

## The Minimal Speech Approach

It is common for many people to use too much language when talking to, or giving instructions to children with special needs. It is a trap that all of us can fall into quite easily without realising it. There is also a common misconception that we often assume that some children can understand a lot more than they actually do. This often happens because a child with special needs may be very verbal and we believe that everything that he is saying, he understands. Some children learn a lot of phrases and often use words that they do not understand, but the listener assumes that if they are using the language they must understand it. Another reason we often get a false impression of the true nature of a child's understanding is that they are able to follow instructions. However, some children become adept at following contextual clues and have a memory of certain routines, and they are not necessarily following the verbal instruction.

It is important that we have an awareness of our own language level when we are not really sure of an individual's level of comprehension. In these cases, we should always keep our language simple. Assessing language levels and capabilities is often very difficult and is best carried out by a speech and language therapist who can observe the individual in a range of communication situations and environments. It is also important to make sure that the individual does not have a hearing impairment which is preventing him from actually hearing the commands.

The minimal speech approach focuses on using one or two key words rather than a sentence. For instance, a teacher could say to a child with autism "Right, get your coat and boots and let's go out to the sandpit". The child may not understand any of this and completely ignore the teacher, or may just follow what others are doing. Alternatively the teacher could take the child to their coat, hand it to the child and say "coat". The child could then be taken to his boots, and the teacher would say "boots", as she helps the child put them on. This may seem like a rather long-winded way for a busy teacher to show the child what he needs to do, but in time it should show positive benefits. Potter and Whittaker (2001) highlight that when communicating with children who have severe difficulties understanding speech, we must communicate whatever is the focus of their attention. So if we are putting their boots on, we say "boot". This way the child can start to relate objects or events with particular words. In the longer term, the teacher will not have to physically show the child the objects, she can just name them and the child will recognise the word.

When using language it is also important to avoid using abstract language and terms. Initially it is probably best to stick with nouns (ball, cup) and verbs (run, swim), rather than use adjectives (big, old), prepositions (in, behind), pronouns (he, mine), or time concepts (tomorrow, this afternoon).



The minimal speech approach can be used with adults or children with a severe communication delay. Just using single words can often be much more effective than sentences. There is now evidence to show that simplifying language not only helps individuals with autism have a better understanding of language, but also has positive effects on behaviour and encourages more interaction and responses. Behavioural difficulties often occur because individuals do not understand what is happening or what other people are expecting. By simplifying language, inappropriate or challenging behaviour may be avoided.

Adding further cues alongside single word commands can also facilitate understanding. Using visuals, a sign or gesture, or objects alongside the speech can give the individual further cues. It is also worth noting, that if you use visuals etc, still use single words, as a longer sentence can distract from the other cue.

Potter, C., & Whittaker, C. (2001). *Enabling Communication in Children With Autism*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers

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