

Know Your Child's Stage of Communication

Your child's stage of communication depends on four things:

- His ability to interact with you
- How he communicates
- Why he communicates
- His understanding

It's important to identify your child's stage of communication so that you have a good idea of what he can and cannot do, as well as what you can expect him to do next. This knowledge will help you to set goals for him and give him the kind of support he needs.

The descriptions of the children at the four stages of communication may help you to identify your own child's communication stage. The four stages are:

- the Own Agenda stage
- the Requester stage
- the Early Communicator stage
- the Partner stage

Not all children pass through all these stages in order, but many children do start out at the Own Agenda stage, progress through the Requester and Early Communicator stages, and eventually reach the Partner stage as they get older. Other children may have characteristics from several stages. And, of course, children do different things depending on the people they're with, the situations they are in, and their own unique personalities.

Once you have read the descriptions of the children at all stages, observe your child closely over the next week. Then fill in the How and Why Checklist found in Chapter 2 on page 84 to identify your child's stage of communication.

The Own Agenda Stage

Rebecca, who is 2½ years old, is quite independent. She likes to do most things on her own, though she doesn't play with toys. Her favourite activity is playing at the park. Whenever she sees her mother getting ready to go out, Rebecca jumps up and down with excitement. Many times, Rebecca tries to open the door herself. But since she can't reach the doorknob, she often gets frustrated and cries. Her mother wonders why Rebecca never asks for help.



Rebecca never asks her mother for help opening the door. A child at the Own Agenda stage does not send any messages directly to you.

A child at the Own Agenda stage seems to want to play alone and appears uninterested in the people around him. He does not yet understand that he can affect other people by sending a message directly to them, so his communication is largely pre-intentional. You know how he is feeling through observing his body movements, gestures, screams and smiles. Many younger children are at the Own Agenda stage when they first receive a diagnosis of ASD.

Expect the child at the Own Agenda stage to do some of the following:

- interact with you very briefly and almost never with other children
- want to do things by himself
- look at or reach for what he wants
- not communicate intentionally to you
- play in unusual ways
- make sounds to calm himself
- cry or scream to protest
- smile
- laugh
- understand almost no words



Rebecca doesn't know how to play with her dolly yet.

The Requester Stage

Kevin is a 3-year-old child at the Requester stage, and communicates mainly by pulling or leading others to request things he wants. During bathtime, Kevin pulls his daddy's hand to ask for more tickles; when he wants to go outside, he leads his mother to the front door. Kevin also pulls when he wants one of his parents to get him a cookie from the kitchen cupboard. His parents are frustrated because it is difficult to get and keep his attention.



Kevin lets his father know that he wants more tickles by looking at him and pulling his father's hand onto his tummy.

The Requester is beginning to understand that he can ask you to do things by pulling or leading you.



Kevin asks to be taken to the park by pulling his mother to the door.

Kevin also asks for cookies by pulling his father to them.

A child at the Requester stage is just beginning to realize that his actions can have an effect on you. By pulling or leading you, he is able to ask you for things he needs or enjoys. He especially likes playing physical People Games like Tickles and Peek-a-boo; when you pause during the game, he may look at you or move his body to get you to keep playing.

Expect the child at the Requester stage to do some of the following:

- interact with you briefly
- use sounds to calm or focus himself
- echo a few words to calm or focus himself
- reach for what he wants
- communicate mainly when he needs something by leading you or taking your hand
- request that you continue a physical People Game like Tickles or a game of Chase with eye contact and/or smiles and/or body movement and/or sounds
- occasionally follow familiar directions if he can see what he has to do
- understand the steps in familiar routines

The Early Communicator Stage

Jake plays physical games like Chase and Tickles over and over again with his parents and his brother. Jake's mother holds him by his shoulders and says, "Ready, set . . ." and then waits for him to look at her and shout, "Go!" to let her know it's time to begin the chase. Mom usually gets tired of the game before Jake does! Sometimes, Jake will start the game with people other than his mother by saying, "Go!" Jake uses a few other words, too. Usually, he asks his mother to open the raisin box by making the "open" hand sign he learned at his preschool, but sometimes he says, "Open."



The Early Communicator can consistently use the same gesture, sound or word to ask for things he likes and to tell you that he wants to keep playing a game after it has started.

The Early Communicator has started to use specific gestures, sounds, pictures or words to ask for things in very motivating situations, like requesting favourite foods or toys.



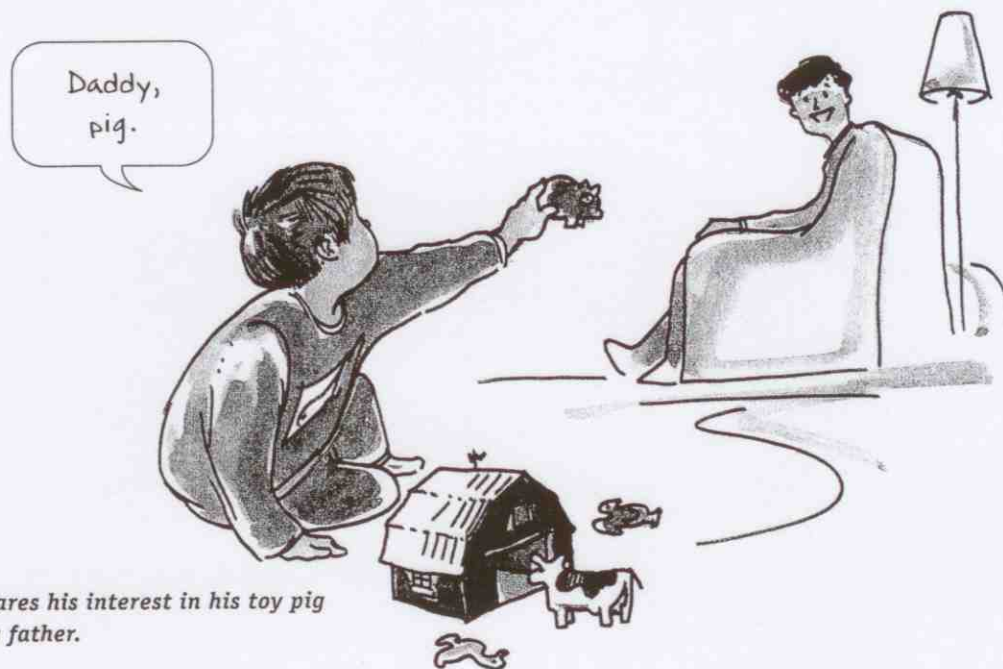
Jake makes a hand sign and repeats the word "open" to ask for raisins.

Mark gives his father a picture of bubbles to ask for the real thing.

When your child is an Early Communicator, his social interactions last longer. His communication is more intentional, although he still communicates mainly to ask you to do things for him. But now he has figured out that he can use the same form of communication – gestures, sounds, pictures or words – consistently in certain situations. For example, he may always ask for juice or his favourite video by giving you a picture or saying the word. Yet he may continue to pull or lead you to ask for other things, like going outside.

An Early Communicator may start to "echo" many things that he hears, sometimes to communicate something to you. He will understand much of what you say to him if he has visual cues and you speak in simple, short sentences. When he finally starts interactions with you – by calling your name, pointing to something he wants to show you, and shifting his gaze between you and what he is interested in – two-way communication is on the way!

When the Early Communicator starts to share his interests with you by looking at something and then looking back at you, he has developed joint attention, a big step forward in learning to communicate.



Jake shares his interest in his toy pig with his father.

Expect the Early Communicator to do some of the following:

- interact with you and familiar people in familiar situations
- take more turns in People Games and play with you for a longer time
- request that you continue a few favourite physical People Games like Tickle or Chase, using the same actions, sounds or words each time you play
- sometimes request or respond by repeating what you say (use of immediate echolalia)
- purposefully make requests for motivating things (e.g., food, toys, physical People Games, help) using pictures, gestures or words
- begin to protest or refuse using the same action, sound or word
- occasionally use body movements, gestures, sounds or words to get your attention or to show you something
- understand simple, familiar sentences
- understand the names of familiar objects and people without visual cues
- say "hi" and "bye"
- answer Yes/No, choice and "What's that?" questions (see Chapter 4, pages 124–125)

The Partner Stage

Jerry is a communication and play Partner. He enjoys interactions with other people and is able to have short conversations about his own interests. Yet his conversations often break down because he doesn't understand what the other person is saying or because he can't remember the words he needs to use. When that happens, he often relies on "echoing" what someone has just said.



Two-way communication between the Partner and another person can break down when the conversation gets too complicated for him.

The Partner is a more effective communicator than children at the other stages. Unless he has speech production difficulties, he is now talking and can carry on simple conversations. He can also talk about the past and future, such as what he did at school or what he wants for his birthday. Sometimes children at the Partner stage can't come up with their own words, but rely on memorized words or phrases. This happens most often in unfamiliar situations and when they don't understand all of what's being said.

When a child at the Partner stage communicates about his own interests, he doesn't have any difficulties. However, in unfamiliar situations, he often has trouble grasping the rules of conversation. For example, he may not consider whether what he says makes sense to his listener. He may start a conversation with, "I went there," not realizing that his listener has no idea where "there" is. Or, he may start a conversation with the same memorized sentence each time, such as "What colour is your car?" or a line from a favourite song.

A child at the Partner stage likes to play with you and with other children, but sometimes plays alone because he is unsure of what to do and say, especially in imaginary play. He does much better in physical play, like running or swinging, or in a structured game where he can learn the rules.

Expect the Partner to do some of the following:

- participate in longer interactions with you
- play with other children most successfully in familiar play routines
- use words or another method of communication to:
 - request
 - protest
 - greet
 - draw your attention to something
 - ask and answer questions
- *start* to use words or another method of communication to:
 - talk about the past and future
 - express feelings
 - pretend
- make up his own sentences
- have short conversations
- sometimes repair or fix what he says when someone doesn't understand him
- understand the meanings of many different words

Expect the Partner to still show difficulties in communication. He may:

- resist playing with other children when he doesn't know what to do, such as in imaginary play, which depends on language and pretending
- use echolalia when he doesn't understand what someone is saying or when he is unable to make up his own sentences
- have difficulty participating in conversations. He may:
 - respond to others rather than initiate conversations himself
 - try to keep the conversation on his favourite topics
 - make grammatical errors, especially with pronouns, such as “you,” “me,” “he” and “she”
 - get confused when conversations are complex and people are not talking directly to him
- have difficulty with the rules of conversation. He may:
 - not know how to start and end a conversation
 - not listen to what another person says
 - not stay on topic
 - not follow up on what has been said in an appropriate way (e.g., not ask others to clarify what they say when he doesn't understand them)
 - give too few details or too many details
- miss subtle social cues that another person is sending through facial expression and body language
- misunderstand sarcastic humour or plays on words because he takes what others say literally

A Partner often wants to play with other children but doesn't know how to ask them.

