

# Help Your Autistic Child Communicate

5 things you can start today

From a father of a minimally speaking boy,  
with tips gathered from SLPs and coaches

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# Before you start

I'm the father of a minimally speaking autistic boy. Like you, I've sat through the appointments, read the books, and tried the things that didn't work.

These are the five most actionable tips I've gathered from the SLPs and coaches who actually helped us. Not theory. Things you can start today, with what you already have at home.

One thing before you read anything else: your child understands more than they can show you. Communication struggles are not a lack of intelligence and not a lack of things to express. What most kids lack is a reliable way to get it out. These five strategies build that way out.

## 1. Presume competence

**What it means:** Talk to your child as if they understand everything. Because they probably understand far more than they can show.

### **Do this today:**

- Narrate your day to your child in normal language, full sentences and real reasons included. "I'm making pasta. The water is boiling. Want to watch?" Or: "We need to leave the park now, because it's getting late and I need to make food for the whole family before everyone becomes sad and hungry." Explain things the way you would to any other kid.
- Never discuss your child's struggles in front of them as if they cannot hear. They can.
- If you ask a question, wait. Count to ten in your head. Many kids need extra time to process and respond. Most adults give up after two seconds.
- Talk about what your child is looking at, not what you want them to look at.

### **Why it works:**

Kids engage with people who believe in them. The waiting alone changes everything. Ten seconds feels like forever to you. To a child processing language, it is exactly the time they needed.

## 2. Model, don't test

**What it means:** Show your child how communication works instead of quizzing them on it. For a child who struggles to respond, every “What's this?” is a test they might fail. Modeling flips it: you point at things and name them, you comment instead of asking. No pressure to perform, no way to fail.

### Do this today:

- Swap “What's this?” for “Look, a dog!” Point while you name it.
- Comment on what your child does: “You found the red car.” “That tower is tall.”
- Aim for four comments for every one question. Count yourself for ten minutes. Most parents are shocked by their ratio.
- If your child uses a communication app or picture cards, use it yourself when you talk to them. If you're having pizza, tap “I want pizza” and let it speak, then serve the pizza. They learn by watching you, the same way speaking kids learn by hearing you.

### Why it works:

Speaking children hear thousands of hours of language before anyone expects them to talk. Kids who communicate differently deserve the same free demonstration period. Modeling gives it to them.

## 3. Start with motivation, not needs

**What it means:** Build communication around what your child loves, not what is convenient for you. Nobody learns to communicate for the reward of announcing a bathroom visit. Kids learn to communicate for the things they love. Desire is the engine of communication.

### Do this today:

- Write down your child's top five favorite things. Foods, toys, activities, people. Be specific: not “snacks” but “the round crackers in the blue box.”
- Make those five things the center of communication practice. Hold up the crackers, name them, wait, then hand them over generously.
- Put a favorite item where your child can see it but not reach it. Wait for any communication attempt: a look, a point, a pull toward it, a sound. Respond immediately and enthusiastically.
- Do not hold favorites hostage for perfect words. Any attempt counts. Reward the attempt, then model the word.

### Why it works:

Communication grows from success. A child who learns “I can get the things I love by communicating” will keep pushing that skill further. A child drilled on words about things they do not care about learns communication is homework.

## 4. Offer real choices, all day

**What it means:** Turn everyday moments into low-pressure communication practice by offering two options. You do not need words to choose. A glance, a point, a reach all work. And every choice teaches the most important lesson in communication: what I express changes what happens.

### **Do this today:**

- Offer two options and hold them up, one in each hand: “Apple or banana?” Hold them apart so a glance is a clear answer.
- Honor the choice instantly, even if you suspect it was random. Handing over the banana they glanced at teaches them their signal worked.
- Build choices into moments that already happen: which shirt, which cup, which book, which way to walk, bath now or in five minutes.
- Keep it to two options. Five options is overwhelming. Two is a decision.

### **Why it works:**

A child who makes twenty small choices a day gets twenty successful communication experiences a day. That is 7,000 wins a year, built out of moments that were happening anyway.

## 5. Give them a voice they can use today

**What it means:** If your child cannot yet reliably speak their thoughts, give them a tool that speaks for them. It is called AAC, which simply means any way of communicating beyond speech.

This is the step many families delay for years, usually because of one persistent myth: that giving a child a communication tool will stop them from talking. Research shows the opposite. Communication tools reduce frustration and often support speech development. Speech and tools are not competitors. They feed each other.

A communication app works like this: your child taps a picture card, and the phone or tablet speaks the words out loud. "I want a banana." "Can I have the iPad?" "Let's watch Bluey." For many families, the first time their child tells them something hurts is the moment everything changes.



Tap a card, Tala speaks it out loud. Full sentences, your child's favorites, your own photos.

## Do this today:

- Download a communication app and set it up with your child's favorites from strategy 3. This should take minutes, not weeks.
- Start with a handful of powerful cards, not a hundred. The favorites, plus “more,” “stop,” and “help.”
- Model it yourself (strategy 2). Tap the cards as you talk. Leave the app open and available. No pressure, no drills.
- Celebrate any tap. Even random taps get a response: they tapped “I want juice,” they get offered juice. That is how they learn the taps mean something.

## Why it works:

Frustration is what happens when a child has something to express and no way out. A voice tool is the way out. And the strategies above, presuming competence, modeling, motivation, and choices, are exactly what makes a voice tool succeed.

We built Tala for this exact start. It is a communication app designed for families, not clinics: set up in about 90 seconds, prebuilt boards with your child's favorites, and your own photos on the cards. It is how my son tells us what he wants every day.

**Download Tala free on the App Store:** [apps.apple.com/app/id6760269821](https://apps.apple.com/app/id6760269821)

## One last thing

You do not need to do all five perfectly. Pick one and start today. Presume competence while you do it.

Progress will not look like a movie moment. It looks like one extra glance, one tap, one choice honored. Those small wins stack. Six months from now you will look back and realize your child is telling you things they never could before.

They have plenty to tell you. Your job is just to build the way out.

Tala is a communication app for autistic and nonspeaking children. Free to download. [Get it on the App Store](#) or learn more at [talaac.com](https://talaac.com).