



The Critical Importance of Declarative Language Input for Children with ASD

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Declarative language, plain and simple, is stating out loud what one knows or thinks, in the form of a comment. It may be used to share an opinion (“I love spaghetti!”); to make a prediction (“I think we are going to the movies tomorrow.”); to announce / celebrate (“We had a great time today!”); to observe (“I notice that your friend wants a turn.”); to reflect on past experience (“Last time this stopped working we checked the batteries.”); or to problem solve (“We need tape to fix it.”). Declarative language does not require a verbal response. Rather, it invites experience-sharing, and provides an ideal social framework for later conversational interactions.

Unfortunately, however, when people talk to children with ASD they frequently use *imperative language*; that is, language that is in the form of questions or commands / directives that require a particular response. For example, “What color is that?”, “What is your name?”, “Say: block,” and “Look at me,” are all imperatives. The problem with this type of language input is that it does not teach children how to become authentic communication partners, because its circumscribed nature does not invite experience-sharing, which is the basis for interactive language use. Indeed, when people primarily use imperative language with a child, he or she learns, incorrectly, that communication consists of right and wrong answers; questions and directives; and that the main purpose of communication is *instrumental*; that is, to “get” something from another person.

In truth, authentic communication is primarily about experience-sharing. We communicate with others to share memories; gather information; learn about one another and the world; seek different opinions; and share emotions. While it is true that we sometimes need to communicate in order to “get” something, if children with ASD are to learn how to *socially* communicate with others, they need a linguistic environment that is rooted in declarative language input.

If truth be told, children with ASD do not need language models that lead to the development of instrumental language

use, for it is common knowledge that as their language progresses, it is often characterized by scripts and rote language that are instrumental, as opposed to social in nature. Furthermore, children with ASD often become “stuck” at the instrumental level and fail to reach the next (higher) level of language development which involves generating the creative, flexible, and dynamic language that comes so easily to typical language learners.

The question to ask is: *What can we do to help the child with ASD generate creative language?* The first step in this teaching process actually begins with the adult (which is very good news, because we are in control of what we do!). So, we need to take a step back and become aware of the type of language that we are using with the child. Are we asking the child with ASD a lot of questions (many of which we already know the answer to!)? Are we using too many commands? Is most of our language input designed to get something from the child? Or, are we generously giving information and sharing experiences so that the child can learn, over time, to do the same in return? In contrast to the erroneous assumption that children with ASD cannot learn from this type of language input, I have found that mindful use of declarative language with children with ASD can make a huge difference in their ability to share experiences and memories; notice things; problem-solve; understand perspective; and communicate

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on a more dynamic and creative level. That said, it is important to note that the language gains that result from ongoing exposure to declarative language take time, for the focus is not on words, per se, but rather on the *use* of those words for *authentic* communication. The challenge then is for us to make the commitment to change how we communicate with children with ASD, and to exercise the patience required to see results.

More specific information on the benefits of using declarative language input with children on the autism spectrum follows, accompanied by examples to ensure understanding and facilitate its use by adults.

Model self-narratives to help the child develop his or her own “inner voice.”

A critically important by-product of language acquisition is that of developing an inner voice to problem-solve and plan. For example, imagine that you are getting ready to go to work and you can't find your keys. Your inner voice may “say” something like, “Now when did I last see my keys? What jacket did I have on?” Basically, your inner voice helps you to think through the problem calmly and gets you started on a plan of action to solve it.

Many children with ASD do not independently develop this inner voice to regulate their thoughts, actions, and emotions. To help them to develop this ability, “think out loud.” For example, make predictions; ponder opportunities; consider possibilities; and reflect on past experiences when you are with your child or student. By so doing, you will be providing a clear language model from which the child can begin to form his or her own inner voice.

Provide a window into another person’s perspective.

Most of us know that children with ASD have difficulty taking perspective. Using declarative language to share your thoughts and feelings provides children with a window into the way you view the world in an inviting, nonthreatening way. In addition, if different people regularly use declarative language for this purpose—for example, parents, teachers, and therapists—it helps the child with ASD to understand that different people have different thoughts, opinions, perspectives, and emotions.

Help the child “zoom out” to see the “BIG picture.”

It is well known that children with ASD tend to focus on details, but fail to put them together to understand the big picture. When we use imperative language, we inadvertently promote this focus. For example, if we tell a child to “put the toy in the toy box” or “say goodbye to Grandma” we are zooming in on the details and creating a situation where there is one and only one right answer. If, on the other hand, we use declarative language to comment on what we see in the big picture, we help the child to notice the context; integrate this new information with previously-stored knowledge; and subsequently form a plan of action that makes sense to him or her. For example, instead of using the imperative language noted above, use the following: “I see a toy on the floor” or “I notice Grandma is leaving.” And, wait expectantly for a response!


Empower the child to be a problem solver rather than a direction follower.

When we give a directive to children with ASD, we leave little room for them to go beyond the response the directive requires. The same is true for asking questions. In contrast, when we use declarative language to share information about the environment or situation at-hand, we provide opportunities for them to expand awareness and practice problem-solving. Think of it this way. From a young age, the type of language input that has been used most often with children with ASD has been that of imperative language (asking questions and giving directives). Clearly, they do not need more practice in that area! Rather, they need practice in problem solving, and identifying themselves as competent problem solvers. That said, success at this level is more likely if you have been diligent in the use of self-narratives. For example, if you have staged situations in the past where you have said on several occasions, “My pencil broke. I need to sharpen it,” then when your child or student breaks his or her pencil, your saying, “I see that you broke your pencil,” (after which you wait expectantly) enables him or her to generate the solution. In contrast, telling the child to “Go sharpen your pencil” robs him or her of the opportunity to solve the problem on his or her own.

Give the child reasons to visually reference and read what is going on in his or her environment.

We know that it can be difficult for children with ASD to tune into the social information that is going on around them. Rather than telling them exactly what to do and when to do it, use declarative language input to help them notice what is important. For example, if it is time for a transition, instead of telling the child to “go to the table for snack” or “put on your coat,” direct his or her attention toward the changes in the environment: “I notice that all the kids are at the table,” or “I notice that all the kids are putting on their coats.” Using declarative language in these situations helps children with ASD to recognize the importance of periodically checking-in on one’s environment to obtain the information they need. Over time they become information seekers rather than passive recipients of information that comes to them when there is an overuse of imperative language.

Clearly, there are many benefits that accrue from using declarative language input with children on the autism spectrum. While it is not a technique that generates immediate results,

its continued use can result in long-term benefits that are significant and lasting. 



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She obtained her Bachelor’s Degree in Mathematics from Boston College but after working for two years with adults with ASD in supported work and residential settings, she found her true passion and pursued a Master’s Degree in Speech Language Pathology from Emerson College. She added RDI® to her practice in order to serve families of individuals with ASD in more effective and meaningful ways. Linda has a private practice in Beverly, Massachusetts that offers services including speech language therapy, communication assessments, school consultations, professional trainings, social pragmatics groups, and RDI.® Her website is www.peer-projects.com and she can be reached at linda_murphy@peer-projects.com.