

# Autism Communication Changes When We Stop Looking Only for Words

*A person can communicate long before the world recognizes the language they are using.*

**By Cathy Levin**

One of the most important lessons autism has taught me is that communication and speech are not the same thing.

We live in a world that values words.

We ask children questions and wait for spoken answers.

We measure progress through vocabulary.

We often associate eye contact with attention and quick responses with understanding.

But autism can challenge every one of those assumptions.

A person may understand more than they can immediately express.

They may communicate through movement, repetition, behavior, pictures, gestures, facial expressions, sounds, routines, or the way they lead someone toward what they need.

The communication may already be there.

The challenge is whether we are willing to recognize it.

## **Behavior can carry information**

When a child refuses an environment, there may be information inside that refusal.

Is the room too loud?

Is the lighting uncomfortable?

Is the transition too sudden?

Are they confused about what is expected?

Are they tired?

Hungry?

Overwhelmed?

Unable to explain what feels wrong?

If we respond only to the visible behavior, we may miss the message underneath it.

That does not mean every behavior should simply be accepted without guidance.

Children still need safety, boundaries, and opportunities to build new skills.

But curiosity changes the quality of our response.

Instead of beginning with:

"How do I stop this?"

We can also ask:

***"What is this telling me?"***

## **Connection does not have one correct appearance**

Eye contact is a good example.

In many social situations, we are taught that looking directly at another person demonstrates respect and attention.

But for some autistic people, direct eye contact can be uncomfortable or distracting.

Someone may listen more effectively while looking away.

If we judge connection only by conventional body language, we may underestimate the person standing in front of us.

This principle extends beyond autism.

Human beings do not all express care, attention, excitement, fear, or discomfort the same way.

Real communication begins when we become interested enough to learn another person's signals.

## **Slow the interaction down**

Sometimes communication improves when the environment does less.

Fewer words.

More processing time.

Clearer instructions.

One question instead of five.

A predictable transition.

A visual cue.

A moment of silence before repeating ourselves.

Adults often become uncomfortable with pauses.

We ask again.

We explain again.

We rephrase.

We add more language.

But the person may still be processing the first sentence.

Patience can become a form of communication support.

## **Celebrate communication before demanding perfection**

Imagine how discouraging it would be to make an enormous effort to communicate and have the response focus only on what you did incorrectly.

The pronunciation.

The grammar.

The volume.

The eye contact.

The timing.

Skill development is valuable.

But connection should not disappear in the pursuit of correctness.

When someone successfully communicates a need, an idea, a preference, a joke, a feeling, or an observation, that moment matters.

Meet the communication first.

Then build skills from connection rather than pressure.

## **Interests can become bridges**

Autistic people may develop deep interests.

Those interests are sometimes described only as something to redirect.

But they can also be bridges.

A favorite subject can create opportunities for conversation.

A preferred toy can support shared play.

A familiar activity can make a new environment feel safer.

An interest can become motivation, confidence, expertise, creativity, and even future work.

We do not have to interpret every strong interest as an obstacle.

Sometimes it is the doorway.

## **Communication is a two-person responsibility**

This is where my broader philosophy about autism becomes important.

We rightly help autistic people develop communication skills for a world that often relies heavily on conventional language.

But communication should not be treated as their responsibility alone.

The listener can learn too.

Parents can learn.

Teachers can learn.

Peers can learn.

Businesses and community members can learn.

We can become better at recognizing sensory overload, allowing processing time, using clearer language, and not immediately interpreting difference as disrespect.

That is what two-way adaptation looks like.

The autistic person develops tools for navigating society.

Society develops greater ability to understand the autistic person.

## **Being understood changes people**

There is something powerful about being understood without having to fight constantly for that understanding.

It creates safety.

And safety can create space for growth.

Autism communication should not be reduced to making someone appear more typical.

The deeper purpose is meaningful connection.

Being able to say:

I need something.

I don't want something.

I am afraid.

I am excited.

I have an idea.

I want to participate.

I need space.

I love you.

I am here.

When we expand our understanding of communication, we may discover that someone has been speaking to us all along.

We simply needed to learn how to listen.

## **ABOUT CATHY LEVIN**

Cathy Levin is a life transformation coach, speaker, entrepreneur, author, and autism advocate. Through her writing and advocacy, she explores autism communication, inclusion, family support, self-leadership, resilience, and the importance of creating a world in which adaptation moves in both directions.

## **CALL TO ACTION**

To learn more about Cathy Levin's speaking, coaching, transformation work, and autism advocacy, visit [CathyLevin.com](http://CathyLevin.com).