussed and help them understand and prepare for what is happening now and next.

Just as visual aids can support a person’s understanding, some non-speaking autistic people also express themselves through written words or symbols/pictures (including through the use of technology). In situations where stress levels rise, some autistic people who usually communicate verbally may

need to use written words and/or visual aids to communicate instead.

Be flexible and open to different ways of communicating, and support and validate what is most effective and inclusive for the autistic individual.



Joe Butler (pronouns: she/her) is an education/autism consultant who has worked with autistic children and young people in the UK for over 20 years. For the majority of that time, Joe taught and led in an autism specialist school for pupils aged four to 19, latterly as a headteacher. She continues to work in both mainstream and special schools as a specialist advisory teacher. Joe provides consultancy and bespoke training for education, youth and adult organizations, as well as for workplaces, both in the UK and internationally, through her company SEND Support. She regularly speaks at conferences and events, and is committed to learning from, sharing, and amplifying the voices and experiences of autistic people to increase understanding and drive positive change. Joe worked with language specialists Zanne Gaynor and Kathryn Alevizos to co-author [Is That Clear? Effective Communication in a Neurodiverse World](#). Joe can be contacted for training and support around any aspect of better understanding autism, including for workshops on communication-based on [Is That Clear?](#) through her website and via Twitter.

Website: <https://www.sendsupport.co.uk/>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/SENDsupportuk>



VALIANT
PARTNERS

ValiantFutures.com
office@valiantfutures.com
760-854-4003

**WE STRIVE TO MAKE
SMART FINANCIAL PLANNING
ACCESSIBLE TO ALL FAMILIES.**

- Who will care for my child when I’m gone?
- How do we access and keep public benefits?
- How much money will it take to support our child?

