WHAT IS COMMUNICATION?

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One of the three defining diagnostic criteria for autism spectrum disorders is impairments in communication. While this sounds simple enough by the one word label that is placed on it, further examination of “communication” reveals that it is not such a simple concept. To look in a dictionary, one might find a definition of “communication” as the exchange of information from one person to another. What really needs to be considered however, are the many ways that this exchange might occur.

In real life (i.e., outside of that dictionary definition), communication might be either intentional or unintentional. Intentional communication means that one person is sending a message to another person in a purposeful way. Lots of communication happens this way; intentional communication can be either language based or non-verbal (e.g., gestures, body language, facial expression, tone of voice, et cetera). Alternatively, sometimes communication happens that is unintentional. This refers to situations when one person does something that is interpreted by another person as a message, even if the first person didn’t knowingly mean for it to be. Unintentional communication is always non-verbal; it often comes in forms that are demonstrated unconsciously (e.g., physical posture, tone of voice, behaviour, et cetera). When looking at an individual’s forms of communication, it is always important to evaluate what type of message is being sent. Is the message sent with purpose or rather, a by-product of how someone is feeling and/or what he/she is experiencing personally at that moment? When the latter form of communication occurs, the responsibility for interpreting the message falls to the receiver.

If it is known that communication is intentional, there are again different factors to consider. One factor is how that message is conveyed – is it expressed using language or is it conveyed using some other form (signs, gestures, behaviour, pictures, et cetera)? Sometimes, individuals might be able to send a message purposefully but not have the language skills to accomplish this in what would be the most conventional way. Language requires specific knowledge of words and grammar, that sometimes exceed the abilities of some communicators. As such, even when messages are sent intentionally, they still sometimes have to be interpreted by the receiver.

Finally, one more layer of communication that needs to be considered when looking at the overall profile of a communicator, is the difference between receptive communication and expressive communication. Receptive communication refers to an individual’s understanding of a message. Expressive communication refers to an individual’s ability to convey his/her thoughts and ideas to another person. Importantly, a person’s receptive and expressive
communication skills might not always be consistent with one another. Sometimes, he/she might be able to understand more conventional messages from others but struggle to send the same sort of conventional message back. Alternatively, some communicators might use forms of communication themselves to send messages but really struggle to understand the messages that others give them back in response. Both of these situations results in a very uneven profile of communication ability and can be quite confusing!

To say then, that individuals who fall along the autism spectrum, have problems with communication really is a bit of a generalization. Rather, what is important from the therapeutic perspective of intervention, is to look much more closely at the strengths and weakness of each person’s communication profile. Only then, can communication partners start to recognize and understand what strategies of support might be most appropriate.