Finding the Words...

by Marge Blanc, M.A., CCC-SLP

When They are Pictures!

Helping Your Visual Child Become Verbal! Part 1

Welcome to a brand new topic in our continuing series on language acquisition. It is a true "eye opener," and promises to open some doors, if your child is a visual thinker!

This column is the first in a series of three, and it is designed to introduce the idea of language development when your child's "first language" is pictures. It is an exciting topic, and it will become "easier to see" after you try out some exercises we have included here.

After you have finished reading this column, we invite you to look back at an earlier series, Natural Language Acquisition on the Autism Spectrum, which you will find useful as a companion tool. All four parts of the earlier series can be downloaded from the author's website, www.communicationdevelopmentcenter.com. The principles of holistic, gestalt thinking are important here, and you will discover how thinking in "wholes" and thinking in pictures figure together as we help our kids with language development.

So now, let's turn to the kids we all know who "think in pictures." Where do words fit into their development? How? And when?

Our best teacher, as she often is, is Temple Grandin. In her landmark book, *Thinking in Pictures*, Temple described her cognitive style to us. "I think in pictures," she wrote. "Words are like a second language to me. I translate both spoken and written words into full-color movies, complete with sound, which run like a VCR tape in my head. When somebody speaks to me, his words are instantly translated into pictures."

Temple's ability to visualize has given her extraordinary skills in her work with livestock. She has been able to create systems for moving cattle in humane ways, because she can first visualize how they would work *from the cow's perspective*! As she says, "I create new images all the time by taking many little parts of images I have in the video library in my imagination and piecing them together. I have video memories of every item I've ever worked with - steel gates, fences, latches, concrete walls, and so

forth. To create new designs, I retrieve bits and pieces from my memory and combine them into a new whole. My design ability keeps improving as I add more visual images to my library." (1995)

While most of us see Temple's abilities as exceptional, she feels her giftedness is not unique. She writes, "One of the most profound mysteries of autism has been the remarkable ability of most autistic people to excel at visual spatial skills while performing so poorly at verbal skills…Interviews with autistic adults…indicate that most of them also think in visual images." (1995)

Jeffrey Freed also considers autism to be the extreme of right-brained, visual thinking. With co-author, Laurie Parsons, Freed wrote in *Right-Brained Children in a Left-Brained World*, "Autism is…the most pronounced form of hypersensitivity and right-brainedness… The further right an individual falls on the continuum…the more apt (the person is) to store information primarily in pictures." (1997)

It is important to acknowledge here, however, that not all individuals with *spectrum* diagnoses are visual thinkers. People with Asperger's labels have a spectrum diagnosis, of course, but are really on the other end of the continuum (both the autism continuum *and* the left-brained/right-brained continuum). As we know, Asperger's kids develop language at the expected age, and are auditory-verbal thinkers. And as we also know, Asperger's kids are often so left-brained and language-oriented that they tend to talk "all the time," avoiding visual-spatial tasks, and exhibiting what we now call "nonverbal learning disabilities."

But, it is the kids who are visual thinkers whom we are addressing in this column. These are the kids whose cognitive style is visual-spatial, often appearing deaf or unable to process auditory information in their younger years, and characteristically late in developing language.

And what kind of a thinker are you, dear reader?

Temple has a test of visual thinking that we would like you to try when you finish reading this paragraph.

The test is to close your eyes and picture a steeple...yes, a steeple…like a church steeple. Don't open your eyes until you have done this to the best of your ability. That's the test… Now, please close you eyes and try it.

OK? Done? Now, read on… Temple then asks who of us saw a single, indistinct steeple…kind of a fuzzy, icon of a steeple…not a particular one, but a "generic" visual representation of a steeple… Was this you? It was certainly this author!

When presenting the "steeple test" to audiences, Temple then asks who saw something more precise…a particular steeple from one's past, one's memory. Was it the first steeple you ever saw as a child? And, did any of you see more than one steeple…maybe some different, specific steeples? If so, did their memory come to you in a series? And, if you had taken the time, would you have seen even more? Temple's ability to visualize is more like that.

For someone like me, an auditory thinker, Temple's description of concept-formation for a visual thinker is priceless. She describes the cumulative process she uses. "Basic principles and concepts in my memory are formed from specific examples that are stored as pictures in my imagination. For example, when somebody says the word boat, the first memories that are triggered are of specific boats I went on as a child, such as the ferryboat that took the family to our summer house. It was not a general boat that took the family to our summer house. There is no general *boat* concept in my memory. My concept of what a boat is comes from images of specific boats I have seen. All my thinking starts with specific examples that are used to form basic principles." (1997)

> **"I think in pictures.**
> **Words are like a second language to me."**
> Temple Grandin, Thinking in Pictures

Finally, Temple notes that this gift presents challenges, too, as visualizations accumulate throughout one's life. Temple cites "dealing with the barrage of details from the environment" as one of the "biggest challenges" of autism. As Temple says, "The details never go away…If I think of the word "bowl," I instantly see many different bowls in my imagination, such as a ceramic bowl on my desk, a soup bowl at a restaurant I ate at last Sunday, my aunt's salad bowl with her cat sleeping in it, and the Super Bowl football game." (2005)

And how about the children in the author's clinical experience? The more ASD children we have gotten to know, the more prevalent gifted visual thinking appears to be! Most of our kids over the last ten years have been excellent visual thinkers, many of them extremely gifted. Here is a typical story, as told by Kathy, a parent of one of our children.

Kathy told us that her son "always had the ability to revisualize...always to play back everything in his head, and to store, and to memorize everything...I feel that when he is pulling videos out of his head that he's actually placing himself in the video, that these people are actually around him, that it's colored, like he could reach out and touch and move through the movies as he's seeing them."

While this does sound like a description of giftedness, please remember that it is also the other side of a "learning disability," or a "language learning disability." The flip side is what we heard Kathy say when she called us about speech and language therapy: her child's lack of useful language, his unintelligible speech that didn't seem to communicate anything, and her son's apparent "deafness" in real life.

All of us probably fall somewhere on Freed's line graph of learners…from the extremely left-brained of us to the extremely right-brained of us…with most of us somewhere in between. As a left-brained SLP, I can find myself on that line, and can speculate about my spatially-oriented OT and PT friends. Stereotyping aside, however, we find ourselves in good company no matter with whom we share the "steeple test". We find co-workers who can close their eye and describe what we are wearing to a T. We find others who close their eyes and see nothing but color…or blackness.

We find some pretty well-balanced thinkers out there, too, like an SLP colleague of ours who describes himself, first, as a visual thinker, and second, as a verbal one. This man once told me that, when he was a child, he processed language very slowly, because, like Temple, he had to painstakingly translate whatever people said into pictures. He then did his "real" thinking in pictures, and had to re-translate back into words, so he could take his turn in conversation. Now that he is an adult, his processing time is quite rapid with casual conversation, but he recently said he is still uncomfortable with more detail-laden exchanges. And, as a child, this man's processing rate was so time-consumptive, that, by the time he had done the translation, thinking, and re-translation, the teacher had given up and called on someone else!

Educators have learned a lot over the years about the various styles of thinking among us. But, until Temple described her own thinking so vividly, we hadn't put that extreme of visual thinking on our list of the possible!

I think we are just beginning to understand where language fits in for the visual thinker.

In *Animals in Translation*, Temple describes the role of language for a visual thinker like herself. She thinks of language as a filter, and she writes that language suppresses visual memories, without permanently erasing them. As Temple points out, thinking occurs without language, and some thinking is actually hampered by language. This is a good lesson for those of us who sometimes think that language is everything and *the* most important goal for our kids!

In our clinic, language flourishes…and we are happy about that. Our job is to support our ASD kids' speech and language growth. But, Temple's comments help us balance our bias about language, and help us remember to support our kids' natural gifts, so they will not be de-valued, or lost, in the process!

OK, so we have established that we will help our kids develop language…but, a good question is, "When?" Another excellent question is, "Which words?" And, finally, of course, is the complicated question, "How?" While we will explore these questions at length in parts 2 and 3 of this series, let's start here by looking at the structure we use in our clinic.

The following supports are presented in a logical order, each setting the stage for the next. If you will give them a good try, I think you will find that they can prepare you and your child for real language development!

Supports for Language Development in Visual Thinkers

(1) Honor your child's visual thinking style. After all, we are the adults, and it is incumbent on us to do the best job we can to "get into" the minds of our children! Unless your

Try to see the world anew, from your children's eyes!

child is on the Asperger's side of the continuum, there is a huge likelihood that your child, regardless of how young, is visualizing in his mind…perhaps very well. It will make us all feel less anxious about our kids' lack of eye contact when we realize that they are probably seeing enough in their "mind's eye" to take up most of their young brain power! With time, of course, they will learn to take in the "rest of the world," too…but, this will take some maturity!

(2) Try to get into your child's mind well enough to share that visual world. We can't be perfect at it, of course, but we all know the tenant about autism: that until we can share in "their world," we cannot ask them to "share in ours." We realize now that "their world" is probably filled with amazing visual complexity and color, and, even if ours is not, we share many of the same memories as our children, albeit in a different form. Try to remember these shared memories like a visual thinker: the videos, the books, the holiday decorations, the car rides you shared with your child. With some trying, you can! You may not be as good at doing this as your child, or perhaps not able to "see" it at all, but you can still remember in your own way what the opening of the Disney video is like, what the view of the stars on the bedroom ceiling is like, and what the scene from the car seat is…

Try to see the world anew, from your children's eyes! Notice what your child appears to notice. Take special note when a visual experience causes your child to laugh, cry, startle, or just sit up and notice. *Remember that we really do need to learn from our children (to see what they are seeing) before we can begin to ask them to learn (the words) from us.*

(3) Think about what your child is experiencing as he sees things, and as he visualizes. It may be more than just the visual scene. How does the experience smell? How does it feel…to your child? And how does it sound? If your child is young, he may block the sound out entirely, or scream if you turn the sound on, or talk at the same time. This may be why your child appears deaf. Young ASD kids can often only deal with one modality, or input "channel," at a time. If your child is older, however, there may be a "sound track" to what he sees.

But even if your child isn't ready for sound yet, let's prepare you for the time when your child can deal with it. Please try another exercise: As you are reading this paragraph, can you still see the room surrounding this page? Do you hear the radio? People talking? What is the "sound track" of the film strip of your life at this moment? If you start to pay attention to your own experiences, you will be better prepared when observing (and planning) your child's experiences.

(4) Think about your child's memory of an experience. You can help prepare yourself for thinking about your child's memories by thinking about your own. What does an "episode" of your own life look, feel, and sound like when you "replay" it in your mind? Is it a feeling? A conversation? If it's visual, does it have a sound track?

If your child is a right-brained, visual thinker, he may also be a "gestalt" thinker, so life doesn't come in tidy little moments of "freeze frame." Rather, it comes in long episodes of complexity, or encyclopedic series of events, depending on how long your child has been storing memories. And these episodes and encyclopedia entries aren't easy to encapsulate in single words or even short phrases! We invite you to look back at the Natural Language Acquisition series for a more complete explanation of gestalt thinking.

The visual, gestalt-thinking child does not fit the image of toddlers learning their first word. That child hears us say a word, and just because we said it, learns it because it seems like we think it's important! "Ball," we extort, and our left-brained toddler chortles, "Ball!" to everyone's glee. But for your little right-brained child, it works the opposite way! Your child already has the experience…and it's way more complex than "ball." You need to discover what that experience was and what it looked like and felt like to your child.

(5) Plan some experiences that will be pleasurable to recall later. Since visualizing is just part of your child's experience, you can plan experiences that encompass other sensations and feelings, too, making sure they are positive. Would your child like to look at the new book while he's cuddled up with you? Or while he's swinging? Or under a pile of blankets? What would make your child laugh or smile? How can you plan for a visual experience your child will really enjoy with multiple senses, and want to recall with you later? Commonly-experienced, happy recollections have great potential for "joint referencing" as you and your child build a repertoire and shared history you will eventually be able to talk about together.

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Try out your ideas, sharing them with your child. Remember to think like your child every step of the way. You will need to do this before you decide what the "sound track" ought to be. Write down your results. Keep a log, to prepare you for the next step.

(6) Plan some more experiences, this time adding an "audio track" your child will like. Make sure the sound is something your child finds pleasurable, and, if your child has auditory sensitivities, make sure it is something soothing. Music, giggling, sound effects, and non-vocal sounds like tapping are better than words at this experimental stage. Remember that auditory information comes in all kinds of packages, and that words are not the only sounds that add meaning to experiences.

Yes, words are in your child's future…I promise. But, for now, we have to put our visual child's needs first…and that is to begin where he is…to honor his style, and to share in it!

In our next column, we will help you decide when the time is right for words. But, for now, you have lots of thinking to do…lots of *visual thinking,* and lots of fun to be having too, with your visual child!

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Marge Blanc, M.A., CCC-SLP founded the Communication Development Center, in Madison, Wisconsin 10 years ago. Specializing in physically-supported speech and language services for children with ASD diagnoses, the Center has successfully helped scores of children as they moved through the stages of language acquisition. Contact Marge and her associates: Communication Development Center, 700 Rayovac Drive, Suite 200, Madison, WI 53711, **lyonblanc@aol.com**, (608) 278-9161.

Finding the Words...

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When They are Pictures!

Helping Your Visual Child Become Verbal! Part 2

"Today is a green day," Sam announced, and then added, "Today is a blue-green day." Yes, I had to agree…blue for light-hearted, and green for deep-experiencing. Our afternoon of a shared movie, laughter, and popcorn had all those blue-green qualities. Several years ago, when Sam first taught me the fine art of "thinking in color", he routinely regaled me with lists of color associations. "Black is like Bob", "Brown is like…," etc. In fact, he had given me the primer, Dr. Seuss' *My Many Colored Days* many years ago.

I have had many other visually-gifted teachers along the way in addition to Sam. In fact, during the last ten years, many children with ASD diagnoses have oriented me to the entire spectrum of thinking in pictures…and in selecting just the right words to match their vivid experiences.

In this, our second column devoted to language acquisition among visual thinkers, we offer the composite experience of scores of children like Sam, whose "first language" was pictures. And we will continue to explore how and when words can best be introduced as their "second language."

First, however, please look back at our previous column and review what you learned as you did the exercises designed to prepare you for "thinking in pictures" yourself. If you do not have access to that column, you may download it from the author's website, **www.communicationdevelopmentcenter.com**.

If you have already done your homework, however, this quick review will remind you of what you have learned so far. You now know what kind of thinker you are – visual, auditory, or probably, your own unique blend. You have paid attention to your form of input during particular "episodes" of life, and can describe it. And, you have done plenty of observing of your child by now, and you have noticed what your child notices on many occasions. You have spent some time noticing your own reactions to those same sights and experiences, as well, so you can make some comparisons. You might now be able to guess how much like, or unlike, your child you are in how you think and process the world around you.

We hope that you have been able to plan some surprises for your child, as well…and that those planned events brought a smile to your child's face. Did the unexpected "peek-a-boo," for example, elicit a happy

shriek? Did a colorful book, like *Rainbow Fish*, make your child reach to turn the page? Did some sparkling bubbles encourage him to giggle in delight? We hope so!

So, now, let's continue our journey towards verbalization with a little side trip: starting your child's own Language Acquisition Journal. You'll be glad to know that Chapter 1, **Observations of your child's delights**, is ready to write, as you transfer all those notes you have already made! Please save some room at the end because this chapter will get longer and longer the more you and your child get in sync with each other. As your observational skills get better, your child will begin to learn that you are noticing what he notices, and your shared joy will take on a life of its own!

Which brings us to Chapter 2, **Referents you share with your child**. You are ready to begin this chapter now, with your first successes in planned joyful surprises.

A little theory is in order here… A "referent" is what you are "referring to" when you use your eyes, gestures, sounds or words to express your shared experience. If your verbalization matches your child's delight over a stream of bubbles in the air (the "referent"), it might be something like, "Oooooh!!" or "Wow! Bubbles!" said with exaggerated intonation. It might be a whispered, "Oooo, that's pretty!" or "Piiiiiink!" depending on your child's sensitivities to sound. Or, it could be something more whole-sentence or "gestalt": "Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, presenting…rainbows." Each person is unique, and for your visual child, selecting the right sounds or words that communicate to him a shared experience means matching them to the "true experience" of your child.

Over time, you will know if that referent is the bubbles, or the colorful swirl in the bubbles, or their motion. It might be the sparkles of the Rainbow Fish, or something no one but you could guess. The true experience is whatever lights up the eyes of your child. Finding the right "sound track" for that experience will be your task when we get to Chapter 3! But right now, you are logging in some shared, or "joint" references. Language development literature uniformly points out that communication happens around these points of common focus, and that our language reflects what we "refer" to when we use words to share with others. When our children are concerned, parents are absolutely the best qualified to know which experiences are the best potential referents. Your work over the next several months will prepare you, and your Speech-Language Pathologist, to recognize these referents and, when the time is right, to choose the best words to match the referents you and your child share.

Up until now, we have been focusing on life experiences we see in our child's day, and plan for our child. But, of course, there are many, many other "experiences" throughout the day that occur only on the two-dimensional screen of our TV's! Not only are they in vivid color, with catchy animation we could never compete with, but they seem to hold our kids' attention better than anything we could ever plan for them!

What do we do with videos and DVD's? Turn them off, like we have sometimes been told? Well, maybe…but for many of our kids, they are their most favorite experiences. Can we live with them, and even help our kids gain valuable lessons from them? Yes, with some caveats… When our children are young, and have not yet developed the physical control to move well in space, their attention is well-suited for letting the world "go by" through moving pictures. As long as we select the movies for content, developmental level, and language, they can be very useful for early joint referencing…if we watch them with our children. And that's the trick! Movies do captivate our visual thinkers, and they do have sound tracks that our kids will hear when they are developmentally-ready. If we watch movies with our kids, and notice what our kids like, rewind, and, maybe even recite later, we will have more joint references to add to our Chapter 2!

"Parents are absolutely the best qualified to know which experiences are the best potential referents."

Here's an important point to keep in mind: movie sound tracks sound only like a series of giant sound bytes to our kids, rather than individual words. To young ears, sentences like "And now…our feature presentation!" sound like a blur of auditory goodness, to be repeated by our children, if at all, in a slur of intonation. Unless we really listen to the way the sound track **sounds**, and remember that, rather than the words themselves, we will miss our kids using it later when their own "feature presentation" occurs (in the form of an arrival at a favorite destination, for example). The enthusiastic blur of sound might be part of your family's

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"feature presentation" for years to come, but it is up to us to recognize the "sound track!"

Most of our kids' daily lives include movies. As long as they are part of a daily "diet" that also includes plenty of playful interaction, exploration, and physical activity, they are useful in creating a bridge to language development. We do need to "be there" with our kids, however, for this to work. But, let's assume we are…and we notice a part of a movie our child loves. As far as we can tell, it is the visual morphing of image to image that is fascinating to him. What is the sound track of that segment? If it is something we'd never guess, words like, "Better luck next time" or "Hey, guys! Let's get outta here!" followed by some dramatic music, and your child is happy hearing it, log it in Chapter 3, along with the particular segment of the movie. You might get the chance to tell someone else about this magic sequence of light and color, with exactly those words, spoken just like they sounded in the movie…and you might be rewarded with profound eye contact, as thanks, from your child! That's how it works! And as your child's auditory sophistication grows, so will the possibility for more precise content to be conveyed this way!

But, "Better luck next time" may not be the language you would have planned for your child's first language experience? It's not what I would have planned either! What to do? Look at some of the "joint reference" activities you've listed in Chapter 2. Can you add a sound track? If so, how will it sound? If your child likes sound with his movies, it's a clue – and your cue - that your own "sound track" might be well-received. If you

"This is NOT the time to teach your child that language learning can be drudgery. Hopefully, it will NEVER be the time for that!"

are a singer, or have a melodic voice, so much the better. Take a tip from preschool teachers, and use a sing-song voice with a nice lilt to it. You're sparking his early interest in words, through your sound track. You can say, "Peek-a-boo!" or "I'm gonna getcha!" or "Tickle, tickle!" to the delight of most of our kids. And, coincidentally, these are the words we hope our kids learn to say!

You've begun Chapter 3!

Now, let's examine the right language for your child's experience, when it is more visual. For purposes of illustration, let's presume that bubble-popping is your child's love. What would the sound track of a bubble experience sound like, if it were designed with your child's perspective in mind? It might be a song: "One little, two little, three little bubbles…ten little bubbles go pop pop pop." Or it might be, "Pop pop pop pop pop pop pop pop pop," sung up and down a scale. Or it might be, "Pink and blue and yellow and green," sung repetitively… Experiment and discover what is fun for your child.

The only real rule here is to make your language fun and melodic, like a whole wave of sound. You want your visual child to find joy in sound, and to learn that sound can make his visual experience richer, or, at least not take away from it! This is not the time for "teaching" words, or inadvertently, turning language-learning into "work." And, it is definitely not the time to withhold something delightful, like bubble-blowing, until your child signs "More", or hands you the appropriate PECS card. This is NOT the time to teach your child that language learning can be drudgery. Hopefully, it will NEVER be the time for that!

As we close this segment of our series, let's momentarily look ahead to Chapter 4 in your child's Language Acquisition Journal, which will be about the specific language you choose for him to experience, when he is ready for it.

You have already learned the qualities of your Chapter 3 sound-bytes that spark attention and delight in your child.

Your child's Language Acquisition Journal:

Chapter 1 – Observations of your child's delights

Chapter 2 – Referents you share with your child

Chapter 3 – Sound tracks of shared referents

Chapter 4 – The language of joint referents

When you move into Chapter 4, we will teach you how to select the specific language of the sound bytes of your child's future. For now, however, remember your focus: you are just providing sound in an interesting, appealing way, so that your visual child is beginning to bridge to the world of sound…which, eventually, will become the world of language!

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When They are Pictures!

Helping Your Visual Child Become Verbal! Part 3

At first, I was stumped. "When no one was looking," Russel told me, "someone dropped a piece of orange."

I was used to these colorful, out-of-the-blue comments, but I still had to read between the lines to figure this one out. I was almost certain Russel was making a joke, and he only joked about things he was pretty sure I could figure out. Yup, there it was: the orange fabric that we could see peeking out from under the blue and the green of the swings in our clinic!

My first clue to understanding the comment was that 8-year-old Russel is always making jokes. Defying any stereotype suggesting that ASD kids are "literal," Russel challenged my propensity to be literal all the time. Years ago, Russel had taught me to give myself time before rushing to the conclusion that he was saying something "off topic." I had to stop and actually *look* at what he was noticing before I understood his reference. But, there it was!

Russel and I were a good team: a left-brained SLP trying to think in pictures and a visual kid trying to use verbal language in socially-entertaining ways! We were both becoming better whole-brained thinkers!

And that's where this column fits in. The third in a series on language development in kids whose "first language" is pictures, this column will help you learn when, and how, to introduce language to your visual child. Russel could have been a "poster child" for how to do this, as his unconventional "view" of the world has colored his language from the time of his first words. But before we tell you how it worked for Russel, we want to focus on *your* child again, and pick up *his* story from where we left off last time.

In our last column, we were talking about how, and when, to introduce sound to your visual child. You learned that you should add a "sound track" to your child's experiences only when it enhances, or at least doesn't detract from, the pleasure of the joyful activities you and your child share.

You also learned that sound accompanies our experiences in life more than we realize, and that much of it isn't "language" at all. We asked you to stop and listen to the sound around you as you read. Noticing the sound tracks of our life episodes can help us all be more sensitive to how sound enhances or detracts from the experiences our children enjoy.

Now let's assume the following: you have had some success in noticing the built-in sound tracks your child finds enjoyable (like the tone, songs and sound effects of a favorite movie segment), and you have had some success introducing some pleasurable sound to a favorite activity (like saying "Whee!" as he happily slides down his favorite slide, or humming a song while he splashes in bubble bath bliss). You have jotted these specifics down in your child's Language Acquisition Journal.

Your Child's Language Acquisition Journal:

Chapter 1 – Observations of your child's delights

Chapter 2 – Referents you share with your child

Chapter 3 – Sound tracks of shared referents

Chapter 4 – The language of joint referents

If you have a nice Chapter 3 going now, and your child is at least 12 months old (most kids are probably much older), you are quite possibly ready for Chapter 4. Before we jump into it, however, and even though you have many ideas you've gleaned from your entries in Chapter 3, we need to add one caveat: If any language, or if any sound you try out does not meet the "joy test," reject it immediately, and find something else. Language can be fun, powerful, and enhancing to life experiences for visual thinkers. If your child learns this, and continues to build on success, language development will happen! If your child inadvertently experiences language as drudgery, or worse, painful, you will have two tasks ahead of you: helping him unlearn the pain, and then learning the pleasure. Far better to learn pleasure right from the start!

OK, what will the language you are going to use look and sound like? Rule #1: Make it fun! You know enough about your child's auditory system by now to have some good ideas. "Whee!" counts as language. So does "La la la," as does "Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, presenting...bubbles!" What do these phrases have in common? **They are right for somebody's child**... Introduce the language that's right for your child. Please don't forget to keep all the intonation, lightness, and music from Chapter 3...but, this time, it's language! Yes, it sounds the same; yes, it's the same "words." But, now it has communicative intent; it's not just a sound track, so you are writing down *words* this time, with the idea that it's the start of *language development*.

This is Rule #2: Language is whatever a group (that's you and your child at this point) agrees to use to refer to something you share. That's all language is! Yes, it's true that the group will get larger someday...but not today. Just decide the words for today.

As you are selecting items from your child's Chapter 3, to become his first Chapter 4 language experiences, another rule will guide you. Rule #3 says: Your child's early language will match his own unique style...and you already know a lot about it! You chose all of these sound bytes in Chapter 3 for a reason. And it was probably that your child enjoyed all of them. They made your child smile and laugh. They were the ones that worked. They represent the language of your group.

Now, your job is to discover what about these sound bytes made them work. Here are some questions to ask yourself: Were they all songs (like the ABC song) and sing-songy phrases (like, "I'm gonna getcha")? Were any of them short or delivered with an element of surprise (like, "Boo!")? And how about your tone of voice? Did you say them all with a lilting, "motherese" inflection ("Tickle, tickle, tickle")? Or did some of them sound more like another style we use with kids, reading a story ("This little piggy went to market...")? Did they all sound a bit like 'baby-talk' ("In your tummy wummy")? Or did some of them sound the way you would talk to an older child ("Yeah, it's really good")?

As you consider the commonalities of what you said, think about the "key styles" that worked. And, now, for the first time, think of them as *language*, as the key *phrases* you and your child share!

What you learn now will help guide choices you make in your child's language experiences over the next several years. Yes, there will be some commonalities with other children, but much of what your child will want to say will be words that speak to *his* experiences, *his* referents, the way *he* sees the world, and the things *he* shares with the important people in his life, people like *you*!

As you discover the language your child chooses to hear, you will think of more and more examples of it. Chapter 4 will take on the flavor of a journal written just for one, your

Con't. on pg. 13

If any language, or if any sound you try out does not meet the "joy test," reject it immediately, and try something else!

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child! Take notes daily, so you can teach others to use the language your child truly enjoys and associates with important experiences in his life. Then you will have expanded your efforts many-fold.

And, it is just the beginning!

But, now, dear reader, this column comes to a close. It is time for you to take stock of this amazingly important time in your child's life...he is ready to learn language! You will continue to have fun as you and your child write his Chapter 4, and by the time we return to this topic in the next issue, you will be ready to tackle some principles that will help your child expand his language to the words that others in his environment use. My friend Russel did this over time, and your child will too. In our next column, we will tell you Russel's language development story, and you will see how the principles you are learning now will lead to your child's useful, flexible language development.

In the meantime, please have fun with Chapter 4, and know that the work you are doing now will have far-reaching benefits as your visual child become a verbal language user!

Your child's early language will match his own unique style...and you already know a lot about it!

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Marge Blanc, M.A., CCC-SLP founded the Communication Development Center, in Madison, Wisconsin 10 years ago. Specializing in physically-supported speech and language services for children with ASD diagnoses, the Center has successfully helped scores of children as they moved through the stages of language acquisition. Contact Marge and her associates: Communication Development Center, 700 Rayovac Drive, Suite 200, Madison, WI 53711, **lyonblanc@aol.com**, (608) 278-9161.

Finding the Words...

by Marge Blanc, M.A., CCC-SLP

When They are Pictures!

Helping Your Visual Child Become Verbal! Part 4

This will be our last column on language acquisition, as it specifically relates to our visual children. This series concludes here with the story of Russel, my eight-year-old friend who you met in last month's column. I have known Russel since he was three, and his story nicely illustrates the principles we have been exploring.

Russel is a gifted visual learner, which is no surprise, since he carries an ASD diagnosis. But Russel is also a good auditory learner. He has always loved rhythm and cadence, having grown up in a house filled with mandolin and folk music. Russel has always been a purist, though, and never wanted anyone to sing words to songs. But over the years, Russel developed his own type of wordless song, a Stomp-style "scat," using his throat, tongue, and nostrils, alternately inhaling and exhaling. By the time he was seven years old, he could deliver his version for 15 minutes at a time, while counting from 1 to 150! This original song with words was especially exciting, because the inclusion of words told us that Russel was tolerating (very predictable) language in his music!

Yes, I guess the numbers 1-150 do qualify as "language," but it was another year before Russel was using real sentences in his music. But he is there now, and quite the creative musician!

But what about language to communicate? When we first met, Russel was almost three, and was well into what we are calling the "Chapter 3" of language acquisition [see sidebar], where the sound track of his daily life was quiet speech, delivered in a cadence and gentleness that matched his auditory temperament. Russel not only "tolerated" sound at this level, but really liked it. The sound track of his life consisted of the predictable rhythm of "poetry," into which almost any words could be placed. None of this implies that Russel was communicating with words, but he was clearly on the right track!

The Story of a Child's Language Acquisition:

Chapter 1 – Things that delight
Chapter 2 – Delightful referents shared with others
Chapter 3 – Sound tracks of these delightful referents
Chapter 4 – Language of these delightful referents

We hadn't coined the term "Language Acquisition Journal" at the time Russel was three, but if we had, these would have been some of the entries:

> Chapter 1 – Russel's delights: *Visual movement: automatic doors, cars going down the street; things that "fit," like shape cubes, boxes with exquisitely well-matched lids; sticky-sweet desserts; his father's music, at a distance*

> Chapter 2 – Referents Russel shared with his family: *looking at the night sky; watching trees swaying in the breeze; going through the "magic" doors at a local drug store; sharing books turned page-by-page; playing with letters of the alphabet; hearing favorite poems; sharing sticky-sweet desserts*

Except for the sticky-sweet desserts, the letters of the alphabet were Russel's favorite things during his fourth year of life. That other people also liked them ignited Russel's sense of fun, and his visual pastime became his passion. He loved putting the letters into alphabetic order, and, delighted in seeing key words in his visual environment. The lighted "Exit" signs were his favorite, especially if they pointed the way to "magic doors"!

Russel was quite OK with us saying the names of the letters, slowly and gently, as he put them in order. We were careful to say each name softly, with gently-rising inflection, just *after* the letter was set in place, so the visual experience was not altered. It was tempting to go faster, or "teach" him in *our way,* but, we knew from many years of experience with scores of visual children that it would not be *his way* if we did. We were determined to honor Russel's *real experience,* and introduce the letter names in such a way that the sound track of Chapter 3 would gradually become a language experience of Chapter 4.

Once he trusted that people would not break the "rhythm," Russel began to love this. He didn't like the ABC song, however, but we knew that would be the case. And, he didn't like rapid, or non-melodic, speech. *Russel's pleasure was maintained only if the timing was predictable.* If any letters were missing, for instance, he didn't want to hear discussion of it. His "key phrases" were all he wanted to hear...

Inevitably, just as it had begun, Chapter 3 finally came to a close after six months. It was many months later when other word orders, like spelling words he liked, became fun. "Boston," "turkey," and "emergency" entered Russel's realm of the visually-intriguing. The alphabet still ruled, but real words played a strong second fiddle.

Russel was nearing four years old, and I had a feeling that sentences were in our immediate future. I also had a feeling about which grammatical constructions we would introduce first. They would refer to the *now,* to existence...and I predicted that sentences like, "It's an A," and "I got a B" and "We found a C" might be nice, grammatically-simple language to use when Russel had had his fill of words in isolation, and the entire *alphabet*, to boot. The alphabet was a sacred *entity*, it seemed, with Russel dutifully isolating all its parts (letters), and then building up many combinations (partial alphabets/words), before he was really interested in *talking about* individual letters.

We were careful to say each name softly,
with gently-rising inflection,
just after the letter was set in place,
so the visual experience was not altered.

Before we go on a little side-journey is in order here... It is a return visit to a 2005 series of Digest columns, called *Natural Language Acquisition on the Spectrum*, which outlines the steps of grammatical development Russel was taking. (Download a copy from the author's website: www.communicationdevelopmentcenter.com) It will help you understand why I wanted to present words to Russel in "wholes" like the alphabet,

and why I wanted to present language to him in whole phrases like, "We found a C." This is because Russel, like his counterparts on the right end of the spectrum, would first learn language from whole-to-part. Russel would then learn to recombine parts in a way nicely described by Temple Grandin: "As I get more and more phrases on the "hard drive," I can recombine them into different ways, and then (I sound) less tape recorder like."

Our kids are behind, but that's just because they started from a different place...and, when they catch up, they will be much the wiser for having been visual and gestalt to begin with!

It was another six months, but Russel then entered the next stage of gestalt language learning, and learned to isolate single words: individual letter names, individual words in his phrases, including "I" and "we." He experienced the fun of combining all kinds of single words into two-word phrases. When Russel got to this stage, I used the principles of Developmental Sentence Types, and encouraged every combination I could think of that would interest him. Part 3 of the Natural Language Acquisition series charts the possibilities, once kids isolate the single word and begin to formulate original phrases "from scratch." For a visual reader like Russel, typical two and three-word phrases were things like, "a T," "green T," "a red E," "spell 'Boston,'" and "spell 'emergency'."

Stage 3 of the gestalt language acquisition process is ***magic***... and, here, ASD kids learn all the things "typical" kids have already learned...that any word in the language can combine with any other, and form new cognitive concepts! It is powerful stuff, and not to be hurried. Our kids are behind, but that's just because they started from a different place. And, when they catch up, they will be much the wiser for having been visual and gestalt to begin with! Stages 4-6 are well-known to Speech-Language Pathologists, not by that name, but they are now part of "typical" language development. You will have people to help you now.

In Russel's case, Stage 3 combinations took a unique twist, and Russel tended to combine words that were unexpected, often ludicrous...and usually funny! Delayed, to be sure, but Russel's verbal humor was emerging along with his earliest grammar! Returning to the joke about the "piece of orange" I mentione in the last column, I hope you imagine how Russel spent his verbal practice time from age 4 to age 8! It has been a ride I would not have wanted to miss!

We are about ready to close this series, dear reader. I imagine you now understand many of the principles, and are feeling hopeful. On the other hand, you are undoubtedly feeling a little trepidation about moving from the "key phrases" of your child's "Chapter 4" to those unique, two-word phrases we all want to hear! Well, of course you are! But, please go back to the Natural Language Acquisition series, and try to put it all together in your mind. Your child's profile is different than Russel's, to be sure, but please know that there is a pattern of interests in your child that has language to match. I understand this because I have seen enough kids to know. You can find that pattern, and take the next steps. I know you can!

And then, let's start a dialogue, you and me. You now know all the principles of language development for visual, gestalt thinkers, and we could do some real brain-storming together! Please send me your thoughts and questions, and we will plan another column that addresses them. And, you may have some perfect anecdotes for a much-needed book I'm writing! Please contact me and share your stories!

All the best to you and your child!

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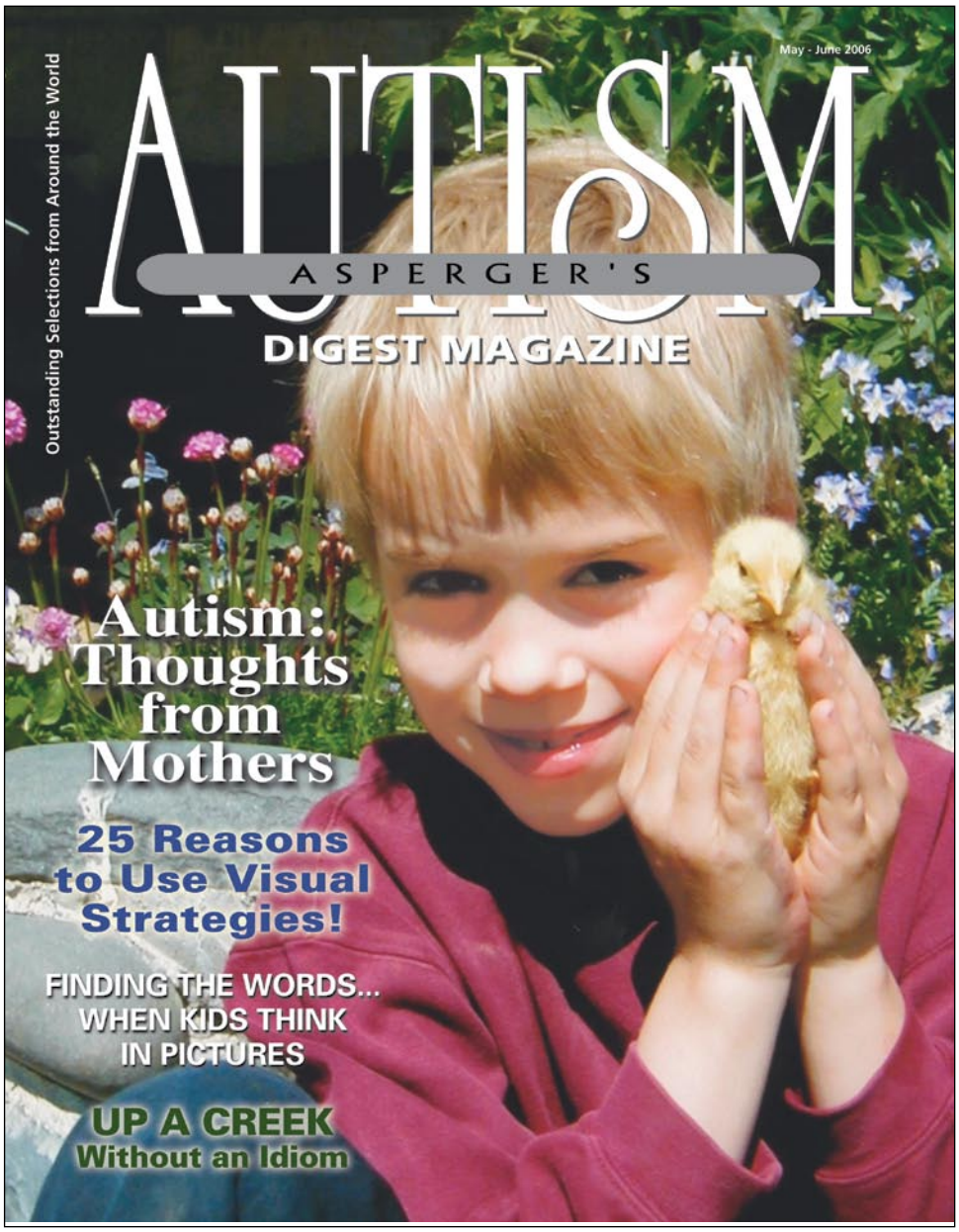
There is a pattern of interests in your child that has language to match!



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