



SLP & OT Support for Autistic Children and Families

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About Nurture:

Nurture Learning and Development is a non-profit society with a mission to provide outstanding, innovative developmental support to children and their families through direct service provision, and professional development. We work with a wide variety of children and families and provide a range of interdisciplinary services from infancy through school age.

Diversity of Supports

- Your child's team may have many different helpful supports – we are just 2 of those.
- Some supports may overlap in a variety of ways and may change as your family and child's priorities shift and as your child grows.
- Your supports may look different depending on where you are in the province.
- Supports may include: early childhood educators & teachers, infant development consultants, supported child development consultants, occupational therapists, speech language pathologists, physiotherapists, social workers, board certified behaviour analysts, behaviour interventionists, doctors, psychologists, counsellors and peer mentors.

Part 1: SLPs & How Our Ideas Might Help!

- SLPs are not just focused on speech!
- We consider communication to be our most important focus. This means we support people to use spoken speech, and also gestures, sign language, picture symbols, or using "talkers" like ipads or typing to communicate.
- We value connection with others and prioritize a child's ability to communicate rather than focusing only on how they communicate.
- Communicating is connecting! Building connections is our biggest priority for autistic children.

Find the Fun:

- SLPs will help you find out more about how your child has fun.
- We want to find out what is fun for them so we can connect, and build engagement, and support their communication.

- Different children are going to have different ideas of fun! This is not different for autistic children compared to other children. And it often changes with time and as the child grows and develops.
- Later on, this may look like supporting older children to find fun ways to engage successfully with peers.

The Power of a Pause:

- One of the best strategies SLPs have is to slow down.
- We replace questions and instructions with a quiet pause.
- Pause, wait for your child to tell you to “go”!
- Pause before a familiar word in a song, to give them a chance to try.
- Pause, see what your child is doing, so you can join in by imitating.
- When we pause, we are letting children initiate.
- Initiating communication is a first step along the pathway to self-advocacy.

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC):

- Use of communication methods other than speech.
- Examples include sign language, picture symbols (on paper or on a device), or typing
- AAC used to be considered only for severe speech delays.
- Now, we understand, it can be supportive for many:
 - Supports communication while children’s speech is less reliable, and decrease the stress and challenges caused by difficulty communicating.
 - Speech generating devices (e.g. iPad) give an auditory model that children can imitate.
 - Spoken speech often increases as well when children are offered AAC.
- Strong support from the autistic community.

Supporting Speech, Language, and Executive Functioning

- When children are engaged, connected, and have a means to communicate we can work on other areas of speech and language development.
- Speech Sounds: Increasing the range of speech sounds and how easily they can be understood by others.
- Words & Sentences: increasing vocabulary, grammar, and the ability to use language in more complex ways.
- Literacy: the mechanics of reading as well as story comprehension.

- Executive functioning: “self-direction for a future goal”

Supports for Teens & Young Adults

- When working with teens or young adults, we may be continuing to support growth in the ways we’ve been talking about so far.
- We might also provide opportunities for connecting with other neurodiverse peers, developing a deeper understanding of different communication styles, and building self-advocacy skills.

Part 2: OTs & How Our Ideas Might Help!

With a focus on health, well-being and participation, OTs supporting autistic kids and their parents explore the "childhood occupations" that are meaningful to them.

Key Childhood Occupations

- Play
- Activities of daily living (dressing, sleeping, toileting, bathing, eating, routines and chores)
- Learning new skills
- Participating in family and community life
- OTs work in a variety of contexts and may support your child and family as they grow and move through the early years, school years and adulthood.
- Caregivers have an essential role in helping their OT understand which childhood occupations are most important in their family context and can help families find the right balance as priorities shift.

Motor Supports

- OTs help assess what motor supports will help kids grow and learn.
- This includes understanding their visual, fine and gross motor skills; how a child plans, initiates, sequences, and executes motor actions; how they coordinate their hands and eyes and how they coordinate the two sides of their body together.
- Fading hands-on help at the right time provides the child with a greater degree of autonomy and choice, helps grow their motor coordination and cognitive development - the ability to plan, initiate, sequence and execute motor actions
- Fading hands on help can look like:



- simplifying the task
- changing the environment
- handing them materials to help them get started
- modeling the action and providing other visual supports like picture sequences or video models
- If continued hands-on help appears beneficial:
 - seek a child's permission
 - plan to step back physical support
 - consider giving hands-on help that provides a stable base from which the child can move on their own, chose the action they want to take and let them determine how long they will sustain a specific action or movement

Sensory Supports

- Supporting a child's sensory preferences is another important lens that OTs use when fostering participation.
- Learning about your autistic child's sensory preferences can be a powerful step in connecting with them.
- When you think about your child's sensory system think broadly across their whole sensory world:
 - taste
 - smell
 - sight
 - hearing
 - touch
 - their sense of balance (vestibular sensory system)
 - how they feel their body in space (also known as proprioception)
 - how they feel/understand their own internal organs (for example, a full stomach or bladder, hunger, their heartbeat) - this is known as "interoception"

Key steps that OTs can take in supporting a child's sensory preferences/needs include:

- validating, respecting and accommodating their sensory needs
- helping them listen to their body and understand their sensory needs
- encouraging them to advocate for their needs
- teaching the child ways to give their body the experiences it needs/wants

- helping caregivers remove sensory barriers that impact participating in family life
- sharing advocacy tools with their caregivers and any important people in a child's life so that we help create a supportive and accepting space for all children

Self Help Supports

When we look at activities of daily living for children, we can see lots of activities and routines where OTs provide support.

- Sleep
 - Dressing
 - Toileting
 - Bathing
 - Eating & Mealtimes
 - Routines & Chores
- Often one of the best supports when fostering self-help skills is to slow down and pause! Take time to engage and connect with your child before placing demands. By creating room for the child to initiate their own actions through a pause in our support, the child is given the chance to make broader choices, have greater autonomy, problem solve and stretch their executive functioning skills.
 - Learning to initiate many of these self-help activities and routines can be hard for many autistic kids - this includes learning where to start, what the steps are in the activity and what the activity looks like when it's finished.
 - Pausing and slowing down can also include thinking deeply about how much we physically, verbally and visually prompt a child through motor and self-help tasks.
 - Strike a balance: reducing independence demands can be a critical strategy in reducing autistic burnout.

Co-create goals and plan thoughtfully

- Firstly - which activities or occupations does the child want or need to do?
- What factors might be promoting or preventing the child from accessing, initiating or sustaining their chosen activity?



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Assuming changes are needed to support participation, we can support changes

- within the individuals involved (for the learner, their peers and their caregivers)
- within the activity or routine
- within the environment