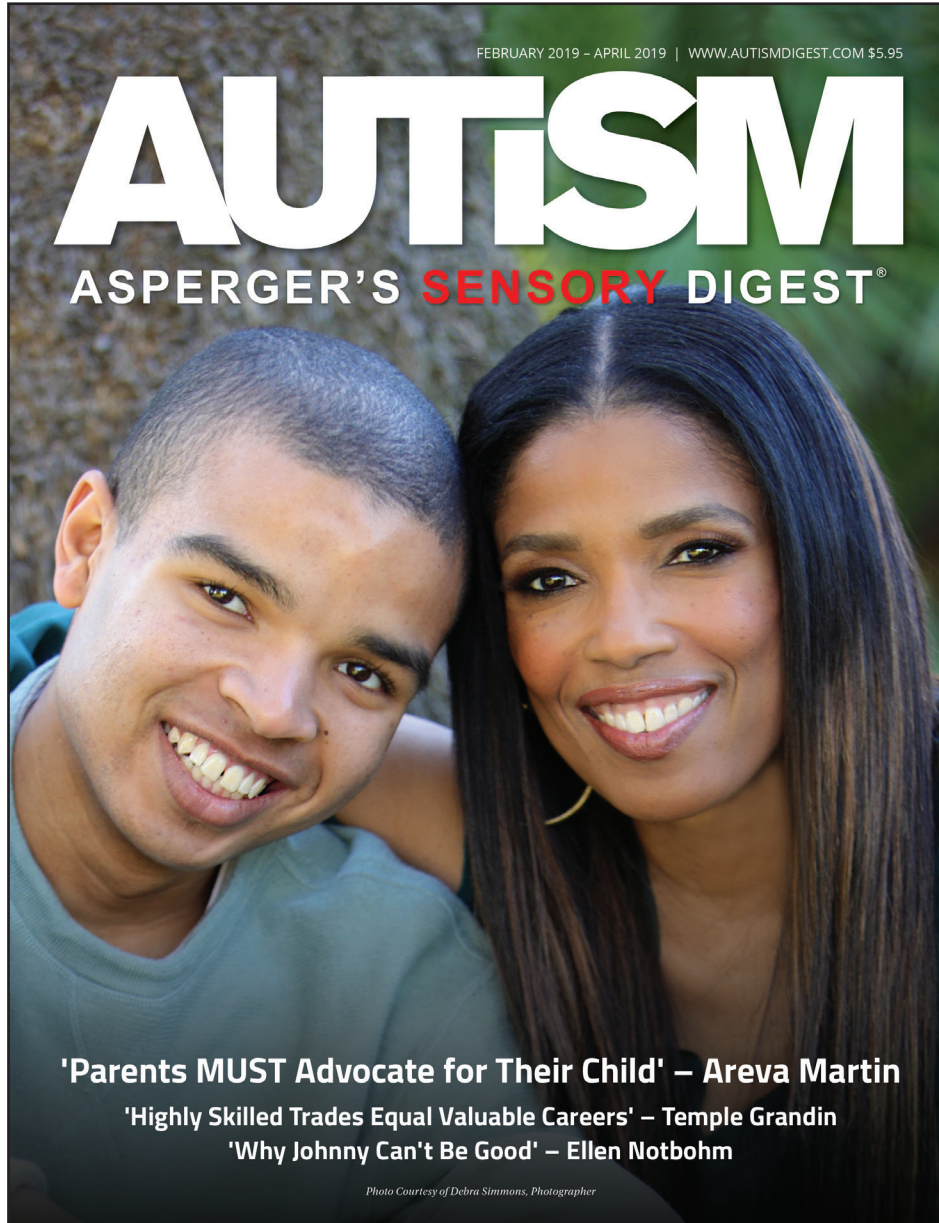


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THE IMPORTANCE OF SHARING PERSONAL MEMORIES TO MAKE LANGUAGE MEANINGFUL

Article By Linda Murphy, MS, CCC-SLP

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The Importance of Sharing Personal Memories to Make Language Meaningful

By Linda Murphy, MS, CCC-SLP

“We used to do that when we were kids!” my husband recently said to our 8-year-old son after watching him add a piece of cheese to an apple.

Nothing revolutionary in the culinary world, of course, but this one statement stood out to me as a great example of how everyone uses their personal memories of past experiences to make connections with others in the present.

This idea of memory-sharing is crucial to keep in mind as you guide your children and students on how to make authentic social connections with others. Think about it.

How often do you enter a conversation that has already started, not sure at first how to join? You listen, you wait, and when you hear someone say something that you have a personal connection to, you chime in. For example, imagine you are among a group of people you have just met, and one of them mentions that she just got back from a camping trip.

Cool – you’ve gone camping too! You jump in: “Where did you go? . . . I went there last summer. It was great...

well, except for the mosquitos!”

Or, a friend shares that he got in an argument with his mom. You instantly call to mind the last time *you* argued with *your* mom and share your story to commiserate and connect with that friend.

This is how, over time, friends become friends and relationships deepen. People share of themselves by recalling personal memories, emotions related to those memories, and search for overlap and mutuality with others. This act of sharing memories with others emotionally connects people

and lays the groundwork from which they can create new memories together. Once two people begin to form memories together, they have a shared emotional narrative to reflect upon moving into the future. Your story with that person begins.

Keep this in mind as you guide your child or students on how to connect with others. To support them to form authentic conversations and, ultimately, relationships now and in the future, you must help them go beyond the superficial language of scripts and niceties.



You need to help them own and remember their own personal narratives, so that they can truly share themselves. You want them to know themselves in the past, present, and future: Where have they come from? Where are they now? Where are they going? Importantly, you also want them to understand how they felt at various points along the way. You want to help them remember moments in their lives that had emotional meaning and fluidly share these with others, when social opportunities present themselves.

Okay...but how?

Often when parents or teachers try to help kids recall memories, they inevitably quiz the child or ask a lot of questions related to the facts. For example: *What happened? Where did you go? Who was there? When was it?...* etc. Here's the problem with this strategy: asking a child to recall memories, when the memories you seek may not have been adequately stored in the first place, will get you nowhere. Focusing on the facts alone will certainly not lead to the rich, relationship-building type of social language you truly desire them to use.

In my experience, children typically answer these questions with one or two words ("the facts"), may say "I don't know," may answer incorrectly,

or may not answer at all. Each of these types of responses can be frustrating for everyone and usually lead to prompting of a verbal response, a memorized answer that does not carry emotional meaning for the individual, or even more questions and quizzing. Yikes! What quizzing never leads to, however, is a naturally developing conversation in which experiences and emotions are shared thoughtfully, driven by the desire to connect.

10 tips to help individuals develop meaningful social language

In contrast, when I have thoughtfully shared memories with a child by making statements about his or her experiences that I know to be true, the child's face lights up with joy and anticipation. As I take the lead in narrating, children are almost always incredibly happy to come along for the ride. They are happy to hear someone recap their story, while, at the same time, be relieved that the burden is not on them to come up with all that language! I have shared stories in this way both with my own children and my clients with similar results. This is how it starts.

The end goal is always to help the individual become better able to express their own personal narratives over time, but it is most effective when

you don't start with questions.

To help individuals with social communication challenges truly develop the type of social language that leads them to make connections and to authentically share themselves, think about changing the way you support kids to recall and share personal memories. Let's get to the good stuff! Here are 10 tips to help you get started.

1. Stop asking so many questions. Comment instead. This is a formal strategy called "declarative language"* and it is powerful. Get in the habit of making simple statements where you typically may ask a question, adding your own observations related to the child's emotions. Some examples:

- Instead of asking, "What did you do yesterday?" say, *We went to the playground yesterday. You loved it, when I pushed you up high on the swing!*
- Instead of asking, "Who is coming today?" say, *Grandma is coming over later today. You always smile when you see her.*
- Instead of asking, "What did you eat for dinner last night?" say *We had pizza last night. You did not like the pepperonis. I could tell, because you made a face!*

*See the Fall 2018 issue of *Autism Asperger Digest* for an article on Declarative Language.

2. Be present in the moment and become comfortable with silence.

As you get in the habit of making declarative statements, be sure to add thoughtful pauses after each one. This allows children time to process what you have said, and often, when given enough time, they will respond verbally or nonverbally, in a related way. It is important to be patient in the beginning, as your child and students may not be used to this space and will often wait to be asked a question or prompted in some way. For some individuals, it can be important to

pause and wait quietly for up to 20-30 seconds. I know this can feel like a long time, but often kids come through, and when they do, it is so worth the wait! If you jump in too quickly, you interrupt the child's thought process, and he must start over again. Be assured that the amount of time you need to wait does not remain this long once you and the child get in the groove of using declarative language. The pace does pick up, but the quiet, respectful waiting between exchanges *always* remains important.

3. Regularly talk aloud to share memories and plan for the future. Get in the habit of sharing memories with your child after the fact as well as commenting on future plans. Make declarative statements as you recap your day or plan for tomorrow. Share these memories and plans with other people in the child's life, alongside the child, modeling how you tell our own stories using declarative language.

For example, if a parent has just gotten home from work, you could say to your child: *Let's tell Daddy what happened today! We walked to the train station. You were running and fell! You scraped your knee, and I could tell it hurt, because you cried. Mommy gave you a big hug, and we put a Band-aid on it.*

Or when planning for the future with your child, you might narrate like this: *Tomorrow we will visit Auntie Jane. We'll put on our helmets and ride our bikes to her house. Sometimes your helmet is too tight, and you don't like how it feels. We will make sure it feels okay before we leave.*

What can be hard, when people first start speaking in this manner, is the act of letting go. That is, letting go of the notion that the child needs to say something in response. They don't. Watch your child for subtle but important nonverbal signals that communicate engagement, understanding, and interest. For



example, are they smiling? Looking towards you? Nodding? Or even just continuing to share space with you versus walking away? This feedback is enough when we start. If these signals are not there, then consider simplifying your statements (less words, simpler vocabulary), and try again.

4. In the moment, notice and narrate your child's emotional appraisals related to events. We want kids to form and store memories that are socially meaningful, but they may need our help to draw attention and put language to these moments. Make declarative statements in the moment or immediately afterwards, so your child remembers what happened and how they felt. Some examples:

You thought that was funny!

I can tell you do not like that noise.

I think you felt a little scared when you saw the dog.

I noticed you loved it when your friend gave you that Pokémon card.

Important: These first four tips are the foundation of all that follows. When getting started, it is a good idea to practice these first four ideas for a bit of time before increasing language demands on your child. It can be hard to get used to speaking in a different way, so monitoring your own language use is a critical first step. Tips 5-10 will follow in part 2 of this article in the May/June/July issue.

Final Thoughts

When you are present in the moment, thoughtful in the language you use, and mindfully allowing processing time, children will truly experience the sharing of memories as a positive social exchange. Your goal is to help them walk away with well-formed memories related to their own personal narratives, which provides better understanding and better expressions of who they are as individual as well as finding joy in sharing memories with others.

Share information generously, wait quietly, and scaffold as needed. From this place of support, the child will be equipped and ready to engage with others in more meaningful ways in future conversational opportunities. ■

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PART 2 – FOR NEXT ISSUE will include a recap of ideas presented and tips 5-10.