



Imitation and Communication: What's the Connection?

By Lauren Lowry
Hanan SLP & Clinical Writer

If you have a young child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), you may have noticed that a lot of therapy programs include work on “motor imitation skills”, which means being able to copy other people’s actions (like banging on a drum, clapping hands, or waving). At first, this might seem like an odd skill to work on. I remember one parent asking me, “Why are we working on imitation? How will this help him learn to communicate?”

While imitation and communication may seem unrelated, there is a strong connection between them. Research with children who have ASD has shown that being able to imitate is linked to their development of language and play skills [1,2]. More recently, researchers have discovered that there’s a link between being able to copy other peoples’ actions and an important skill needed for meaningful communication, known as “**intentional communication**” [3].

What is intentional communication?

Intentional communication happens when messages are sent directly to another person to achieve a specific purpose. For example, if a child looks at Mom or Dad and then points to the fridge because he wants a snack, that is intentional communication. If she takes a noisy toy to Mom or Dad and shakes it to show them how much noise it makes, that is intentional communication. These messages can be sent with or without words – they can be sent using words, gestures, sounds, signs, or pictures. Sending intentional messages paves the way for spoken language for many children [4].

Before children are able to communicate intentionally, they may make sounds, do actions or even say a word, but these are not sent directly to another person for a specific purpose. So how do you know whether a child’s message is intentional or not?

The best way to tell if the message is intentional is to notice if the child looks at you or connects with you in another way (such as coming towards you or taking you by the hand) while using the sound/action/word. For example:

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- If your child makes the sound “ca” while playing with cars and doesn’t turn to look at you or expect you to do or say anything in response, then it probably wasn’t an intentional message. He’s likely just practicing making sounds while he plays.
- If your child gives you the car and says “ca”, then it’s likely he’s trying to show it to you or get you to do something with the car. This is a message sent directly to you for a purpose, and this is intentional communication.

Because intentional communication is key to interacting with others, researchers have been trying to find out how to encourage it in young children with ASD. One study looked at several early skills that might provide some insight into whether children with ASD will develop intentional communication [3]. They found out that **the most important skill that predicted whether children developed intentional communication was their ability to copy others’ actions.**

Copying actions can include imitating actions with objects (such as tapping a spoon on a table, rolling a ball, or shaking a tambourine) or actions without objects (body movements such as waving goodbye, stomping feet, or clapping hands).

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Why does imitating help intentional communication?

An important part of learning to communicate involves paying attention to people and tuning in to their words, actions, gestures, and facial expression. When your child learns to imitate you and your actions, he is also learning to pay attention to you and focus on what you are doing and saying. This allows him to learn from you and to see and hear many examples of intentional messages. And because having a back-and-forth copycat game is lots of fun, your child will be motivated to keep the interaction going, take turns with you, and send his own intentional messages.

How to help your child imitate

There are some simple things you can do at home to help your child learn to copy your actions. One of the best ways is to start by imitating your child yourself! If you imitate a simple action your child does and then wait, you will likely get his attention because children enjoy being imitated. If you do this a few more times, your child may start to expect it and watch you carefully.

Then, once you have a copycat game going, you can try doing a new action that is related to whatever action you’ve already been doing. For example:

- If you’ve been copying your child as he bangs on a drum, you could try banging somewhere else (the table, floor, etc.)
- Then, wait to see what your child does – he may copy you back!
- If he doesn’t copy you, you can try a few more times, waiting after each time you do the action to see what your child does.

By copying each other back-and-forth in this way, your child will start to pay more attention to what you’re doing and saying, and he’ll realize how much fun it can be to interact with you during a copycat game!

You can find more information about how imitation benefits children with ASD here:

- [Imitation with Children on the Autism Spectrum: More Than Just a Game of Copycat](#)
- [Follow the Leader: The Power of Imitating Children with Autism](#)

Working on imitation is an important goal in the *More Than Words*® Program. Parents learn how to imitate their child to get an interaction going, and then how to help their child imitate them back. Imitation is also one of the ways parents help their child learn to play with toys in *Take Out the Toys: Building Early Toy Play for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Other Social Communication Difficulties*. This booklet shows parents how they can encourage their child to imitate simple actions with toys, such as pushing a toy car, stacking rings or blocks, or putting shapes in a shape sorter.

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References

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3. Sandbank, M., Woynaroski, T., Watson, L.R., Gardner, E., Keçeli Kaysili, B. & Yoder, P. (2017). Predicting Intentional Communication in Preverbal Preschoolers with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Journal of Autism Developmental Disorders*, 47, 1581–1594. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-017-3052-1>
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Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.

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