

Words can hurt; words can help

When I work with children with ASD on social skills, I often ask them: "How long will another person remember what you do or what you say?" A typical answer I get is "about five minutes." These answers are enlightening. Frequently, young people with ASD have the impression that other people just don't remember too many details about what other people say and do. A young man who sometimes neglected to button his shirt insisted that no one ever noticed. "And even if they did see my shirt unbuttoned, they would just forget in a second."

Young people on the autism spectrum may experience difficulty understanding the social consequences of their words and actions. This lack of awareness can affect them in several ways. First, the child with ASD may be less likely to say something encouraging or complimentary to another person. Second, the child may, failing to discern the harmful effects of hurtful words, may blurt out "unfiltered" statements with harsh, judgmental or violent content. The combination of these distorted beliefs lowers their motivation to make good impressions and their conviction that altering their own words and behavior really makes any difference anyhow.

When we try to help children with autism increase their ability to use kind words and refrain from hurtful ones, it seems very helpful to use clear visuals and to equate the other person's emotional pain and pleasure to physical pain and pleasure. My clients seem to "get" the physical pain and pleasure of others much better than emotional pain and pleasure.

I developed these illustrated social stories to help my clients to realize that their words have the power to hurt and to help, and that their words and actions matter.

Joel Shaul, LCSW

Joel Shaul provides workshops nationwide on the topic of social skills teaching for children on the autism spectrum. Learn more: <http://bit.ly/zGDQCi>

Words can really hurt someone.
It's in their mind, but it feels almost like other kinds of pain.

1 When you say mean things like: (circle)

2 ...it can make another person's mind feel almost like: (circle)

a toe getting stomped on...

tasting or smelling something awful...

hearing a fire alarm from just three feet away...

A gust of shivering, cold wind

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Words can make other people feel great.

1 When you say kind things like... (write down kind things you have said):

2 ...it can make another person's mind feel almost like: (circle)

they are getting a present...

they are hearing their favorite music...

they are smelling something good...

they are being petted like a soft kitten...

they are tasting their favorite food...

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