

Teaching the Child to Understand and Use Abstract Language

by
Tracy Vail, MS, CCC/SLP

Some children with autism are able to learn to ask for (mand), identify (receptive) and label (tact) concrete objects and actions with relative ease but show a great deal more difficulty learning other parts of speech that may be considered more “abstract” in nature such as adjectives, adverbs, prepositions and pronouns. There are many theories as to why these “parts of speech” are more difficult for children with autism to learn but it may be due to the fact that these words are “relational” or “relative”. In other words, the words used change depending on what is being compared, the perspective of the speaker or who is speaking to whom. For example, when seen next to a bush, a tree is considered, “bigger” but when compared to a skyscraper, the same tree would be considered, “smaller”. A ball laying, “on” the floor may also be “beside” a chair but depending on where the observer is located, “beside” might look very different! If I am talking to a female, I call her “you” but if I am telling someone else something about that same person, I call her “she”. It’s easy to see how the children can get confused! In behavioral terms, it is more difficult to obtain stimulus control when the stimulus is constantly changing!

As with other parts of speech, one usually has the most success when using the child’s motivation or desire (establishing operation/EO) to teach them to request (mand) for something using these parts of speech. Once the child is using these words to request (mand) with no prompting, the child can be taught to receptively identify and label (tact) using these words with much greater ease through the use of transfer procedures. Let’s look at each part of speech to determine how we might manipulate the child’s need to request using these “abstract words”. It is important to remember that the questions used to elicit the response as well as the object(s) of reference are all part of the stimulus conditions which specify which response will be reinforced.

Adjectives- After learning nouns and verbs, adjectives are typically the next part of speech we teach a child. Adjectives are words that describe nouns including words describing how things sound, feel, taste, look and smell. There are some basic things to keep in mind when teaching adjectives to children with autism. First, make sure you are teaching the child the word to describe how he is experiencing the sensations. Also, be sure the child is “tuning in” to the correct feature. Finally, teach in a way that avoids the child chaining responses or using adjectives inappropriately. Finally, use the child’s motivation or desire for items to teach the child to request with adjectives and then transfer to all other functions (verbal operants).

It’s important to understand that children with autism may be experiencing sensations in an atypical manner. For example, something that may smell “sweet” to you may smell “stinky” to the child. So, when teaching adjectives, it is important to be aware of how the child is responding to a particular sensation and give the appropriate label for his reaction. Remember that when teaching adjectives, we can also be teaching the child to request (mand) for his environment to be changed by telling us how he experiences events. Just as when an adult may say, “I’m cold.” as an indirect request for someone to turn up the heat, the child may be taught to say, “too loud!” as a request for those around him to quiet down a bit. The hug that feels “nice” to you may “hurt” the child. When the child is able to identify these sensations or request a change, it allows him to have more control over his environment and may reduce the “need” for negative behaviors that might occur if the child were unable to communicate in another way.

It’s important when beginning to teach adjectives that the items be identical in every way except the target descriptor. Many children with autism have difficulty responding to multiple features of the same item and if we use items that differ by more than one feature to teach a concept, we can’t be



sure the child is “tuning in” to the correct aspect of the object. For example, if we used a big striped ball and a little ball with stars on it to teach “big” and “little”, the child may learn that “big” means things with stripes and “little” means things with stars. Instead, we should use two balls that are the same color and texture but are different sizes.

It’s important to be sure to use many different items in a variety of combinations when teaching the adjectives to help ensure the child isn’t accidentally taught to use the adjective to request the item or to chain the adjective and noun as the new name of the item he wants. For example, we wouldn’t want the child to begin saying “blue” to request a “blue ball” or to request all blue things by saying “blue ball”. To avoid this, we’d teach the child to request a blue ball, red ball, yellow ball etc. as well as teaching him to request blue cups, red cups and yellow cups. In fact, we should follow the new response quite quickly with a different combination. Another way to avoid this confusion is to begin by combining adjectives with only the child’s strongest requests (mands) or those which he will consistently use without any prompting. It’s also important to teach the child under which conditions he should use adjectives. For example, if two different cups were available, it would be important to describe the one he wanted using adjectives but if only one cup were available, it would not be appropriate to use the adjective. We don’t want the child to begin using adjectives to request and label (tact) things in the environment all the time because his communication will sound very unnatural. Consider the child who asks the child next to him for a “long, yellow sharp pencil” when his pencil breaks! In this case, just asking for a pencil would be much more appropriate.

To use the child’s desire or motivation (EO) to teach him to request with adjectives, begin by offering two or more different choices of the desired item requiring the child to use the adjective to clarify their request (mand). Once the child is able to request using the adjectives when appropriate, begin transferring them to tact (label) responses. It is helpful to use the sense used in “experiencing” the adjective in the SD or question asked of the child when transferring to a tact response. For example, after a child has asked for the “hard ball” with no prompting ask, “How does the ball feel?” and/or “How does it feel?” to teach him to label (tact) “hard”. (Note that you do want to be able to remove the noun from the SD as having it included gives the child a “clue” that you are not asking for the name of the item.) Then use the SD or question, “What kind of ball?” or “Describe this ball.” to teach the child to combine the adjective and the noun as a 2 word “label” (tact).

Receptive responses containing adjectives can be taught when cleaning up toys or when an item is needed to complete a task. For example, the instructor might ask for the “big towel” when needed to dry hands or ask the child to find the “little car” when cleaning up toys (Note: Only if more than one of the items was present so clarification was needed). Others choose to teach adjectives as receptive responses (pointing, giving, touching) first, then transfer to tacts (labeling, naming). The order in which you teach the functions (operants) is less important than determining the function in which you are most likely to get a correct response then transferring the response to other functions (operants).

When teaching the child to respond to the “features” part of the FFC responses we are sometimes teaching adjectives. Some people feel it is not important to be sure the child has learned to mand (request) and/or tact (label) the adjective before teaching it as a feature but it may be important that this be done to avoid the response from being a rote memorization. For example, it might be better to teach the child to request and/or label “hot/cold” before teaching him to respond to “something cold is (ice cream).” When the child is taught the reversals of features, they are responding with adjectives as intraverbal responses (no visual item present). To use the above example, if the child was taught to respond, “cold” when asked, “How does ice cream feel?” and the ice cream was not present, this would be an intraverbal response. Being able to tact (label) cold is important in order to avoid this being learned as a rote or memorized response.



There is some disagreement among professionals regarding whether or not adjectives should be taught as opposite pairs. Some feel that doing so leads to more confusion for the child and others feel that it helps the child learn the relational value of the terms. Words that have clear opposites such as “big/little”, “wet/dry”, “hot/cold”, “long/short” appear to be easily taught together but it’s not always necessary. Some adjectives don’t have clear opposites such as “sparkly” or “fuzzy”. Adjectives can be taught in isolation with examples and non-examples of the target adjective if the child is having difficulty learning the targets taught together. If given thought, most items a child enjoys can be found in different forms that would allow one to teach adjectives. Some ideas for combining adjectives with desired objects include:

- Big/little, long/short, striped/solid, full/empty and different colored balloons.
- Wet/dry, different colored sand.
- Soft/hard, squishy, rough/smooth, different colored balls.
- Long/short, shiny/dull different colored ribbon sticks.
- Different sizes and colors or “gears” or “wheels” that spin.
- Different sizes and colors of tops.
- Skinny/fat, big/little, tall/short. Soft/hard, squishy, sticky forms of favorite animals and characters from books or videos.
- Different sizes and colors of cups that juice can go in and/or different types and temperature of juice.
- Different temperatures of water when taking a bath or washing hands. Use tablets to change bath water to a requested color!
- Different color crayons, markers, paper and play dough and sharp/dull pencils or crayons for kids who enjoy art activities.
- Different kinds of cookies or ice cream.

It may not be possible to teach both the number and variety of examples needed to generalize correct responding to adjectives. A wide variety of objects must be used. Receptive and labeling (tact) teaching procedures can be provided to ensure enough examples are taught. Two identical items are first used and the child is asked to receptively identify and label (tact) multiple examples. After identical objects are mastered, teach the child to label (tact) using the adjectives with non-identical items.

It is also important to be sure to teach all the different “ranges” within a particular adjective being taught. For example, when teaching “red”, teach a wide variety of shades of red to be sure the child is able to generalize the tact. When teaching concepts of size, be sure to teach that one object can be considered “big” next to another but “little” when compared to something else.

We begin by teaching adjectives that are as different from each other as possible (opposite) then start comparing smaller differences. Comparative (big, bigger) and superlative adjectives (big, bigger, biggest) can be taught once the child is able to label (tact) opposites.

Prepositions- Prepositions are words that describe the location of nouns and are always in relation to another object. They are one of the most difficult parts of speech to teach children with autism. This may be due to the fact that the same “words” can “look” so different depending on the objects used and the location of the speaker and listener. In addition, the same location can be described using many different terms! In behavioral terms, there is difficulty obtaining stimulus control because multiple stimuli (i.e. the object you are referring to, other objects present, the question used) control the response and many of these stimuli vary a great deal.



To experience how difficult prepositions might be for a child to learn, try a little experiment at home. Put an item in a certain location then have different people come into the room and describe its location. You'll probably find that different people describe the location in relation to different objects so that one person may describe the location as "in the corner" and another may say it's "beside the couch" and still another may say it's "between the couch and the wall" and still another may say it's "next to the couch". All of the responses may be correct but all are different! Another source of confusion may be the way we use prepositions. Most people would agree we ride "on" a bike and "in" a car but do we ride "in" or "on" a wagon? What about a train? A swing? Do we walk "in" or "on" the grass? Do fish swim "in" or "under" the water? Most people are not very consistent in their use of prepositions and the child may hear different words used to describe the same location from different people.

One way to help the child learn to understand and use prepositions correctly is to maintain consistency across instructors. The group should agree on terms to use with specific objects such as those listed above. Another important consideration is that prepositions should always be taught in combination with an object you are using to teach the location. For example, teach "in the box" and "out of the box" rather than "in" and "out" alone. While, "in" may be quite clear when taught alone, an item that is "out" may also be "on the floor" if the referent object is not also included in the response.

One of the easiest ways to teach most children prepositions is to use highly desired items placed in the target location. When the child requests (mands) the item, tell him the location (prompting initially then fading the prompt). For example, if teaching "under" have an upside down box and when the child mands for his "Pooh" toy, tell him it's "under" the box. While playing with Pooh, you could then direct the child to place Pooh "under the box" and have him jump "over the box". Then bring out other objects such as a bowl and a book and let the child mand (request) for Pooh or other characters to jump "over the book" or "under the bowl". By mixing up the target locations and referent objects, you can ensure the child learns to respond in a flexible manner. Again, be sure to transfer to all functions (verbal operants) including mand (request), receptive (identifying), tact (labeling) and intraverbal (responding to the verbal behavior of others).

If the child enjoys moving, the best place to teach prepositions may be on the playground! Climb under and over bars, get on and off balance beams, go up and down slides and in and out of structures. Go through and around tunnels. Some children love to boss adults around so let the child tell you where to go! (mand) Once he is using the prepositions to serve this function, transfer to other functions.

Some children enjoy playing "Find the toy" with an adult. To play this game, take turns hiding a favorite toy. One person hides the toy and the other can make 3 guesses as to its location. If the location is not guessed, the person who hides the toy tells the other where to find it. This game can be quite difficult and should be used with children who are able to mand (request) information regarding locations using "Where" questions and "Is/Are" questions and can respond to intraverbal "yes/no" questions but still have some confusion with prepositions.

Another more difficult game that can be used to teach higher level prepositions is to put a barrier between two children who both have paper and crayons. One child gets to be the "boss" and tell the other child what to draw and where to draw it. For example, the child might tell the child to draw a house in the middle of the page, a sun in the corner and a tree beside the house. This is a good game for both children because if the child who is not the "boss" has any questions, he must ask the "boss" for clarification! (Mand for information) When the picture is finished, let the children compare their pictures and see how they are different! Again, this game should be used for children who are able to mand for information using "Where" questions.



Pronouns- Pronouns are also very difficult for children with autism because the term used depends on who is speaking to whom as well as the presence or “knowledge” the listener has of the referent! In addition, many children with autism like to have one name for every one thing so the fact that “mommy” can also be called “she”, “her” and “you” can be quite frustrating! Also, pronouns are often difficult to teach because if we want to prompt the child to respond the way he is supposed to, we often have to reverse the pronoun. For example, if we’re teaching the child to respond to “Whose nose?” By saying “my nose” when we prompt him, we must say “my nose” even though this is what we would use to refer to our own nose! The tendency for many people is to reinforce the child who responds correctly with “my nose” by saying, “That’s right! It’s your nose!” which further adds to the confusion!

Finally, when teaching a child to use pronouns, we have to be sure to teach them to use them correctly both as “tact” (labeling in the presence of a person) and “intraverbal” (using the pronouns to talk about things not present) and to use additional “communicative behaviors” such as pointing to clarify the referent. Consider the child who might walk up to a teacher in a classroom of children and say, “She took my ball.” The child is present in the room but the teacher has no idea who “she” is! It is important to teach the child to point or at least look at the person to whom he is referring when giving a tact response.

As another example, consider the child who comes home and his mother asks, “What did you do at school today?” The child responds, “I built a castle with him.” The mother has no idea who ‘him’ refers to. It is important to teach the child to use the name of the person he is referring to “establish the referent” before using pronouns in as an intraverbal response.

One of the mistakes that often occurs as a result of the difficulty inherent in teaching children with autism to use pronouns is the avoidance of their use at all! Instead, people will use the actual name of themselves and/or the child instead of the appropriate pronouns. For example, a parent might prompt, “Kevin wants to go outside.” Of course, after years of being reinforced for saying “Kevin wants to go outside”, it will be very difficult to teach the child to use “I” correctly when referring to himself. Or, when looking through a photo album, parents may teach the child to respond with his name when asked, “Whose that?” while looking at a picture of the child. The response elicited should be “me” not the child’s name in this context.

Pronouns such as “he, she, it, him, her etc.” should not be used in early language training but it is important to start teaching children to refer to himself as “I” and “me” from the very beginning to avoid having to “fight against” our own teaching later on.

I / Me

The first pronouns many children learn are “I” and “me”. These are typically taught through the mand (request) when the child begins requesting with “I want...”. ‘Me’ can be taught when the child is requesting an action. For example, when the child requests “push” ask, “Who should I push?” and prompt him to respond, “me”. Be sure to have other people or dolls available to push also so the child doesn’t begin to chain “push me” into a single request for “push”. Once fluent as requests (mands) these pronouns can be transferred to tacts (labels) quite easily by asking “Who am I pushing?” and prompting “me” or “Who wants some juice?” and prompting “I do” or “me”.



My / Mine

The easiest pronouns to teach next are typically “my” or “mine”. First teach these responses as a request (mand) to keep an item that someone is trying to take from them. For example, while gently trying to take a toy truck, prompt the child to say “my truck” and pull the truck away (just like most young children!) It is important to teach the child to “defend their things” this way, especially if they are in a daycare or preschool environment. It’s much better than hitting or passively letting another child take toys away! Once the child is responding when you try to take the truck, ask, “Whose truck?”. The child will most likely respond, “my truck” as a tact (label) response because he just said it. Be silly! Try to put the child’s shoe on as you get ready to go out and give him your shoes to put on to prompt him to mand, “My shoe!”. Mine can be taught in a similar way. The child is just taught the word “mine” rather than the combination of “my” and the object.

My / Your

It is best that you **do not** begin teaching “my” and “your” by giving receptive instructions. Typically, we suggest teaching both receptive (point to/touch) and labeling (tact) responses at the same time. This is because the child will often label (tact) the item/action while he is receptively identifying. In order to transfer from a receptive response, the label (tact) has to be included as the child is pointing. Remember, we are transferring the child’s behavior to a new condition which is not possible in the case of the pronouns “my” and “your”. Instead, this task would require a reversal of the pronouns. For example, one of the early objectives in the ABLLS™-R includes teaching the child to identify body parts on themselves and others. Many use the SDs “touch my nose” and “touch your nose” to teach this skill. However, if asked, “Touch my nose” and the child responds by touching and saying “my nose”, this would be an inappropriate use of the pronoun and could not be transferred to the tact of “Whose nose?”. Instead, have the child tact the body parts of dolls, animals pictures of people etc. The tact target to transfer to should include the possessive tact of the item and/or teaching the tact of the possessor/possession combinations. Wait to teach the pronouns after the child has mastered many other skills.

Instructor: “Touch the dog’s nose”
 STUDENT: (*touches*) and says, “dog’s nose”
 Instructor: “Right! This nose is the...”
 STUDENT: “dog’s”
 Instructor: “Whose nose?”
 Child “Dog’s”
 Instructor: “Tell me about this.”
 STUDENT: “Dog’s nose”

Later, when the child is ready to begin learning pronoun’s the same activity can be used to teach other possessive pronouns such as “his”, “her” and “its” which do not require pronoun reversals.

Other teaching procedures used for teaching possessive “my” and “your” can include the use of contingent comments. With contingent comments, the child is taught to label (tact) something in the environment by following the “model” of the instructor but not echoing directly. This is often a successful way to teaching children with autism since they have a tendency to imitate (echoic/duplic).

Instructor: “My light is yellow.” (*Point to child’s light and give phonemic prompt mm*)
 STUDENT: “My light is blue.”
 Instructor: “Tell me about this light.” (*while pointing to the child’s light*).
 STUDENT: “My light is blue.”



Next, present “Tell me about this light,” with full prompting of “Your light is yellow.” STUDENT: “Your light is yellow.” Continue until the child is able to describe each item using the correct pronoun referents. The use of “Tell me about” as the SD reduces the effects of the pronoun reversal.

“My” and “your” can also be easily taught when playing games. Teach the child to tact whose turn it is. Start by having both the instructor and the child saying, “My turn” at the appropriate times but only ask, “Whose turn?” after the child has already said, “My turn.” After this is mastered, begin saying, “your turn” each time the instructor has already taken a turn and prompt the child to do the same. Once the child is consistently saying, “your turn” with no prompting, transfer to the tact by asking, “Whose turn?” following his initial response. Finally, once both are mastered, begin mixing the two.

At some point, the child does need to learn to reverse pronouns but this should only be conducted after many other pronouns have been mastered. Just teach one of the pronouns at a time. When teaching, it will be important to provide full echoic prompts before the child responds. For example, tell the child to “touch your knees” then ask, “Whose knees?” and prompt, “mine”. Wait for the child to imitate you then ask the question again to get an unprompted response. Once the child is responding with “mine” consistently with no prompting, introduce “your”.

Instructor: “Touch my nose.”
 STUDENT: (*touches nose*)
 Instructor: “Whose nose? Say, ‘yours’.”
 STUDENT: “Yours.”

For some children, it is easiest to wait until you’ve taught the child to mand (request) information using “Whose?” and “Who?” then teach the pronouns in conjunction with these requests. For example, put a piece of the child’s favorite candy on the floor and prompt him to ask, “Whose candy?” tell him “It’s yours!” or “It’s your candy!” He’ll learn the meaning of “your” quickly! Then, start asking him, “Whose candy is it?” after you’ve responded to his question and prompt him to answer, “mine”. Every now and then, when he asks, “Whose candy?” say, “It’s my candy.” and take the candy or ask him to give it to you. (Be careful! It may be tempting!) Ask, “Whose candy?” and prompt him to respond, “Yours”. Of course, if the child does not like candy, any reinforcing item can be used.

His / Her / Its / Our

These are also possessive pronouns and the advantage of teaching them is that they often do not require reversals between the instructor and the child. These are pronouns used to label (tact) or intraverbally respond to states of ownership. As described above, these pronouns can be taught with body parts. It is suggested that if using this teaching procedure, the child is also taught to point to the referent.

(*a picture of a boy, girl, and dog are present*)
 Instructor: “Touch his shirt.” (*0 second delay prompt*)
 STUDENT: (*touches boy’s shirt*)
 Instructor: “Touch his shirt.” (*fade prompt*)
 STUDENT: (*touches boy’s shirt*)
 Instructor: “That shirt is ...”
 STUDENT: “his.”
 Instructor: “Whose shirt?”
 STUDENT: “His.”

Continue with other possessive pronouns for the girl (her) and dog (its collar)
 Possessive pronouns can also be taught in conjunction with subjective pronouns.



(pictures of people performing various actions with objects)

Instructor: "Find, "He's playing his guitar."
 STUDENT: *(points and says)* "He's playing his guitar"
 Instructor: "What's happening?"
 STUDENT: "He's playing his guitar"
 Instructor: "Find, She's playing her guitar."
 STUDENT: *(points and says)*, "She's playing her guitar"
 Instructor: "What's happening?"
 STUDENT: "She's playing her guitar"

Plural pronouns can also be taught in a similar manner by having 2 or more people be the "owner's of the object. For example, 'We're washing our car,' or "They're cleaning their house." Single and plural pronouns should also be taught in a mixed fashion so the child can respond in a flexible manner. (Ex: They're playing with her dog. She's cleaning their house.)

I / He / She / You / We / They / Us

These are "subjective" pronouns. In other words, they are used to refer to the subject of a sentence tacting (labeling) an item that is seen or can be used intraverbally as long as the "referent" or person you are talking about has already been established.

If the child has a favorite toy, tell him you really want to play with it but someone else has it. Then prompt him to ask, "Who?". Both a male and a female should be present. Initially prompt with a point in addition to telling him "He/she" has the toy but fade the pointing prompt. Once the child is easily finding the correct person based on the pronoun you've given, transfer to the tact (label) by asking, "Who has the toy?". Be sure the child is talking and pointing as part of his response when first teaching. Also, be sure the child is talking "to" the instructor as the pronoun changes to "you" if he is talking to one of the people holding the toy. Once the child has mastered "He/She", give the item to various different people and prompt the child to respond correctly depending on to whom he is speaking as well as who has the toy.

(a male, female and the child are present and a favorite toy (light) is passed around)

Instructor: *(Gives the toy to a male)* "Tell me. Who has the light?"
 STUDENT: *(points at male but looks at instructor and says)* "He does"
 Instructor: "Tell him."
 STUDENT: "You have the light"
 Instructor: *(Gives child the light)* "Who has the light?"
 STUDENT: "I do"
 Instructor: *(Gives female the light)* "Who has the light?"
 STUDENT: *(points to female, looks at instructor)* "She does"
 Instructor: "Tell her."
 STUDENT: "You have the light."

Note that the child is prompted to give a full sentence in response to "Tell" rather than just answering the questions with a phrase. This is to avoid inadvertently teaching the child to relay messages by saying "You do" or "he does".

Another way to teach subjective pronouns is to teach the child to point to pictures of males, females animals is to start with a receptive response and concurrently teach the labeling (tact) response. Be



sure to teach in combinations with all other parts of speech (verbs, adjectives etc.) to be sure the responses generalize to a variety of different sentence forms.

(Instructor has a variety of different males and females of different occupations. Child has already been taught the phrase responses through FFC and reversal transfers)

Instructor: "Touch, He puts out fires."
 STUDENT: *(Touches male firefighter and says)*, "He puts out fires."
 Instructor: "Tell me about the firefighter."
 STUDENT: *(points and says)* "He puts out fires."
 Instructor: "Touch, She has a hose."
 STUDENT: *(touches female firefighter and says)*, "She has a hose"
 Instructor: "Tell me about the firefighter."
 STUDENT: *(points and says)* "She has a hose."
 Instructor: "Find, She has a yellow hat."
 STUDENT: *(touches and says)*, "She has a yellow hat."
 Instructor: "Tell me about the firefighter."
 STUDENT: *(points and says)*, "She has a yellow hat."

Once the child is responding correctly, begin fading your receptive prompts and just say, "Tell me about this firefighter". The child may give multiple different responses but be sure he uses the correct pronoun.

To teach plural pronouns, tell the child that some people are going to his favorite place (park) and prompt him to ask, "Who?" Respond, "We are! Get your shoes on!" Transfer to the tact (label) by asking, "Who is going to the park?" and prompting, "We are." Once you get to the park, look around for other children playing on different equipment and ask, "Who's playing on the swing?" prompting "We are." Then, "Who's playing on the slide?" prompting, "They are." Transfer to "Tell me what's happening?" so the child will give the full sentences, "We are (we're) playing on the swing"; and "They are (they're) playing on the slide." (Note: There are pros and cons for teaching children to use contractions before they learn to use auxiliary verbs with correct subject-verb agreement. The author prefers to focus on teaching functional communication that matches what is typically heard in the environment rather than focusing on "correct grammar")

Another teaching strategy is to let the child "boss" (mand) for different people to perform actions then teach the tacts using the appropriate pronouns in the context of the reinforcing activity.

A variety of males and females present. Child is the "boss". The instructor has previously taken a turn being the boss to model manding for 2 or more people to perform an action.

(Mommy and daddy jump.)

Instructor: "Who's jumping?"
 STUDENT: *(Looks at instructor, points to parents)* "They are."
 Instructor: "Tell Kate." *(another person present)*
 STUDENT: "They're jumping."
 Instructor: "Tell Mommy and Daddy."
 STUDENT: "You're jumping."
 Instructor: "Let's you and I jump!"
 STUDENT: *(jumps with instructor)*
 Instructor: "Who's jumping?"



STUDENT: "We are."
 Instructor: "Tell Mommy."
 STUDENT: "We're jumping."

Pronouns can also be taught by teaching the child to make "contingent comments". In other words, begin teaching the child to tact (label) aspects of the environment in a fashion similar but not exactly the way you do. For example, while coloring, you might start with easy tacts such as, "My crayon is red" then point to his crayon prompting him to say, "My crayon is blue". Vary this by saying, "I have a big ball." and prompting him to say, "I have a little ball." When he's responding to these with no prompting, begin adding other pronouns such as, "She has a red shirt." or "He's holding his dog." and point to a different picture for him to tact. Start by pointing to the same sex to avoid confusion but you can mix up the sexes once the child is responding consistently with no prompts needed. Also, fade your pointing prompt so the child is choosing which item he wants to tact (label/describe).

Him / her / them / us

These are "objective pronouns" or pronouns that refer to the object of the sentence. Typically developing children often have difficulty discriminating the appropriate use of these pronouns and given the way they are typically used, it is easy to see why. Consider that we typically model the use of these pronouns by giving the child directions.

Example: "Give the ball to him."

If we'd used a person's name rather than the pronoun, the last word would become the subject of the tact response.

Instructor: "Give the ball to Sarah."
 STUDENT: (*gives the ball to Sarah.*)
 Instructor: "Who has the ball?"
 STUDENT: "Sarah has the ball."

Therefore, it would be perfectly reasonable and logical to assume the response to "Who has the ball?" after being asked to "give the ball to him" would be "Him has the ball" Right?!

To avoid this confusion, the author prefers to teach the child to use objective pronouns after teaching subjective pronouns and to include the subjective pronouns in initial teaching to help teach the discrimination of the appropriate use.

(pictures of males and females giving things to other people)

Instructor: "Show me, 'He gave the ball to her'."
 STUDENT: (*Points and says*) "He gave the ball to her."
 Instructor: "What happened?"
 STUDENT: "He gave the ball to her."
 Instructor: "Who gave the ball?"
 STUDENT: "He did."
 Instructor: "Who did he give the ball to?"
 STUDENT: "Her."

Or, in a game type format, have the child mand for an action along with other people manding for the same action. Vary the people requesting the action and performing the actions so that all forms of the pronouns can be taught. Also vary the people to whom the child speaks to teach him to discriminate the pronoun usage depending on to whom he is talking.



(Multiple males and females present playing catch.)

STUDENT: "Throw the ball to me."
 Instructor: "Who threw the ball?"
 STUDENT: "He did."
 Instructor: "Who did he throw to?"
 STUDENT: "Me."
 Instructor: "Tell me what happened."
 STUDENT: "He threw the ball to me."
 Instructor: "Throw the ball to me."
 STUDENT: *(Throws)*
 Instructor: "Tell me what happened."
 STUDENT: "I threw the ball to you."
 Instructor: "Tell daddy what happened."
 STUDENT: "I threw the ball to her. "

(female is the "thrower)

STUDENT: "Throw the ball to me."
 Instructor: "What happened?"
 STUDENT: "She threw the ball to me."
 Instructor: "Tell her."
 STUDENT: "You threw the ball to me."

Plural objective pronouns can be taught in the same manner or by having "teams". (It's our turn. Throw it to us. We threw the ball to them.)

Finally, make sure the child is discriminating all of the conditions under which it is and is not appropriate to use pronouns. Take the child out in the hallway with one other person, away from other people and have one person perform an action. Ask the child if Daddy (who's waiting in the room) can see what happened. When the child responds, "no" remind him that Daddy needs to know who performed the action. Prepare Dad to ask, "What happened?" when the group re-enters the room. The child should respond by either giving the person's name (i.e. Mommy sang a song.) or pointing while relaying, "She sang a song."

Adverbs- Adverbs are words that are used to describe actions. Adverbs can be taught by building on the child's requests for actions (mands). For example, if the child can ask you to walk, ask him if you should walk "quickly" or "slowly". If he asks you sing, does he want you to sing "loudly" or "quietly"? If you're banging on a drum, prompt him to tell you to "play quietly!" "Help" him jump on the trampoline by holding his hips and let him mand (request) to jump "high" or "low". When you push him on the swing, does he want you to push hard or softly? Does he want to go fast or slow? High or low? Just as when teaching other parts of speech, once the child is manding (requesting) using the adverbs, it's much easier to teach him to label (tact) and receptively identify them. To teach the tact, transfer from the mand. For example, once he consistently asks you to "walk slowly" ask, "How am I walking?" to teach him to tact (label) "slowly".

To get the 2-word response of the adverb and verb, say, "Tell me what's happening." to get "walking slowly" or "slowly walking". Prompt the responses both ways so the child will be flexible in combining phrases into sentences later. Adverbs can be found in different locations in sentences so we don't want him to be "stuck" using just one sentence form. For example, we might say, "He walked slowly



down the street.” or “He slowly walked down the street.” or “He walked down the street slowly” to describe the same event. We want the child to have this same flexibility in using sentence forms.

To teach the child to respond receptively, have two identical objects performing two identical actions with only the adverb differing. For example, have one Pooh dance quickly and another dance slowly. Ask him to identify each. If cars are racing, ask which one went down the ramp quickly and slowly. Have 2 people play a drum and ask who’s playing loudly and who’s playing quietly.

A good time to teach adverbs is when you are teaching the child to imitate the speed of an action. As he learns to do this, begin tacting the adverbs that go with the actions. Let him tell you how to perform the actions! As with all other parts of speech, we want to be sure to teach all verbal operants (functions) of adverbs. Intraverbal adverbs can be taught by teaching the child to identify things that run fast then teaching the reversal so he can respond to, “How does a tiger run?” with no visual stimuli present.

While all of these more “abstract” parts of speech may be more difficult for some children with autism to learn, we can teach them if we are consistent and precise in our teaching and capitalize on the child’s interests to be sure that learning these parts of speech benefits the child.

