# Top Tips to begin engaging with an Autistic child:-

So here are our top tips; firstly, remember that each autistic person is different and unique and what motivates and engages one autistic child may not motivate and engage another. It is therefore important to firstly begin to recognise what motivates your child and what activities or items your child is engaging with.

Even though every autistic person can learn to communicate, it's not always through spoken language. Non-verbal autistic individuals have much to contribute to society and can live fulfilling lives with the help of visual supports and assistive technologies.

**Strategies for promoting language and interaction development in autistic children:**

**Imitate your child (sometimes known as Intensive Interaction)-**Mimicking your child's sounds and play behaviours will encourage more vocalising and interaction. It also encourages your child to copy you and take turns. Make sure you imitate *how* your child is playing – so long as it's a positive behaviour. For example, when your child rolls a car, you roll a car. If he or she crashes the car, you crash yours too. But don't imitate throwing the car!

**Focus on non-verbal communication-** Gestures and eye contact can build a foundation for language. Encourage your child by modelling and responding to these behaviours. Exaggerate your gestures. Use both your body and your voice when communicating – for example, by extending your hand to point when you say "look" and nodding your head when you say "yes." When asking your child to sit down on a chair you might say 'Jason sit' and pat the chair with your hand. Use gestures that are easy for your child to understand and imitate. Examples include clapping, opening hands, reaching out arms, etc. Respond to your child's gestures: When he/she looks at or points to a toy, hand it to her or take the cue for *you* to play with it; similarly, point to a toy you want before picking it up.

There are many forms of communication, not just language. When you are looking for a communicative response from your child remember to watch your child's physical responses such as, reaching for, moving an arm or leg, a fleeting eye gaze, a vocalisation and reward it with a response of your own. Respond promptly, the promptness of your response helps your child feel the power of communication.

Remember behaviour usually is communication! What is successful will usually be repeated whether it is appropriate behaviour or not. Try not to respond to a negative or unwanted behaviour (as much as is safely possible). Reward positive desired behaviour with an acknowledgement or response.

**Leave "space" for your child to talk-** It's natural to feel the urge to fill in language when a child doesn't immediately respond. But it's so important to give your child lots of opportunities to communicate, even if he/she isn't talking. When you ask a question or see that your child wants something, pause for several seconds while looking at him expectantly. Be aware that each ASD person has different language processing requirements. Try to gauge how long your child usually takes to process and respond to verbal communication, don't be tempted to repeat questions too quickly as this may mean that your child then has to begin re-processing and de-coding what you have said all over again!

**Simplify your language-** Doing so helps your child follow what you're saying. It also makes it easier for him/her to imitate your speech. If your child is non-verbal, try speaking mostly in single words. (If he/she is playing with a ball, you say "ball" or "roll.") If your child is using single words, up the ante. Speak in short 2 key word phrases, such as "roll ball" or "throw ball." Keep following this "one-up" rule: Generally use phrases with one more word than your child is using. Remember to say your child's name first to gain their attention (even if they do not look to you or appear to respond) and then give an instruction e.g. 'Jason sit'. Sequence your language in the order that you would like the child to complete the tasks in hand e.g. 'Jason first puzzle then IPad'.

**Follow your child's interests-** Rather than interrupting your child's focus, follow along with words. Using the one-up rule, narrate what your child is doing. If he's playing with a shape sorter, you might say the word "in" when he puts a shape in its slot. You might say "shape" or "square" when he holds it. By talking about what engages your child, you'll help him learn the associated vocabulary (labelling).

**Encourage play and social interaction-** Children learn through play, and that includes learning language. Interactive play provides shared enjoyment and the potential to create opportunities for you and your child to communicate. Use activities that include your child's special interest if possible. Cause and effect toys are usually effective and also offer opportunities to verbally label items, colours, numbers, shapes etc. Also try playful activities that promote social interaction e.g.; singing, reciting nursery rhymes and gentle rough and tumble. During your interactions, position yourself in front of your child and close to eye level – so it's easier for your child to see and hear you.

**Use simple play routines-** Play routines are a great way of offering your child the opportunity to join in. They need to be fun, simple and repetitive. For example; blowing bubbles; you might use 'ready, steady, go!' and then blow the bubbles. You would repeat this several times and then begin to pause after saying 'ready, steady…' to see if your child responds with the word 'go!', or an action (reaching for the bubbles) or eye gaze (making eye contact with you) to indicate they want you to blow the bubbles. They may show anticipation by pursing their lips, in each instance this should instigate your response and they should be rewarded with bubbles!

**Offering guided choices-** While interacting through activities with your child try to establish from the start that you are going to be part of the activity and lead from the start. Keep control over the items involved (you could put puzzle pieces into a bag or box for example) in the activity and offer each piece in turn.

If you have chosen to use a shape posting activity you could offer guided choices; offering a choice of two shapes for the child to select a preference and post e.g. 'square or circle?' (If they know their shapes) or 'red or yellow?" (If they know their colours) when the child reaches for one they can take it and post it (you can also verbally label their choice as they take the item to confirm their selection).

**Turn-Taking-** Introduce the concept of turn-taking when you feel your child is ready. After all social interaction requires the art of turn-taking! The activity you choose will need to be motivating, perhaps based around a special interest. It will need to be simple and offer the opportunity for a quick exchange of turns; for example posting shapes, stacking bricks. You will need to lead the activity and keep control over any pieces that are used for the activity. Use structured, repetitive

language e.g. '(adult's name) Julie's turn' '(child's name) Jason's turn' using a physical prompt to indicate which person you are referring to (placing your hand on your chest, or pointing to yourself when it is your turn and vice versa). Once this skill has been learnt through play it can be transposed into other areas of communication and learning.

**Use objects of reference to communicate to your child-** This is the first form of visual communication you can begin to use and requires no significant preparation! Use real objects relevant to the activity you are about to do to communicate visually to your child; for example; you might show your child a puzzle piece and a DVD and say "Jason first puzzle then DVD". You can begin to generalise this into other everyday activities; showing them a nappy to indicate it is changing time, car keys to indicate you are going out in the car etc. It is important to use the same item each time to represent an activity, so if you are going to use a bowl to represent snack time you should use the same bowl each time (some children will need you to use the exact same item, including colour).

**Lastly, remember to play with joy!** Lose your inhibitions and enjoy what you are doing. You will need to provide an irresistible invitation for your child to join you!