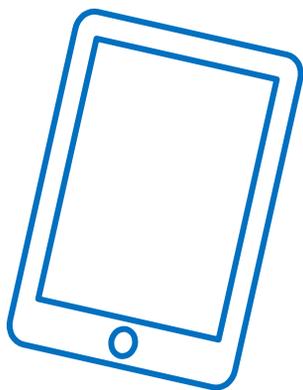


How to Encourage Social Communication in Children with Autism by Using Tablets

A Guide for Parents



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- The aim of this document is to offer advice to parents of children with autism on how to use the tablet/iPad for social communication development.
- Social communication skills, such as the ability to keep attention, share interest, participate in a conversation and understand others' feelings, are very important for your child's social and language development.
- The iPad/tablet can be motivating for your child and it can be used to start a conversation or a simple interaction.
- But how can you best use the tablet with your child to support the development of social communication? This guide will offer you a few ideas and different strategies to try.
- For further information, contact Chrysoula Mangafa via e-mail magafa.chrysoula@gmail.com I would love to hear from you! Your feedback will help me continually update the guide.



1 How to encourage social communication when using a tablet

1.1 Get your child's attention

- Start by observing what their favourite apps are and what they enjoy doing on the tablet. Then show interest and excitement on what they are doing to get their attention. You can then play with them or ask them questions about the games or any apps they use at school.

1.2 Use an 'iPad' Partner

- Let your child decide who and how they can share the tablet. It can be you or sibling or a relative. What matters is that your child feels comfortable in order to start a social interaction.

1.3 Talk about feelings

- Read a story together on an app, use social stories or watch a video on YouTube Kids*/ children's programmes. Ask your child to tell you how the characters feel and how the events in the story/clip make them feel.
- You can use apps that teach about emotions, such as 'Expressions for Autism', 'Avokiddo Emotions' and 'Find Me: Picnic Time (Autism)' *or any app, such as 'WeeMee Avatar Creator' *to talk about the facial expressions of the avatars that your child creates.

2 What can you do as a parent?

2.1 Allow time to respond

- It's important to allow time (about 10 secs) for your child to respond or ask for help. Let them take the lead. This will encourage them to initiate an interaction with you more often.



2.2 How to develop verbal communication

- Use minimal speech, model simple language and use one instruction at a time. These will help your child to process the information more easily.
- Show enthusiasm about what they are saying or showing you on the tablet: Use exaggerated pitch, facial expressions and gestures.
- Celebrate each small step of progress and share their work with grandparents/relatives/friends and the class teacher.
- Encourage your child to initiate communication by asking you to unlock the tablet's screen, download an app or change the settings.



2.3 How to develop non-verbal communication

- Body position: Have your child on your lap or sit by them if they're older and just look at what they are doing. Show that you are available and wait for your child to initiate communication.
- Eye contact: Do not force them to look at you straight in the eyes. It's better to look at the tip of their nose or over their shoulder.
- Use symbols: Use the same symbols that the class teacher uses at school for consistency, such as turn taking boards, sand timers and 'first'- 'next' boards. You can also use apps, such the 'Wait4it' or 'Autism Timer'* along with the symbols.

3 Recommended tablet-based activities

3.1 How to choose a suitable app

- Your child may prefer to download by him/herself the apps that they like. That's ok but if you want to have a go with them and choose educational apps, games or sensory apps there's a list of questions in the appendix that can help you choose the most suitable ones. The list of questions in appendix can guide you on what to look for on an app.

3.2 The advantages of using 2 player apps

- Two player apps, such as 'Math Fight' and 'Fruit Ninja'* can also create social communication opportunities. Your child can practice waiting for their turn and working with you to complete the activity or game on the tablet.



3.3 Here's a list of a few activities you can try out with your child

Interacting together

- Project the tablet screen on the TV: Use Apple TV for iOS and Chromecast for android tablets or AirServer for all devices*. The TV screen will be visible to all and everyone can participate in what you are doing on the tablet.
- Do a project together by collecting information about their favourite topic/interest. You can use 'iBooks'* or any app to create interactive images and/or videos. Creating something together will encourage them to interact with you.
- There's nothing wrong with playing games together on the tablet. As long as you both enjoy it, give it a try! They may like drawing/sketching or singing/dancing by using drawing apps, like 'Drawing Pad' or YouTube kids* videos.
- Does your child like Lego bricks and puzzles? You can extend the fun and take turns in playing together the Lego apps and the 'Tangram for Osmo' app*.

Creating things together

- Help your child create a story or scene by recording their voice/your voice and add pictures. There are many story making apps, such as 'Our Story' and 'Pictello'*.
- Create a social story, such as going to the dentist or hairdresser's by creating a video and using apps, such as the 'My Pictures Talk - Video Modelling Tool' app*.
- You can have fun cooking together and use the tablet to take photos/ video of the process and talk about it.
- Use games apps, such as the 'Happy Geese' app*. They can have an educational value and they can be used as a point of communication and celebration with your child.

Linking up ideas together and with the wider community

- Connect with distant family via FaceTime or Skype*.
- Ask your child to find the weather forecast on the tablet when planning to go out and locate on maps the restaurants/holiday place you are visiting. You can also use apps, such as 'Green Screen by Do Ink' and 'Tellegami'* to present the weather forecast to you.
- Explore the outside world and use the camera to record and take photos of minibeasts/flowers, the route to grandparents/ relatives/friends or the local stores.



4 How to provide a worry free tablet experience

4.1 How to set up the environment

- The tablets can be used anywhere. However, if you want that extra peace of mind, avoid letting your child alone with the tablet in their room. Use a common area where you can check and ask what your child is playing or if they need help.



4.2 Screen time should be timetabled and monitored

- If you feel that your child is playing too much on the tablet, sit by them and have a discussion with them on what they are playing or take turns to play something together.
- If they don't like to share with you, show interest on what they have done and give praise. Introduce a time frame and have a symbol for iPad time in their visual timetable.

4.3 Set Routines

- Introduce an iPad session at home (have it as a slot in their visual timetable) where you sit opposite or by your child holding the iPad. Ask them to choose an app to play together. Do this for as long as they can hold their attention.
- Have a symbol for 'iPad choice' and another for 'iPad work'. Your child will gradually learn when the iPad is given as a reward/ choice and when it is used to do a task.

4.4 Staying safe

- Set up a passcode for downloading apps.
- Enable the parental control settings on the tablet.
- Set up firewall filters on the tablet.
- Before using the tablet with your child ask them to create a tablet 'contract' which will include rules of correct and safe usage of the device and internet. You can do that by drawing or taking pictures showing the rules E.g. Share with others, take turns, charge after use, keep it clean, store it in the safe place, access appropriate content, etc. This can be a fun learning activity that you can do together.



4.5 Connectivity

- Make sure that the tablet is fully charged before use.
- Make sure that the tablet is connected to the Wi-Fi and if possible to the printer (e.g. via Airport Express*) so that your child can print their work and share it proudly with others at home and school.
- Show to the class teacher what you have been doing on the tablet, what your child likes playing/is good at. This will encourage your child to interact with their teacher about the things they like on the tablet.
- Why don't you take photos of your child's work while they're doing their homework? This will allow their teacher know when and how they do their homework or where they need more help. E.g. Use the tablet's camera to show how they solved a maths problem or how they made an arts project.

4.6 Accessibility Settings

- Lock the tablet on the desired app to prevent your child from constantly switching through apps. It can be difficult to keep their attention if they are distracted looking through different apps simultaneously.



A few last tips!

- The tablet is an extra tool to use along with non-digital resources, such as books, games, worksheets and symbols.
- Familiarise yourself with how the tablet operates and set some rules about its use before giving it to your child. It's good to know that the tablet can be used for fun and educational purposes.
- What is important is the mutual understanding and sharing of interest between you and your child by using a tool such as the tablet.
- Be creative and find interesting ways to use an app besides its original function and purpose. Don't fixate on what is happening on the app. It's all about the communication and not the activity.
- And don't forget! You are the expert of your child and you know best what can help them thrive in life and interact with others.

Useful Links

- Accessibility features built into the iPad : <http://sen-ipads.com/how-to-videos/accessibility-features-built-into-ipads/>
- Keeping children safe online: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-measures-to-keep-children-safe-online-at-school-and-at-home>
- Parent information about tech use: <http://parentinfo.org/>
- Things to consider when buying a tablet:
<https://www.internetmatters.org/advice/tech-guide/tablets-and-laptops/>
- iPad app lesson ideas: <https://itunes.apple.com/us/book/explain-everything-lesson/id939801330?mt=11>
- Android app lesson ideas:
https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.a1b.learningApp&hl=en_GB

** The author doesn't endorse and/or promote any of the apps and links. These are only used as recommendations based on participants' input.*

Appendix

App selection questions

(You don't need to answer all questions! They're here for you to give you an idea of what you can look for)

Audience:

- Is it age and content- appropriate?
- Is it at your child's level of language and cognitive ability?
- Is the app designed for children with autism or other additional needs?
- Does it meet your child's individual needs?

Purpose:

- What does the app teach?
- Can it be linked to what the child is learning at school?
- Does it promote collaboration? (e.g. Does it allow multiple users to use/ view the app at the same time?/ Can two users play/create together in pairs?)
- Does it provide opportunities to talk about the activity?
- Does the app allow you to connect with family/friends/school and share content?
- Does it provide immediate feedback?
- Is the feedback positive and visual/verbal?

Ease of Use:

- Is it visually appealing, engaging, fun and simple to use?
- Is it self-explanatory with clear instructions?
- Does it offer time delay in child's responses?
- Is there a choice for multilingual content?
- Does it build on child's interests?

Customisability:

- Can the settings of the app be altered?
- Can the levels of difficulty be adjusted?
- Can the sound be turned on/off?
- Can your child choose/change the rewards of the app?
- Does the app allow to import own photos/ record own voice?

Appendix Continued

Price:

- Is it free or reasonably priced?
- Does it require in- app purchases and if yes, can they be blocked?
- Is it free of advertisements?

Data Storage:

- Is there a privacy policy?
- Can the child's work be printed and shared across devices and with teachers/parents?
- Does the app save personal information/ gallery photos in a secure location?
- Can you access the history of the app and track your child's progress?

Access:

- Is there a manual/ tutorial of how the app operates?
- Is there online customer support?
- Can the app developer/company be easily contacted?
- Is the app updated frequently?
- Is there research evidence?
- Are there reviews from users/ professionals and good ratings?

NB Please contact me for reviews of iOs and android apps.

