

The give-and-take of casual conversation is something most of us take for granted. But for my son David, who was diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder at age three, conversation did not really exist. Although he could name many things in his environment, his language still seemed one-way and only had meaning for him. If I asked him if he wanted a hot dog or a hamburger for lunch, he might answer, “red.” Now what did that mean? Ketchup? But that could go on either food. Maybe he wanted ketchup by itself (more likely), or he might have been referring to something completely unrelated, such as his shirt, or the dog’s shirt on TV, or his favorite train that was not even in the room at the moment.

I took David for music-based listening training at Center for Listening and Learning in Gainesville, FL, just before his fifth birthday in August 2005. I was hoping to remedy some of his one-way conversational style. He had some other autistic issues as well but I thought that if he could communicate better the social understanding and pretend play would follow.

It wasn’t long after we started the on-site program with Diane that I noticed he would respond to me with more than just a “yes” or “no” when I asked him a question. He would finally share something of his day at school besides “fine.” And when I questioned his teachers, they confirmed that, yes, he did paint or build a robot with boxes, just like he claimed. He wasn’t making it up. His pretend play also took off and he would give his imaginary friends dialog that was appropriate to the situation, not just sound bites from one of his videos.

David started interacting with the neighborhood kids more and they responded to him like one of the gang because he said things they could understand and relate to. Before they would just shrug their shoulders and walk away because they didn’t “get” David, and he didn’t seem to catch what they were trying to tell him. It opened up a whole new world for him.

David has made other great strides since starting the listening program. His fine motor skills continue to improve. David writes legibly now holding the pencil in the correct position, and he recently cut out a sun with triangular rays. Also, for the first time he participated in the school Christmas Carole Concert, where the preschoolers sang before an audience of parents. This was always too overwhelming for him before. Field trips have gone well, and traveling as a family has become easier, because David doesn’t ask to go home every five minutes as soon as we arrive at our destination. In general his obsessions and perseverations have diminished immensely.

We’ve done and continue to do many therapies with David, but I truly feel that the Center for Listening and Learning has helped with some of the key areas of deficit, and as such has provided an integral piece of the puzzle that is autism.

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