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Can Pictures Help Autistic Children?

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Why Should I Use Pictures?

Autistic children often have difficulty focusing on tasks, adapting to changes in routine, and expressing themselves in an effective manner. Pictures may help them improve their communication by providing a visual image for their feelings, thoughts, wants, or needs. When a child uses, or is shown, pictures of routines/schedules, transitions may be easier since the child can see what is happening now and what comes next. Overall, using pictures for communication can help increase a child's memory skills, understanding of the world, and social communication abilities.

Why Are Pictures Important for Communication?

- Pictures are especially meaningful to autistic children because pictures can help them to express themselves more easily.
- Pictures relating to the child's environment provide opportunities for functional (everyday) communication.
- Pictures (in combination with written words) can help build language and vocabulary skills.
- Picture communication can help minimize behavioral problems by providing a consistent way to communicate feelings, thoughts, wants, or needs.

How Do I Use the Pictures?

Here are some easy steps to follow when using pictures:



1. Show the child the picture, and point to and name the object/action. Then have the child practice on his/her own. Give prompts, models, and cues as needed.



2. Show the child how to give the picture to someone or place the picture in a communication book to express feelings, thoughts, wants, or needs. Then have the child practice on his/her own. Give prompts, models, and cues as needed.

Reinforce a child's understanding of a picture and how to use it by giving a clear description of the picture as well as how to use it. This helps the child learn to use pictures for effective communication in the classroom and at home.



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What Style of Picture Do I Use?

Generally, use simple pictures (few items/few colors) for younger children or children who function at lower levels. As the child has success with using the pictures for learning or communicating, you can increase the complexity of the picture (more items/more colors) or add pictures. Following are different kinds of pictures to choose from based on the child's visual and comprehension skills:



Black and white line drawings

Eliminates many of the distracting background colors and details which exist in more complex pictures. Children who have limited or no verbal output and/or are establishing introductory communication skills may benefit from these simple drawings.



Cartoon drawings

Introduces aspects of color with illustrations of objects/ actions. Use these pictures to teach basic items/activities and advance to more realistic drawings of common items/ activities. In particular, use these with children who do not find detailed drawings to be distracting or overwhelming.



Photos

Provides actual images of items with real color and detail. Use photos to identify objects/ locations in the child's natural environment. Use these for developing personal meaning and motivation.

Things to Consider!

- Keep in mind that each child will have a different skill level when using pictures.
- Note that autistic students generally have more success with pictures that appear on a white background, which allows the focus to be specifically on the image(s).
- Use more colorful and detailed pictures as the child improves his/her understanding of different concepts/topics.
- Observe a child's preferences for pictures and use what is most effective for increased communication and function with daily living skills.

Resources:

Autism. Retrieved December 11, 2008, from http://kidshealth.org/kid/health_problems/brain/autism.html

Autism Speaks. What to do about it, treatments for autism. Retrieved December 11, 2008, from <http://www.autismspeaks.org/whattodo/index.php>

Healing Thresholds. Connecting community and sciences to heal autism. Retrieved December 11, 2008, from <http://autism.healingthresholds.com/therapy/visual-schedules>

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