

Effective strategies for families and educators to help build language, communication and reading skills for individuals with autism and/or developmental disabilities

For parents of students in all grades

Children benefit from a variety of visual and kinesthetic (hands-on) learning experiences that are provided for them at school. Using visuals, relevant sight vocabulary and appropriate reading materials will help them develop literacy skills. Here are some effective strategies you can use to help your child develop communication, comprehension and reading skills in order to participate independently during home and community related activities:

Using visuals:

Visuals include real-life objects and items, photographs, picture symbols, line drawings and words.

Visuals can be presented to show and teach children:

- the choices they have
- what is going to happen next
- their feelings and the feelings of others
- the things that are available in their immediate environment
- how to organize things in their immediate environment
- how to do things independently
- what they need to know about difficult situations

Structuring activities with visuals:

- Put visuals – pictures, labels, etc. where they will be used.
- Add printed word(s) under pictures so your child learns to make connections between them and develop an understanding of what they mean.
- Be consistent and use the same language – words, phrases, labels, etc.

when referring to visuals for a specific activity, task or routine.

- Point to pictures when talking about them.
- Use visuals to create matching activities that will foster the development of learning in different areas.

Reading:

- Choose stories that your child enjoys and ones he/she can relate to based on personal experiences.
- Provide many opportunities to read the same story at different times to allow for repeated exposure and rote practice when reviewing familiar words and learning new sight words.
- Provide opportunities for your child to learn specific vocabulary in different contexts (e.g., use "food" words during meal preparation and when grocery shopping) in order to develop generalization skills.
- When reading to your child stress the "fun" words (e.g., things, actions, characters). Be animated and expressive.
- Create opportunities and look for things that your child will want to share with you when reading a book (e.g., pointing to favorite characters and objects, carry out simple actions, etc.). This means that you may need to skip to other parts of the book and not necessarily be able to read from the beginning to the end. Focus on maintaining your child's interest and motivation.
- Provide opportunities for your child to take turns when you are reading to

him/her (e.g., fill in missing words, point to key words and pictures, answer content questions when presented with choices).

- Provide opportunities for your child to answer "yes/no" questions and "What's this?" questions.
- Model words as you read and reading strategies (e.g., emphasizing certain words, stopping at the end of a sentence, pointing to relevant pictures and/or words, turning the page, etc.).
- Change the written text to make it simple based on your child's understanding and reading level (e.g., use one word labels for short phrases – "This is a bear" – say "bear").

Reading Materials:

Choose books that are appropriate for your child's reading level and relate to his/her interests. These may include:

- Cardboard, cloth and soft vinyl books
- Picture books with specific themes such as, animals, community helpers, numbers, etc.
- Pop-up books and those with hidden objects/pictures
- Magazines and catalogues that contain pictures and/or photographs of your child's favorite things and hobbies (e.g., buildings, trains, etc.)
- Interactive books – books with different textured fabrics, flaps, buttons for sounds, etc.
- Predictable books that have words and/or phrases repeated. They have specific patterns, rhythms and rhymes that children like to hear and can learn to read independently.
- Simple story books that have plots with a beginning, middle and end. Start with familiar topics (e.g., a visit to the Doctor's) and move onto ones that will allow your child to use his/her imagination.
- Create a book based on specific situations and experiences such as, an

album, journal, picture book, story book or scrapbook (e.g., vacation, recipes, friends, family, hobbies, etc.)

- Create a book that will help your child understand what needs to be done in specific social situations (e.g., asking a friend to play, sharing toys, etc.).

The Alphabet:

Your child may have a good rote memory for the letters of the alphabet. Encourage him/her to say the sounds of letters and help them understand that when these letter sounds are put together, they form words. Your child may also read words based on whole word recognition and this is where it is important to expose him/her to functional sight words at home and in the community (e.g., foods, clothing, activities, community places, etc.).

Television and Videos:

Provide opportunities to read the name of TV programs on the TV guide and labels that are printed on the cover of movies. Watch TV shows that encourage your child to use letters, numbers and sounds (e.g., Sesame Street, Wheel of Fortune, etc.).

Cards and Letters:

Create a print enriched environment where your child has an opportunity to read notes, letters and lists that are meaningful and a part of his/her daily routines (e.g., "To Do" lists, phone numbers and mini-schedules on the refrigerator, etc.).

The book "More Than Words" by Fern Sussman was used as a reference for some ideas presented in this tip sheet.

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