



Other people should understand:

Common communication needs & preferences for autistic youth



Albin, M., Dekker, E., Shaw, R., Padvaikas, M., Sooriyahetti, O., Goodes, B., & Phoenix, M.

✉ albinm1@mcmaster.ca



A guide to connecting with the autistic youth in your life



Designed as a menu, this resource is for autistic youth and people close to them to explore communication preferences and needs together. It was created by autistic youth, close communication partners, speech language pathologists, & researchers.

At a restaurant, you pay and leave; **for many autistic youth, the "bill" for a conversation arrives later as exhaustion or burnout.**

What looks effortless often involves constant background work, like reading the room or navigating hidden rules.

The goal of this menu is to help create **spaces where some of that background noise can finally quiet down – where autistic youth can drop the mask, say what they mean, and just be.**

REFLECT, DISCUSS, AND MAKE THIS COMMUNICATION MENU YOUR OWN

Take stock of your spoons. Which items cost you the most energy? Which ones make it easier to keep the conversation going? Mark them up on the next few pages.

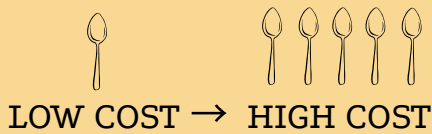
Sit down together. Where do these items show up in your life? Where are they missing?

Place your order. Choose what you'd like more of in your conversations, and what you'd rather leave off the table.

Add your own dishes. Your communication needs might not all be listed here. There's space throughout to add your own thoughts, preferences, and ideas.

Spoons represent energy. For many autistic people, everyday interactions draw from a limited daily supply.

The more spoons beside an item, the more energy it often costs.



APPETIZERS Conversation Starters

START SPECIFIC
Try asking about something specific - a show they love, a project they're working on. "How are you doing?" can feel like a test with no right answer.



DON'T RUSH THE HELLO
A little silence at the start isn't awkward. Some people need a moment to settle into the conversation and feel comfortable.



OPEN INVITATION TO SHARE
If you're not sure where to start, ask what they're into lately. Then actually listen to their interests and go from there.



A LOT OF SMALL TALK
Loved by many, but dreaded by others (including many autistic people). Best chosen as a small portion, as it can take up a lot of energy when on the menu.



UNSpoken EXPECTATIONS
Not a recommended dish on our menu. The energy spent decoding what someone meant, wanted, or felt without them *just saying it directly*. Unspoken expectations have a way of spoiling the meal early on. Just say what you mean!



BEVERAGES

Helpful strategies to sip on and use throughout the meal.

BE CONSISTENT WITH YOUR COMMUNICATION
Being a reliable communicator - showing up the same way each time, with the same patience, and willingness to learn.

NON-JUDGMENTAL APPROACH
Accept what someone share, and how they naturally communicate, without correcting, minimizing, or trying to fix it. It goes a long way!

SHOW CURIOSITY WHEN UNSURE
Instead of "why do you do that?", try "I noticed ____, tell me about that" or "what does that feel like for you?" The difference is small in wording and enormous in impact.



THE MAIN COURSE

Includes common communication preferences/needs for autistic youth. Check off which are true for you, add your own examples, and discuss them with someone close to you.



LEAVE MORE PROCESSING TIME

- After you ask something, wait. Really wait. Counting silently to 5 in your head is a good start.
- Try agreeing on a signal together (a hand gesture, a word) that means "I need a moment". This can help silence feel more comfortable for both of you.

-
-



FLEXIBLE COMMUNICATION OPTIONS

- Accept all ways of communicating. Talking out loud isn't the only way - texting, typing, writing, gesturing, or using visuals can be really helpful.
- Know that filler words (e.g., um, like) and stumbling on words can happen often. No need to correct them, just let the other person keep going.
- Accept direct communication - I mean what I say, and say what I mean. Assume good intent and clarify if needed.
- 'If sensory factors (noise, light, heat) affect communication, ask 'What helps?' instead of assuming. Simple changes, including standing or moving to a quiet space, can make a big difference'

-
-



ON THE SIDE

These are supports to offer as options, not impose as solutions. Think of them as sides on the menu – some people want them, some don't, and that's fine either way.

- A heads-up before difficult conversations (no ambush chats).
- Time to think before responding, with no pressure to fill silence.
- The option to text or write instead of talk.
- Sit down for hard conversations instead of on-the-go.
- Agreeing on a "pause" signal when you need a moment
- Not pointing out verbal habits (the "ums," word mix-ups) - just focus on my words.
- Recap in writing after important conversations
-



DESSERT

The best part of the menu! Includes ideas for talking about people's interests.



TALK ABOUT FOCUSED INTERESTS

Focused/special interests are how many autistic people process the world and build connection. You don't need to match their enthusiasm for their interest, but showing up and chatting about it goes a long way.

REVISITING FAMILIAR TOPICS AGAIN

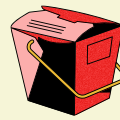
The same topic, revisited again and again, allows for depth and builds comfort. Resist the urge to redirect. This is where some of the best conversation happens!

SHARE YOUR OWN INTERESTS TOO

Try sharing something you're passionate about first – it's easier to share when you know the other person has their own focused interests too. When they share, lean in and ask genuine questions. You never know what you'll learn or become interested in!

My Interests

TAKE YOUR ORDER TO GO

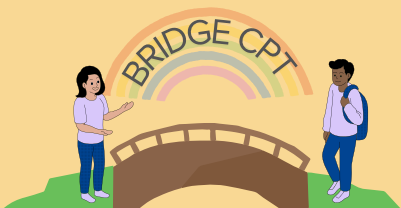


Autistic youth: Create a “to go” card you can keep with you as a reminder of what works best for you in conversation.

Communication partners: Make your own card, and keep it handy.

WELL-MEANING COMMUNICATION CHOICES THAT TEND TO BACKFIRE.

Instead of...	Try to...
Correcting word mix-ups mid-sentence	Follow the meaning, not the exact words
Interrupting to say "you're not making sense"	Ask a clarifying question at a natural pause
Stopping someone mid-story to redirect	Let them finish, then gently steer
Assuming loud or blunt = rude	Assume good intent, always



A note from the chefs (team):

Just keep showing up to the table - it takes time to get it right!

