

Children's views exploring their own language & communication experiences

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Introduction

Consultant Speech & Language Therapist

- Autism Diagnostician (adults without learning disability)

Clinical Lecturer at The University of Manchester

Interests in the language & communication profile of autistic individuals in marginalised groups (not previously explored)

Consequently, also exploring subtle language & communication differences & the impact on emotional well-being

More recently, working on co-production in research, creating optimal communication environments for ND people, children's views on Speech & Language Therapy

Background to current talk

PhD: Investigating Subtle Language & Communication Differences Between Autistic Females & Males Without LD

Study one: Comparison using direct assessment of language & pragmatics

Study two: Comparison using observation & report measures (communicative functionality)

Study three: Qualitative exploration into the impact of subtle measurable communication differences on the individual (child self report)

Study one & two, participants

n=13 autistic girls, n=13 autistic boys, similar severity ratings (ASSQ)
without learning disability (PIQ+70): measured using WASI
aged 8y11m-11y6m, attending mainstream primary school

n=26 typically developing (TD) children: sex/gender & age matched



Study one: direct assessments

- *Basic structural language*: receptive vocabulary & sentences (TROG); expressive vocabulary & sentences
- *Narrative measures*: above sentence level language markers of complexity & length coherence/story-complexity
- *Semantic task*: word association task
- *Inference*: experimental measures of figurative language & coherence
- *Language of emotion*: novel measures of expressive & receptive vocabulary



Study two: functional communication

Researcher/clinician observations: Pragmatic rating scale (Landa, 1992)

Child Self-report: Communication Checklist – Self-Report (Bishop, 2003)

Parent report: Children's Communication Checklist 2nd edition (Bishop et al., 2009)

Parent & teacher report of adaptive behaviours: Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaire
(Goodman, 1997)

Summary of findings: study one & two

Autistic females had better scores on measures of pragmatics, semantics & language of emotion (LOE) than autistic males

BUT perform less well than non-autistic females on measures of narrative, pragmatics, semantics & LOE

This is despite ALL groups having similar scores on basic structural language measures

The children & parents of autistic children *report* similar levels of difficulty in communication experiences (not differentiated by sex/gender)

Rationale for study three

Why do autistic children report similar levels of difficulties in communicative experiences (not differentiated by sex/gender)?

- This is a finding replicated self (& parent) reports of autism severity
- Is it differing societal expectations? Differing levels of self-reflection/criticism?

It could be that the children compare their skills against their naturally occurring peer group, thus defining their sense of personal strengths & weaknesses

Therefore, subtle communication differences could still have a meaningful impact on the individual

Study three research questions

We wanted to explore the experiences of autistic children (without learning disability) on having subtle differences with language & communication

As the questionnaires identified similarities rather than differences according to sex/gender, this research would look for emerging themes from the reports of equal numbers of autistic girls & boys

We also wanted to explore the impact of those subtle communication differences on social interactions, participation & emotional well-being

Methods

Team



Core team:

- Dr Cathy Adams
- Dr Jenny Freed

Analysis team:

- Dr Helen Chilton
- Katie Foy
- Dr Kathy Leadbitter



Community participation

Parents: were consulted to guide research focus & develop child interview questions & protocol

Autism@Manchester: provided in-depth scrutiny of the interview materials

Autistic young person: piloted interview questions, protocols & supporting material & provided feedback

Autistic co-production: researcher recruited to the data analysis & editorial team



Establishing child interview questions

Questions were developed to offer structure without leading answers

11. Do you find it easy or difficult to explain your thoughts to other people?



- Has this ever happened to you?
- Can you tell me what happened?
- Do you know what you were feeling at the time?
- Can you describe that feeling to me?

Supportive material was made available to all, prior to the interview

Ideas to help you think: storytelling

	Who?
	When?
	Where?
	What happened?

Stories can be about something true that happened or something make believe

Telling a story is important so you can explain to other people what happened in real life situations.

We tell a story every time someone asks us 'what did you do at the weekend?', or 'where did you go over the summer holidays?'

Establishing child interview protocol

Highly flexible, in line with parent consultation & literature (Howard et al., 2019). Adjustments included;

- place of interview (typically school or home)
- time of day
- method of recording (audio or visual)
- accessing supportive materials before or during the session (or not)
- having a parent present (or not)
- taking sensory calming breaks or having sensory calming activities available as required

Participants

Recruited as a subgroup from studies one & two

Child interviewees

- $n=6$ autistic girls & $n=6$ autistic boys, aged 9-14 years
- No learning disability, structural language in normal range
- Eight from original cohort



Process

Child interviews, 45-90minutes

Audio or video recorded then transcribed

Interviews analysed using thematic analysis (IPA)

Autistic researcher interpretations prioritised to reduce neuro-typical researcher overshadowing in presenting the child's thoughts

Emerging themes are represented with a quote

Themes & quotes were reviewed by the wider team

Child main themes

Overarching: interaction between communication & emotional wellbeing

1. Understanding
of own
communication
strengths &
weaknesses

2. Impact on self-
advocacy

3. Impact on
relationship
building

4. Communication
& literacy strengths

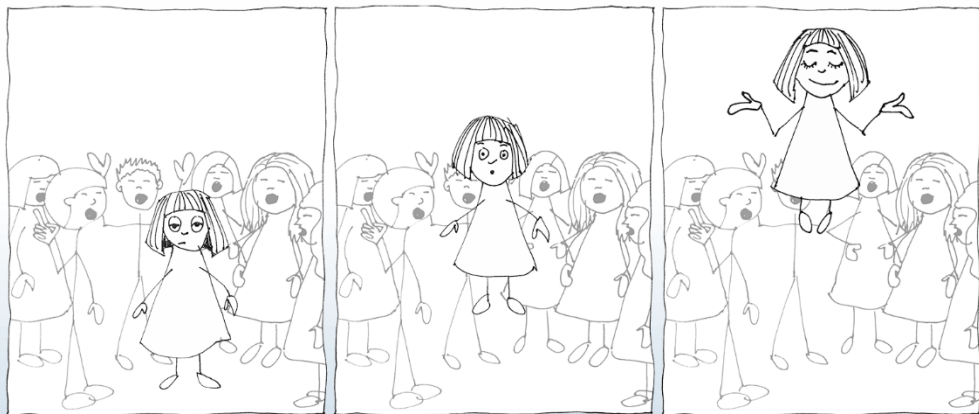
Themes & Quotes

1. *Perceptions of communicative ability*: strengths & weaknesses

Strengths: vocabulary 'I know the longest word: pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanokoniosis. It's got 40 characters'

Weakness: listening difficulties

'I sometimes just drift off in the middle of someone talking. Like in school when they're telling us what to do, I just drift off & I don't know what we're doing'



'If it was just a few [instructions] I'd remember easily, but when it gets longer, I sometimes forget, just do a little but not what they ask'

Themes & Quotes

2. *Self advocacy:*

‘I’d go into loads of detail, or I’ll barely go into any detail, to try to avoid going into loads of detail’

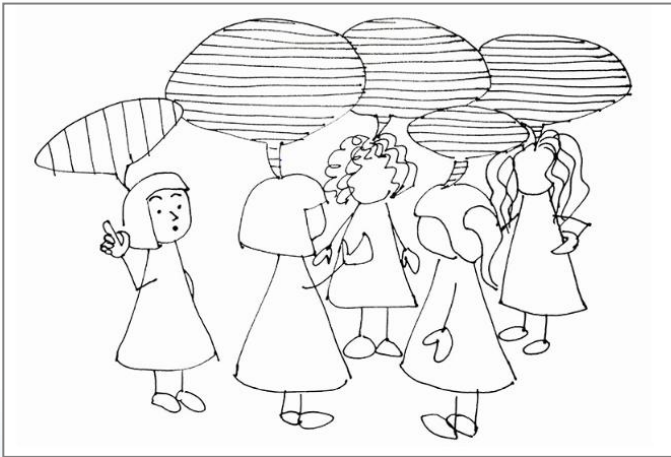
‘I have an idea in my head, & I can’t get it out’ {clenches fists & shakes them}

Explaining feelings: ‘usually I’ll convey a negative emotion, of being sad or worried, but I’ll shut down ... So they’ll know it’s a negative emotion, but not which one

Themes & Quotes

3. Impact of social communication on relationship building:

‘You can’t really do anything without talking to people because most things involve talking, even board games you have to talk about that, the rules & stuff’



‘[in secondary school] I could no longer talk about my little pony (...). I couldn’t talk about toys without them talking about makeup. It felt like someone had taken out a few of my vocal chords, or taken out a big chunk of my brain’

Themes & Quotes

4. Communication & literacy interaction:

- Largely strengths
- Provides supportive strategies

‘I like the way [my favourite characters in books] have gender neutral names, gender neutral personality’

Potential sex/gender difference (?): girls use of literature to support better awareness of self & others, social & emotional behaviours



Themes & Quotes

Overarching theme: Emotional impact of communication breakdown

‘I am bashing my head & its noisy & its chaos’

– listening in groups

‘teachers say ‘just say something’, & I am getting all wound up & I don’t know what to do’

- self-advocating

Potential sex/gender difference: girls seemed to provide fuller & more detailed descriptions of emotional impact of communication breakdown

Overarching findings

1. Interviews found that autistic children without learning disability & structural language within normal limits will experience & report difficult experiences with communication
 - The children could identify many of their own strengths & weaknesses, but the girls appeared to provide more detailed accounts
2. Children also identified the impact these communication differences had on social participation & developing independence.
 - In terms of independence, children focused on issues explaining thoughts & events (self-advocacy)

Overarching findings

3. The children identified a relationship between communication breakdown & poor emotional well-being

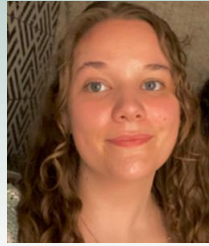
- This produced increased negative emotions (reactively) & feelings of reduced self-worth & competency (in the longer term)
- Language of emotion was linked to difficulties explaining emotional events & seeking support
- Increased emotional responses were linked to reduced communicative skills

4. Interviews showed that children & families had developed a range of strategies to manage the lived experience of communication differences

Clinical implications

- Structural language assessment is insufficient to rule out language & communication impact for this group
- The relationship between communicative breakdown & emotional well-being is significant for the child
 - It could impact on immediate levels of stress & frustration
 - It could impact on feelings of self-confidence & efficacy
- Targeted intervention could improve social & functional participation for this group & have a positive impact on mental health
- Children should be included in clinical decision making & personal target setting

A new grant



- Starting in May 2025
- NIHR funding was granted to explore the views of autistic children on their communication & what they want from Speech & Language Therapy services
- There is little research exploring healthcare concerns with SLCN children
- Three phases of work – all co-produced
- Uses multimodal interviewing techniques to discuss complex decision-making with children who are minimally verbal
- We will report findings at Café Autistique
- [Autism speech and language therapy | The University of Manchester](#)

What we want: how can Speech & Language Therapy best meet the needs of autistic children?

We are looking for **autistic children & young people (9 – 17 years 11 months old)** to take part in an adapted interview about *their* priorities and preferences in Speech & Language Therapy.

We hope our findings will support the development of services in this area.

In the first part of this study, we are looking for children & young people who are **verbally-able**, so likely in **mainstream schools accessing a mainstream curriculum**. A formal autism diagnosis is important and should follow national clinical guidance on best practice.

Please get in touch to ask about eligibility or find out more:

NDSpeech-LanguageTherapy@manchester.ac.uk

Our team includes experienced & DBS checked autistic researchers & Speech & Language Therapists.

The interviews will be adapted to meet individual needs.

If your child has more significant language support needs, we will be recruiting these children to a related but different study. Please do ask for details.

Questions

With Thanks

