

Imitate to Communicate! Helping Children on the Autism Spectrum Learn Naturally During Fun Interactions

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We all learn how to do things by watching other people and copying them. Think about the last time you learned to do something new. Maybe you joined a new exercise class, learned a new hobby, or started a new job. It's likely you didn't know exactly what to do in this new situation, and you may have figured out what to do by watching other people and copying what they did. We learn many things this way. In fact, you can learn almost anything these days by finding a video on YouTube and copying it!

Imitation and children on the autism spectrum

Throughout childhood, children learn a lot about communication by watching and imitating the people around them. But for children on the autism spectrum, imitating others can be difficult. This can have an impact on how they learn new things, including how to communicate and interact. By helping children learn how to imitate, you can encourage their social communication skills. And the best way to help them learn to imitate is by following their lead and having fun together!

Helping children imitate – naturally

You don't need special toys or activities to help your child learn to imitate. Learning to copy other people is most meaningful when children are engaged in fun, everyday activities with their caregivers. There are simple ways you can get a fun interaction going and help your child learn to imitate:

5 steps to help your child imitate you

1. Observe what your child is doing

Notice what your child is doing and what your child is interested in by observing them closely. Is your child moving their body? Doing an action with a toy or object? Making any sounds?

2. Copy what your child is doing

Do exactly what your child is doing. If your child is running back and forth and making the “ahh” sound, run beside them and make the “ahh” sound too. If your child is playing with a toy or object, get your own toy or object and copy your child’s actions. If you don’t have a duplicate object/toy, grab something that is similar. For example, if your child is tapping a drumstick on the table, you can get a pencil and tap it on the table beside your child.

3. Watch your child as you copy them and see if your child notices what you’re doing

As you copy your child, notice if your child watches you or what you’re doing. They might smile, quickly glance over to check out what you’re doing, or keep the game going by doing their action again. All of these are great signs because it means you’ve started an interaction! Keep imitating your child so that the interaction continues, with you and your child noticing each other’s actions.

4. Add something new to the game

If your child is having fun and you have an interaction going, try adding something new to the copycat game. The new action should be related to what your child is already doing. For example, if your child is running back and forth saying “ahh”, you can keep running but add a different sound while you run like “eee”. Or you could try running in a different direction while you say “ahh”. If your child is pushing a car along the floor, you could add something new by pushing it up a ramp, or by bumping your car into your child’s car. You don’t want to change the nature of the game – your child is playing in a way that is fun for them, so the new action should be just as fun, and it should match their play idea.

5. Stop and wait to see what happens next

After you've added a fun, new action to the game, stop and wait to see what your child does next. If your child doesn't notice or doesn't like the new action, go back to copying what your child is doing. They might not be ready to imitate yet. But if your child notices the action and likes it, they might try to copy it. If they copy it, great! Keep imitating the new action back and forth. If your child goes back to their original action or does something different, copy that to keep the interaction going.

Having fun is what's most important

The most important thing to remember is to have fun together and to keep the interaction going back-and-forth. Don't introduce too many new ideas or change the game – stick with your child's play idea and add a new action that is related to their idea. By joining in with your child in his way, they will likely notice you, enjoy interacting with you, and have lots of fun!

For more ideas on using imitation to help build social communication skills, take a look at our guidebook, [More Than Words](#).

About The Hanen Centre

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 on the autism spectrum, and those who are developing typically.

For more information, please visit www.hanen.org.

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