

CareCertify LLC

CareCertify Caregiver Training · Autism Spectrum Caregiving

AUT-04

Communication & Connection

Participant Guide

Professional Caregivers & Direct Support Professionals · A Caregiver's Guide to Autism

Updated July 2026 — peer-reviewed & self-advocate sources

Every autistic person communicates. Your job is to understand how — and to build genuine trust along the way.

Learning Objectives — by the end of this module you will be able to:

- Treat communication as two-way and presume competence
- Give processing time and speak clearly
- Use visual supports effectively
- Support augmentative and alternative communication (AAC)
- Connect through the person's interests
- Build trust and respect communication boundaries

Section 1: Communication is two-way

Understanding and expressing — support both.

- **Receptive.** How the person takes in and understands communication — which may be far more than their speech suggests.
- **Expressive.** How the person shares thoughts and needs — through speech, AAC, writing, gesture, or behavior.
- **Presume competence.** Always assume the person understands and has something to say, and speak to them accordingly — never over their head.
- **Everyone communicates.** There is no such thing as a person who doesn't communicate — only communication we haven't learned to read yet.

Section 2: Give processing time

One of the simplest, most powerful skills.

- **Allow silence.** After you speak or ask, wait — many autistic people need extra time to process and respond.
- **Don't rush or repeat.** Resist filling the silence or rephrasing immediately; repeating restarts the processing clock.
- **Count to ten.** Silently count several seconds before adding anything — that patience often gets you a response.

Section 3: Speak so you're understood

Clear, concrete, literal — and kind.

- **Be concrete.** Say exactly what you mean; avoid idioms, sarcasm, hints, and vague words like 'later' or 'in a bit.'
- **Keep it short.** Use short sentences and one instruction at a time; too many words at once can overwhelm.
- **Say what to do.** Tell the person what TO do ('walking feet') rather than only what not to do ('stop running').

Match your pace and volume to the person; slow, calm, and clear beats fast and loud every time.

Section 4: Visual supports

Seeing it often works better than hearing it.

- **Pictures & symbols.** Picture cards or symbols can show choices, steps, or feelings when words are hard.
- **Visual schedules.** A visual schedule shows what's happening now and next, reducing anxiety about the unknown.
- **Written words.** For readers, a short written note or list can be clearer and calmer than spoken instructions.
- **Gestures & modeling.** Point, show, or demonstrate — pairing words with visuals helps understanding.

Section 5: Meet people where they communicate

Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) is real communication.

- **Many forms.** AAC includes picture boards, speech-generating devices or apps, sign language, and typing or writing.
- **Honor it fully.** Whatever a person uses is their voice — respond to it as you would spoken words.
- **Never take it away.** Never remove or withhold a person's AAC device; it's like taking away someone's ability to speak.
- **Model it.** Use the person's AAC yourself sometimes — 'modeling' helps them learn and shows you value it.

Section 6: Connect through their interests

Shared interest is a doorway to trust.

- **Follow their lead.** Show genuine interest in what they love — trains, animals, a game, a show — and let them teach you.
- **Info-dumping is connection.** When someone shares deeply about a favorite topic, that's them connecting with you — welcome it.
- **Side by side.** Connection doesn't require face-to-face talk; doing an activity side by side builds real rapport.
- **Join their world.** Meeting the person in what matters to them beats pulling them into small talk that drains them.

Section 7: Building trust

Six habits that make you a safe person.

- **Be predictable.** Do what you say, keep routines, and give warnings before changes — predictability builds safety.
- **Respect space & touch.** Ask before touching or helping; respect personal space and the person's comfort.
- **Be patient.** Let interactions unfold at the person's pace, without pressure or hurry.
- **Be genuine.** Autistic people often value sincerity highly; be honest, warm, and real.
- **Offer choices.** Choices give control and dignity — 'red shirt or blue shirt?' beats 'get dressed now.'
- **Don't force eye contact.** Never demand eye contact; it can be painful and can make listening harder, not easier.

Section 8: Reduce communication pressure

Demands and pressure shut communication down.

- **Fewer demands.** A stream of questions and commands can overwhelm; space them out and keep them essential.
- **Offer choices.** Choices invite communication and give control, which lowers anxiety.
- **Comment, don't quiz.** Notice things aloud ('the dog is sleeping') instead of constant questions ('what's the dog doing?').

When someone feels safe and unpressured, they communicate far more freely.

Section 9: A connecting interaction, step by step

A simple, repeatable approach.

- Get on their level and gain attention gently, without forcing eye contact
- Use a clear, short message paired with a visual or gesture
- Wait — give real processing time
- Watch for any response — words, AAC, gesture, or behavior
- Respond to their communication and honor it
- Follow their interest to keep the connection going

Connection first, task second — a trusting relationship makes everything else easier.

Section 10: Respecting communication boundaries

Respect makes you a trusted presence.

- **Personal space.** Give space; don't loom, block, or crowd, especially when the person is upset.
- **Touch with consent.** Ask and signal before touching or physically guiding; unexpected touch can be alarming.
- **Sensory comfort.** Notice sensory needs during interaction — a quieter voice, less clutter, softer light.
- **Allow downtime.** Respect the need for quiet and alone time; not every moment needs conversation.

Section 11: Common communication mistakes

Easy to make — easy to fix.

- **Talking over them.** Discussing the person as if they aren't there, or speaking only to family, is disrespectful — include them.
- **Forcing eye contact.** 'Look at me' can increase distress and reduce understanding; drop it.
- **Rushing responses.** Answering for the person or moving on too fast denies them their voice.
- **Removing AAC.** Taking away a device — even as a 'consequence' — silences the person; never do it.

Apply It — Scenarios

Supporting AAC

A client uses a tablet with a communication app to talk. During a busy moment, it would be 'easier' to just guess what he wants.

The right response: → Slow down and give him time to use his device — his device is his voice. → Watch the screen and respond to exactly what he says, not what you assume. → Keep the tablet available and charged at all times; never set it out of reach. → Model a few words on it yourself to support and honor his communication.

A new client, building rapport

You're meeting a new client who loves marine animals but seems wary of you.

The right response: → Don't push conversation; be calm, predictable, and unhurried. → Show genuine interest in marine animals and let him share or teach you. → Try a side-by-side activity rather than face-to-face questions. → Give it time — trust is earned through consistency and respect, not forced.

Key Terms

Term	What it means
Receptive communication	How a person understands what's communicated to them.
Expressive communication	How a person shares thoughts and needs.
Processing time	The extra time many autistic people need to take in and respond.
Visual support	Pictures, schedules, or written words that aid understanding.
AAC	Augmentative and alternative communication — communication beyond speech.
Modeling AAC	Using a person's AAC yourself to teach and validate it.
Declarative language	Commenting or narrating instead of questioning or commanding.
Presume competence	Assuming the person understands and has something to say.

Check Your Understanding

1. Communication is two-way, meaning it involves:

- A. Receptive (understanding) and expressive (sharing)
- B. Only speaking
- C. Only listening
- D. Only writing

Answer: A — Receptive + expressive.

2. Giving 'processing time' means you should:

- A. Repeat immediately
- B. Answer for them
- C. Move on fast
- D. Wait after speaking, without rushing or repeating

Answer: D — Wait; allow processing.

3. A visual schedule helps by:

- A. Hiding the routine
- B. Adding surprises
- C. Replacing the person's choices
- D. Showing what's happening now and next

Answer: D — Visual schedules reduce anxiety.

4. 'Modeling' AAC means:

- A. Hiding the device
- B. Speaking for them
- C. Ignoring the device
- D. Using the person's AAC yourself to teach and validate it

Answer: D — Model AAC to support it.

5. You should demand eye contact:

- A. Never — it can cause distress and reduce understanding
- B. Always
- C. In public
- D. To show respect

Answer: A — Don't force eye contact.

6. Talking about a person as if they aren't there is:

- A. Efficient
- B. Fine if they don't speak
- C. Disrespectful — include them instead
- D. Best practice

Answer: C — Include the person.

7. 'Presume competence' in communication means:

- A. Assume they can't understand
- B. Speak only to family
- C. Lower expectations

D. Assume the person understands and has something to say

Answer: D — Presume competence.

What You Learned

- Communication is two-way — support understanding and expressing, and presume competence
- Give processing time; wait without rushing or repeating
- Speak clearly and concretely, one step at a time, saying what TO do
- Use visual supports, and honor AAC as the person's real voice — never remove it
- Connect through the person's interests, side by side
- Build trust: be predictable, patient, genuine, offer choices, don't force eye contact
- Avoid talking over people, forcing eye contact, rushing, or removing AAC

Next: AUT-05 — sensory processing and creating supportive environments.

Legal & Training Basis

This course is caregiver education about autism spectrum disorder, developed from current, authoritative sources including the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the DSM-5-TR diagnostic framework, and peer-reviewed research. It is general education for caregivers — not medical advice, a diagnosis, or a treatment protocol. Every autistic person is an individual; caregivers should follow each person's own support plan and consult qualified professionals for medical, behavioral, and dietary decisions. Current as of July 2026.

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