

It is likely that there will be some impairment of the imitation ability found in children with Autism Spectrum Disorders and that they will have more difficulty in imitating the behaviour of others compared to other children. Much of our life's learning of language development, acquiring new skills and social integration is based on the imitation of others. It is therefore essential to try to help the child with autism to improve his skills in this area.

In the normally developing child the steps involved in the imitative process are as follows:

- The child is capable of *pseudo imitation* where he can only imitate another's imitation of his actions.
- The child can only imitate an action only if it is within his behavioural repertoire.
- The child can begin to imitate different actions that from his behavioural repertoire.
- The child gains the ability to imitate an action that occurred at some time in the past – this is referred to as *deferred* imitation.

Using this as a model it therefore makes sense to start in the area of pseudo imitation when working with a child with low imitative ability. We attempt to improve the child's imitative skills by actually imitating his spontaneous actions. Not only is this often the quickest way to encourage the child to imitate our actions but it has a number of added benefits for the child including:

- Making the adult seem more predictable to the child and giving him/her a sense of control over the interaction. This sense of control can enable the child to relax and hence achieve greater concentration.
- Giving the child information about what he/she is doing. Some children may be actually unaware that they are for example, flapping their hands and they may only realize they are doing so when they see the action mirrored in another person.
- Helping the child to decrease his or her repetitive behaviour.
- Improving social interactions and eye contact with the person doing the imitating.
- Making the child feel as though he and his behaviour is accepted and respected by others.

Imitation is not an easy task for the child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. Because of this it is important not to rely on the child imitating you when teaching new skills. A more successful approach is likely to be a hands-over-hands approach where you manually guide the child's hand to perform the action. However, in order to make progress in teaching how to imitate it is worthwhile considering why this is such a difficult task for these children. Some of the reasons for this are outlined below:

- Difficulty in attributing mental states to others. The child may be unaware that we are requiring them to imitate us.
- In order to imitate another person it is necessary to hold a representation of what they just did in memory. This can be difficult for the child who has not yet formed internal representations of objects or actions.
- The child may not yet have the desire or the social understanding to conform to a group situation, so the natural desire to fit in by copying others may not be present.
- The child may be attending to our actions in an over-selective manner and just be focusing on

---

a small part of what we are doing without taking in the overall action. This is referred to as stimulus over-selectivity and is not uncommon in children with autism.

- The child may have difficulty with responding to information coming from more than one of the senses (visual, auditory and tactile) at the same time. An example of this may be that the child is confused when required to imitate both actions and songs.
- Deferred imitation is often difficult task for children with autism until they have mastered the higher cognitive demands of object permanence and categorisation.

In order to assist the child with improving his imitative abilities some of the following suggestions may be useful:

- Begin with pseudo imitation first. Then move on to encouraging the child to imitate behaviours that are from within his repertoire. Finally move on to encouraging the child to imitate new behaviours.
- As the coordination of oral movements (such as those used in language) is more complex than the coordination of the arms and the legs, start with gross motor imitative behaviours initially.
- Freeze gross motor movements in time so that the child has longer to process and hopefully make an internal representation of your actions.
- Use music to encourage imitative behaviours if your child responds well to it.
- If the child has difficulty with cross-modality processing try to allow the child the opportunity to copy a gross motor activity without any accompanying sounds.
- Allow the child access to a full-length mirror so that she / he may practice imitating his/her own actions.