



THE THERAPIST
JOURNAL OF THERAPIES & REHABILITATION SCIENCES
<https://thetherapist.com.pk/index.php/tt>
ISSN (E): 2790-7406, (P): 2790-7414
Volume 6, Issue 4 (Oct - Dec 2025)



Speech Therapy in Improving Communication Skills in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder



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ARTICLE INFO

How to Cite:

Hassan, S. (2025). Speech Therapy in Improving Communication Skills in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Speech Therapy in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *THE THERAPIST (Journal of Therapies & Rehabilitation Sciences)*, 6(4), 01-02. <https://doi.org/10.54393/tt.v6i4.291>

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a complex neurodevelopment disorder that normally occurs during early childhood. It is typified by the chronic lack of social communication, restricted or repetitive behaviours and cognitive and adaptive functioning of different degrees. Children with ASD can show problems in their perception of social stimuli, creation of social relationships, verbal and nonverbal self-expression. These challenges often extend to speech development with the consequent delays in language acquisition, abnormal prosody, and the inability to create intelligible speech [1,2].

Globally, it is estimated that one out of every 44 children have ASD with the male-female ratio being 4:1. Among the main problems with children with ASD, there are differences in the rate of speech, pitch, and intonation, which have a significant implication on the social interaction and the overall quality of life. It is important to identify these challenges at an early age because early intervention has been observed to enhance the performance in various areas of development [1,2].

Recent studies have provided evidence on the crucial nature of early intervention especially speech therapy in solving these challenges. Systematic reviews have shown that early speech therapy has the potential to make a significant contribution to language acquisition, social skills, cognitive ability, and self esteem. Although it is possible that the severity of autism cannot be changed by early intervention, meaningful functional differences can be observed, enabling children to communicate more efficiently and interact with their surrounding [3].

New interventions in speech therapy are also improving the outcome of children with ASD. The speech-enabled games have been designed in a customized manner and are directed at specific speech production difficulty areas. Such interactive programs lead to children being able to control the prosodic features of their speech in real-time, and therefore, the therapy is efficient and entertaining. The results of pilot studies carried out over a long-time show that vocabulary skills, eye and mouth fixation, prosody, and general communication can be improved, indicating the possibility of using technology in speech therapy interventions [1].

The COVID-19 epidemic emphasized the importance of telerehabilitation and online speech therapy as a means of continuity in ASD children whom in-person therapy was unavailable. Research has also shown that distance interventions are as efficient as face-to-face therapy to enhance language abilities, social interaction, and general participation. Telerehabilitation is both able to overcome geographic barriers in families residing in rural or underserved regions and offer an option that is more convenient and secure during times of a pandemic or other factors that restrict access to the clinic. Moreover, online therapy enables therapists to track the progress in real-time, give instant feedback, and customize the interventions to the needs of particular children [4].

The presence of parents, education, and stress management are the key aspects of the therapy. The studies have revealed that stress on caregivers may adversely influence the outcomes of interventions, but that parental education and coaching have a positive impact on the experiences of children and their caregivers. The role of teachers and mentors is also significant to provide the supportive environment and help communicate the skills of communication. Those programs which incorporate caregivers, offer practical advice, and provide community support always result in high outcomes [1,2,4].

Although these developments have taken place, there are still challenges. The shortage of resources, the delay in starting treatment, and the ignorance of the community remain the hindrance in most areas. The skills of trained professionals, financial assistance, and dedicated caregiver involvement are needed in early therapy, and usually, they are limited in underserved regions. The increase in access to

early and innovative interventions in speech therapy, training caregivers, and enhancing support systems are critical measures that will allow providing children with ASD with equal opportunities [1,2,3].

Early and novel speech therapy is a transformative intervention in improving communication and social outcomes of children with ASD. The combination of traditional therapy and technology-based interventions, support of caregivers, and the creation of awareness among the community members are the main tools needed to help each child reach his/her full potential. Further researches, awareness creation, and allocation of resources are needed so that children with ASD can have access to effective communication support so that they can be able to achieve their full developmental potential and be useful members of the society.

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