

Further Information

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Bòrd SSN nan Eilean Siar
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Social Communication Team

Imitation

We are listening - how did we do?

We welcome your feedback, as it helps us evaluate the services we provide. If you would like to tell us about your experience:

- speak to a member of staff
- visit our website www.wihb.scot.nhs.uk/feedback or share your story at: www.careopinion.org.uk or 0800 122 31 35
- tel. 01851 708069 or 07814 071868 Monday-Friday between 9am-5.30pm.

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Adapted from Scottish Centre for Autism Imitation leaflet.

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What is imitation?

Imitating someone means copying another person. This can include:

- physical imitation (what their body is doing)
- vocal imitation (noises, vocalisations or words they are producing)
- object imitation (having the same object/toy).

Imitation sounds easy in theory but in practice it can take time to get used to this way of interacting with another person.

Many people feel embarrassed imitating a young child, as their behaviour is often very different to ours! It can be physically hard work imitating a young child as they roll around the floor and jump around, often very quickly!

We would encourage you not to feel embarrassed and really try to copy exactly what your child is doing (some things such as nose picking are excluded!). Comfortable clothes and shoes will help you move around more freely.

Why do we use imitation?

There is lots of research to prove that imitation can have a really positive effect on young children with autism.

Some of the positive outcomes include increased looking, vocalising, smiling and engaging in reciprocal play. Children can become much more aware of other people through imitation and this provides a great foundation for future communication and play skills to develop.

By giving the child a response that is highly predictable, i.e. we will copy everything, we are helping the child to expect a response from another person. This is the basis of reciprocal interaction; the play is becoming a two-way process involving two people and our aim is that the child will eventually be able to imitate another person. Therefore imitation can also reduce solitary play (the child playing on his/her own).

Do children with autism like being imitated?

Yes! The majority of young children love to be imitated.

Initially you should imitate everything that the child is doing so they are dictating what is happening and many children with autism like to have play on their terms (by this we mean that they want to decide what to do).

The child can also control the amount or type of stimulation received so again they are in control of the interaction at a level that suits them and is comfortable for them to proceed with.

A few children will find imitation quite intrusive and may become distressed. Should your child become distressed, try moving further away or if necessary leave it for a while, and try again later.

When could imitation be used?

Imitation can be used to help children settle and to develop an interactive relationship between them and the adult.

It is useful to try imitation in a relatively uncluttered, distraction free environment when this is possible. Sometimes children become very focused on toys, sometimes too many toys can be upsetting and sometimes they can be in the way if a child is jumping or skipping.

What will start to change throughout your use of this approach is the amount of imitation that the child dictates. This is developing a two-way relationship and increasing your child's flexibility to be able to take on an idea from someone else. Eventually your child may begin to imitate you.

Imitation is something that other family members can do and we often hear of brothers and sisters of young children with autism developing their play with each other through imitation.