More than Words

Marge Blanc, M.A., CCC-SLP

Consider what communication is, and is not, before you do anything else.

"My child has just been diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder, and I know that communication is her biggest challenge. Now that I have a diagnosis, what do I do next?"

It's a question most families have asked at one time or another, and a good one to address in this newly-focused column on communication!

A common first step parents take is to begin a search for answers, a search that may take you in as many directions as you have resources. So many ideas sound promising, and parents often feel too stuck to choose any strategy at all.

Our goal is to get you unstuck and help you make good decisions based on the needs of your child! Let's start with some basic principles:

- Your child is the same child you have always known, before and after the diagnosis. Nothing has changed in your child because of this new label, and you don't need to start over with your child. You already know more about his communication than anyone else, and more than you might realize!
- Consider what communication is, and is not, before you do anything else. By definition, "communicate" means to "transmit information, thought, or feeling so that it is satisfactorily received or understood." Communicating involves a sender and a receiver, so, like the tango, it takes two to communicate! One of these two people is your child with ASD, and the other one is - well - you!
- This next part is important! The information shared is "exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior." And, "common" doesn't mean "usual" as in "the words people usually use." It means "understood in common," that is, understood by the people in a group, even if that group is made up of only two people. Think "twin language," for example. To illustrate, let's take a scenario in which each person understands that a smile means, "I like your thinking," and that a glance at the clock means, "What time is it?" Simple enough, right? But a smile might also mean, "That's so ridiculous." Or that glance at the clock might mean, "This is taking forever." Tricky, this communication! And far more dependent on shared understandings than meets the casual eye!

Now let's turn to communicating with your child with autism. The following four questions begin an assessment you can do yourself to better understand your child's current communication skills.

1. What does your child do, or say, that you understand, that communicates? For example, can you distinguish your child's hungry cry from his tired one? Or her frustrated cry from her frightened one? Sure you can, because you know your child! This is successful communication!

What percentage of the time are you right? It's not 100%, of course, because our kids have coordination and other physical challenges that disguise their communicative attempts. But as you've learned to read between the lines of modulation and timing, we're willing to bet your percentage is admirable, and better than anyone else's! Remember that the percentage of time you are correct in receiving your child's message is the percentage of time your child is communicating successfully!

"Yeah, but…" you might be retorting at this point. "He didn't mean to cry that way when he was hungry. I want him to tell me he's hungry, or point to what he wants, or something!" Of course you do! But, let's consider another question first:

2. Does your child ever scream on purpose? Or look at you on purpose? Or reach for something on purpose? If you can answer "yes" to any of these questions, then your child is, at least sometimes, "intentionally communicating." Please think about what your child communicates on purpose: rejecting certain foods? protesting his brother's proximity? requesting that a movie continue? You alone can complete this inventory.

3. How does your child communicate the things you listed in 1 and 2? Is it body language? Facial expression? A glance of his eyes? Vocalizations? Words? Please remember: as much as we value words, they aren't necessarily better at communicating, just more commonly valued. And, contrary to popular belief, expressive language isn't the same as communication. Words are important, of course, but far less communicative than facial expressions or gestures unless the words are spontaneous and sincere. As a rote descriptor, the word "happy" conveys far less than an ear-to-ear smile to communicate a feeling of joy!

Here's the final question:

4. How do you show that you understood your child's message? Do you repeat back what your child says? Do you comment on what you know he is communicating? Do you take a conversational turn, thus encouraging him to continue to take more turns? It is not uncommon for adults to inadvertently interrupt a conversation by stopping to wonder if they are right when interpreting their child. We often doubt ourselves, and "test" our child by asking him to "say it again." In doing so, the communicative value of the moment is lost and the child rarely can respond on cue and repeat what he said! The conversation ends.

Do you listen intently to all speech, even when it's unclear and doesn't seem like words at all? Many a parent is chagrinned to finally understand that their child has been communicating with language – albeit unclearly – for years!

Other valuable questions we need to ask ourselves: Do we watch our kids' eyes as they look around? Do we follow our kids' bodies as they move towards things? Do we notice their hands as they reach out for things? Do we pay attention to the pages our kids look at in their books, or the scenes in a movie that spur jumping up and down and smiling? These are all clues to your child's communicative intents, and when we understand that, they become communication!

To follow are some take-home assignments, your "To Do" list to help you observe your child, and more successfully understand his communication:

1. Spend 10 minutes today, and each day this week, jotting down instances when you could read your child's feelings, whether or not your child was intentional. Make sure you note how your child communicated: his voice, his eyes, his body language, his facial expression.

2. Next week, spend 10 minutes each day recording instances when your child communicated on purpose. Think about what your child meant by his intentional communication, and take note of how he made his intentions known.

3. The following week, spend 10 minutes each day checking your notes from the previous two, and see if you agree with yourself! Make changes as appropriate.

During this three-week period, avoid the advice of others! Once your inventory is finished you will be much more aware of your child's communication skills, be in a much better position to consider others' input, and judge which information might be of real value for your child! You'll be unstuck and ready to move forward!

In the weeks to come please remember that communication is much more than words! The very best definition of "communication" is sharing and, in this spirit, we look forward to sharing more about communication next time!

Reference

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Actions Speak Louder Than Words

Marge Blanc, M.A., CCC-SLP

... your child looks blissfully happy as he's swinging up high. It's "written all over his face."

We love words, it's true. And we want our kids to talk, to talk more, and especially, to talk to us! "Use your words," we remind them. This is fair. But, even more than just using words, we want our kids to *communicate* with words! How do we get there?

This column will help! But we won't start with a list of words kids tend to acquire first, or even the functional words we really do want our kids to learn. Rather, we will focus on what's behind the words *your child* will use first to communicate! You will learn to help your child become a verbal communicator by discovering *which words he wants to say*. How? By watching your child and reading the signs that tell you, "I would be saying, 'That is so cool!' or 'Whooooa!!' if I could." You will learn that "actions speak louder than words" until children acquire *the words that are right – for them!*

As intuitive as it sounds, the words anyone uses ought to be the ones the speaker wants to say! Unless the words we say are the right words – for us – they are like a foreign language, empty words learned without context or personal meaning. We all know how words sound when they don't ring true: hollow, like a clanging cymbal. When body language is in conflict with verbal language, we just don't believe the words. If there's a mismatch, we go with the nonverbal message every time!

"I feel fine," says your friend in a lackluster voice. "What is she trying to hide?" you wonder. "I don't feel good," announces your child with more drama than fatigue, pleading with you to let him stay home from school. "Oh," you reply, cutting to the chase, "then instead of checking out the TV schedule, you'd better march yourself off to bed."

Other aphorisms: A picture's worth a thousand words; seeing is believing. We're not fooled by empty talk…and neither are our kids. If we teach them "happy" and "sad" without an index of internal feeling, they learn to use the labels, often in the context they learned them, but communicate nothing. "How do you feel?" we ask. "Happy" comes the rote reply, but the nonverbal body language says otherwise. We suffer the delusion that because we teach a child to "use his words" – in this case, "happy" – the child who says it is happy!

Now, let's turn this communication pyramid upside down. Instead of starting with words, let's start with the individual! How does your child feel? How do you know how he feels? How is he communicating that feeling? What are you picking up, noticing, seeing, and hearing that conveys this message? We know communication involves a sender and a receiver. (Refer back to last issue's column for more detail.) So, for instance, your child looks blissfully happy as he's swinging up high. It's "written all over his face." You show him you appreciate his joy by laughing with him, and, by adding a receiver, you've completed a "circle of communication!"

Next you add, "I am sooo happy!" You put words, real words, to your feelings…ones that mirror those of your child! By doing so you bridge from nonverbal communication to verbal communication by mapping language onto feeling and action! You create an entry in your child's dictionary of meaningful words he may begin to use in real life!

Now it's time to apply these principles to your own child! Here's your To Do list:

1. Take some time this next week and watch, really watch, your child. You might do this when someone else is available to play with your child, or better yet, to film your child playing with you. Being an observer

helps you see the moment that usually goes by all too fast. Watch the "pictures" your child projects, and jot down ten different feelings your child communicates nonverbally. What does excited look like? How about contentment? Or confusion? Incredulousness?

2. Identify any ten nonverbal expressions. Looking closely, describe how your child communicates them. Does his body dance in a certain way when he's surprised and delighted compared with a jerkier flail when he's surprised and scared? How does his body reflect the difference? Do his eyes "smile" when he's joyful? What do they look like if his joy turns to over-excitement? What does his face look like just before he emits the cry of meltdown?

3. Let all of this simmer for a week, and watch for these feelings to be expressed again. This time, see if you can reflect them back to your child. (Not when this will heighten a volatile state, however!) Mirror your child, and complete the circle of communication by joining your child in nonverbal communication. Jump and squeal with him in excitement; soften your face and sigh with contentment; drop your jaw and your hands and look at the ceiling during confusion; raise your eyebrows and the pitch of your voice with incredulousness.

4. Then, the following week when one of these feelings is expressed, follow your mirroring with words, or at least sounds. Give voice to what you feel, or see, in one of several ways. You can mix and match your vocal responses, as your authentic reaction dictates.

   - If you share the feeling your child is expressing, say so, using kid-friendly words and vocal tone: "I am soooo happy!!" "Coool!" Say what you think your child would want to say at this moment. If he uses sounds and not words, you might pick words that have incredible sound value: "Wahoo!" "Whew!" "Ahhh!" If your child is enchanted with words from movies or books, pick something he likes to hear: "You can't get meee!" spoken with more intonation than individual speech sounds.
   - If your authentic reaction is more personal to you, choose this moment to comment on what you feel: "You look sooo happy up there!" "I looove swinging with you!"

   You are mapping language (beginning with sound) onto nonverbal communication. Your efforts are creating a first dictionary, a very personal one, for your child. Know that even though it may take awhile for your child to use these words or sounds, your honest acknowledgement and joint participation count for more than you can imagine. Your shared experiences add up, and, over time, your well-chosen words and intonational expressions will become a greater part of those experiences.

5. Finally, you have another avenue for discovering your child's feelings…his eye gaze! Control of the eyes is often the most reliable motor control a child has, so following your child's eye gaze opens a window into understanding his reactions. When you notice what he notices, you create a circle of communication. *When he notices that you notice*, true sharing occurs! And if you acknowledge his glance with words, you give it voice. For example, your child looks at the clock; your gaze follows. You smile at him and then you say, "Yeah, you're right. It's time for our TV program!" This bridge to shared attention is extremely powerful: it was initiated by your child and understood by you!

You now have a systematic procedure for building communicative success with your child! As you share more and more experiences and feelings with your child, you develop a joint repertoire of nonverbal communication, which will lead to your child's real, heart-felt, verbal communication! Your child's communication pyramid will have a solid foundation from which to build his future!

In the Beginning...was the Conversation!

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Successful conversations require two persons to be meaningfully connecting with each other.

Not the word? Think again. True, we usually regard conversation as something kids work up to after years of learning the "building blocks" - the sounds, the words, the sentences, and finally taking turns with sentences. But that's just verbal conversation. Actually, we were using conversation long before we used words. But it was nonverbal conversation then.

Think about the fact that we understood and used facial expressions, gestures, vocal calls, and eye gaze to communicate long before we learned to talk. We engaged in the give-and-take of asking and responding, giving and receiving, showing and appreciating, doubting and reassuring, demanding and placating long before we knew there were words for such expressions. And even after the words came, if they were out-of-sync with the nonverbals, the words never "rang true," and the nonverbals still did the communicating.

So what is the structure of a conversation, nonverbal or verbal? It's a circle. In fact, the "circle of communication" between sender and receiver of a message is the basic unit of measure of social reciprocity. Stanley Greenspan's Floortime model, for example, is built around creating circles of communication, first nonverbal, then verbal.

James MacDonald's Communicating Partners (CP) program provides a useful step-by-step protocol, helping parents become part of playful, communicative dyads with their children. Parents learn to follow children's lead, and respond to what their children can do and want to do. In our clinic, too, we find this to be the key to successful conversational interactions.

Let's go back to the beginnings of reciprocity to see why this should be so. Each baby's initial intention to nurse is a beginning point. It is his first intention: to seek nurturance from his mother. Possessing both the need to survive and faith in his mother, the infant's intent is to reconnect with the source of his support. Once life-giving nurturance is given, the circle is complete, and the child/parent dance of reciprocity begins. This infant's communicative "turn" begins the first of many nonverbal conversations of his life. And, beautifully, this first circle leads seamlessly to other conversations: nonverbal and verbal.

In the beginning was the intent to create a circle. In the beginning was the conversation. It started with the child. The mother "followed her child's lead" and reciprocity was born. Yes, many of our children are delayed in motor behaviors, suckling and otherwise. And, yes, we often need to jump-start the system, and to support fulfilling that intention. But that doesn't change the basic order of things: the child takes the first turn.

We do not pretend that it's easy for our kids… or for you, their parents, friends, and advocates. But, let's return here to the experience of James MacDonald and the evidence he and his colleagues have amassed over the years. "Our ultimate goal is that children enjoy turn-taking with any behaviors they can do so that they have the freedom to build relationships when they wish…We have found that when we join into the child's world of sensation and action and respond nonjudgmentally, most children do enjoy the connection and will communicate with whatever behavior they can do." (p. 115)

Our experience is the same. And I would add that in our clinic, there are two concepts we have found to be crucial for the connections to happen: safety and sincerity. It must feel safe to a child to put himself "out there", and know that what will come back will be kind and thoughtful. Our kids are sensitive and vulnerable, with

motor systems that are often too rough around the edges to communicate nuance effectively. Thus, our kids are often misunderstood, and, unfortunately, learn that not all situations are safe for trying.

If a child's attempt at creating a circle comes back *at* him rather than *to* him, he may not try again. If a child's hug feels more like a slug, we have to remind ourselves that "it's the thought that counts," and match the intention with a smile and the deep pressure hug the child intended. If a child's attempt to stroke our hair ends up in a tangled strangle hold, we have to remember to "be the adult", and not yell. Rather, we need to gently remove the hand now attached to our hair, and simultaneously provide the smooth touch we know the child was seeking.

Even if these situations happen only rarely, and the bulk of a child's communicative attempts (smiles, laughs, body hugs) are successful, any botched conversations should be followed by a disclaimer. Something like, "I know you didn't mean to grab me so hard; I love your touch, and we are still a team" can sooth ruffled feathers and provide the safety net to try again.

Sincerity is the other crucial concept. We have to really mean it for conversations to be successful. You know the adage that "90% of effort is just showing up"? Well, the same is true of conversation. We have to show up, and actually be there! Sincerely be there…and not on the way somewhere else, and not just to log another tick mark on a data sheet. We have to truly care, and have the time to wait for the next turn to come around.

What this means is that conversations must be real. They are the main events on the stage of life, and the participants must really participate. They must be connected, committed, and provide the stability and honesty that comprise true relationships. Nothing less will work, not really. Think of all the dead-ends. We ask our neurotypical kids what they did at school, and the conversation screeches to a grinding halt with, "Nothing." We hear our child ask for a favorite book to be read for the zillionth night in a row. We say, "Not tonight. We did that one last night." Child cries, conversation ends.

James MacDonald said it well, "Successful conversations require two persons to be meaningfully connecting with each other," and describes those conversations as "matched, balanced, and enjoyable." (p. 195) In our clinic, we find that taking a few minutes at the beginning of each play-time to "tune in" with the child helps us match him. "The first step is to convince your child that he can be himself with you. First, join your child by doing parallel activities and not making any demands. Take time to see where the child is in terms of his emotions, interests, and availability…be still…be alert…be accepting…be responsive." (pp. 83, 84)

From our experience, the following protocol will help you develop early conversations with your child.

1. Take stock of your nonverbal conversations to date. How has your child taken turns with you? (Feeding? Hugging? Tickling? Laughing? Making faces? They all count!) Which conversations did he start? How many turns did your child take?

2. Look more closely at your successes. What were your child's initial intentions? How did you "read" your child? What kind of turns "kept the conversation going"?

3. Which conversations have the potential to expand - to be more fun or more creative or be useful in other situations? How can you take turns that will help this expansion take place?

4. Has your child communicated other intentions that might lead to conversations if you responded in just the right way? What would "the right way" look like?

5. How can you keep track of these ideas during the next two weeks, so you can evaluate your successes?

Yes, there's plenty more to do after this, but, believe me, developing a repertoire of nonverbal conversations is so powerful that you will find some of the next steps emerging before your very eyes! In the beginning was the intent, the reaching out to someone who was already there, that grew into the reciprocity of all our relationships!

References

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Laughter: The Universal Language of Childhood

Marge Blanc, M.A., CCC-SLP

Kidspeak is melodious... and is the "language" or shared sound that underlies verbal language.

The title of this issue's column

was the theme of a cartoon I saw some years ago. It showed a bevy of happy children running and laughing, wordlessly communicating their pleasure through the "language" of shared sound that underlies verbal language. Let's examine how this works.

The Sounds of Speech

To begin with, kidspeak is melodious. It is the sing/song we mimic when we speak to our children in "motherese." Around the globe, the tonal patterns of speech have some surprising consistencies. For example, the musical interval within different words for "Mommy" is a third, and the interval for "Daddy" is a fourth. Who knew we all shared such a universal song?

Enter cacophony, however, and the picture is much different. Distress calls have little music in them. The sounds of pain hurt our ears; tantrum is deafening. So, to truly build a "sound" foundation for our kids' verbal language, we have to find the laughter! I know this is not easy with many of our children, and I have seen how confounding the twists and turns of the road can be. But, when we get there, and a child experiences safety, pleasure, and freedom from pain, we discover the joy-filled, intonational underpinnings of verbal language. We have the stuff that words can ride on, and from which verbal communication is born.

Let's look more closely at this "sound wave." Sound comes from our air stream; breath is released from the relaxing of the muscle at our core, the diaphragm. As it rushes through the larynx in our throat, it is vibrated into different musical pitches. And it can be shaped into pitch contours that sound like real talking! You know how people sound when they're talking in the next room? Or how a teenager sounds when he grunts, "I don't know" without opening his mouth? It's like that…and it's the "goo goo goo goo" of baby talk.

We have underestimated babies, it seems to me, when we say they are "just" babbling. We tend to ignore their "music language" for months and months, until one day, seemingly out of the blue, they say their first isolated word. We celebrate that day, of course, but rarely do we rewind the movie to re-live how it evolved. With our ASD kids, we do remember, though. The years leading up to the first word are often agonizingly long, but when the great event occurs, we often have considerable data to show what the path looked like. We can replay our kids' voices in our minds, and hear the sound strings when they were all slurred together, when talking sounded like a jumble of vowel sounds, something like "goo goo goo goo" but not as clear.

In the field of Speech-Language Pathology, we refer to the intonational string of sound as "suprasegmental" (meaning above the segmentals) and to the speech sounds themselves as "segmentals." From a purely sound standpoint, this makes sense. Think about your experience when you hear a foreign language. You can't segment the sound stream, having no idea where one word ends and the next begins. From a developmental perspective, this also makes sense. In the early years of life, it's all about the sensory context. Sound plus the other senses within the experience form a gestalt, a whole, and meaning is embedded in that context. But once kids are ready, bits of it become isolated, and individual words are born.

The Meaning of Sounds

What is meaning to a young child? The work of Jean Piaget provides a useful answer. Until

two years of age, during the sensorimotor stage, the young child is engaged in learning to use his body to interact with the world. The thinking and the language that develop during this period mirror his exploration. The sounds of contentment - safety, satiation, and satisfaction – are built in. Let's consider some of them. "Whew!" has an unmistakable feeling. Think of what "Mmmmm" and "Yum yum yum" conjure up. Say these kid-words to yourself, and notice the delightful rise in your voice, and the fall that comes when you run out of air. The "Aaaah!" of satisfaction is calming and satisfying all by itself!

Now try a very different exercise, and express these feelings: danger, need, discomfort. Listen to the sounds emitted: a shrieking "Aaaa!", a whining "Unh!", a struggling "Uh!" or "No!" Do you hear the lack of melody, the constriction of the air stream, the tightness of your throat? These sounds are painful to produce, and painful to hear.

So, what did we learn from this little experiment? First, that to reflect the joy of life, our language system needs to find some pleasurable contexts and expressions within which it can grow. We need to coax the smiles from inside our kids, and create the "Ah!" and the laughter! No small task, of course, with many of our kids, but our autism community is replete with resources. Many good folks are out here, and our community is a sharing one.

And after that? Sounds of pleasure, intonational contours of joy, suprasegmental sound patterns of self-expressed happiness lead to the words you want so desperately to hear: "Yea!" "Yes!" "I love it!" "I love you!" They are there in your child, I assure you. Happy sounds come with free breathing, rich intonation, an open mouth, and bursts of gleefulness. Words are embedded in these riches… and, over time, they can be chiseled out of the intonational background as the diamonds in the rough they are. When the circumstances support them, they will be part of the sensorimotor experience of your child. Create the circumstances, and the words will follow.

Your assignments, then, are these:

1. Take some time each day this week to find a smile in your child. Jot down ten situations that made him happy. Pay special attention to any sounds he made. Did he shout gleefully as the water comes out of the faucet? Did he giggle with a particular pitch when you tickled his knees? Did he shriek with joy when Barney appeared on the TV? Can you sound just like him in each instance? Practice each of these sounds, mirror your child, and internalize the sound track.

2. Next week, when you meet these situations, mirror sounds back to your child. You know your child's gleeful sounds now, so let him hear them from you! You are creating a sound library for your community of two – the beginnings of a language you share.

3. The following week, be a mirror again. Use the sounds you learned from your child, but this time, make them sound a little more like words. "Whewee!" "Ohhhh!" "Uh huh!" are a few we all recognize. Make sure the sound contour continues to flow, however. You are not trying for vocabulary yet, just a little step up from pure sound.

4. Finally, the fourth week, add a word or two, still making sure the sound continues to flow, and still sounds like your child. You might try, "Whewee… wow!" or "Ohhh…yeah!" or "Uh huh, you got it!" Have fun with your dictionary, and see if it adds to the fun. You know how contagious laughter is, and there's huge value in laughing uproariously together!

You are now truly on the road to language – with a strategy for discovering the sounds and words your child will be able to call his own. You know which situations support happy sounds, and happy language, and have begun to write a personal dictionary for your child. With your dictionary in tow, go have some fun!

Marge shares past AADigest articles and columns at her website. Check them out to learn more about communication and language issues in spectrum children! www.communicationdevelopmentcenter.com.

First Words: Their Real Significance to Language Development

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Our kids were talking far earlier than their first...word.

It seems like we've waited forever to hear our children's first words. And we have such hopes pinned on them. But where do they come from? Can we hasten their appearance? Does it make sense to try? What do first words really mean to language development? This column will look at these questions, and offer some practical advice for addressing this critical stage of your child's language development!

Where Do First Words Come From?

Let's start by addressing a common presumption, that first words form the foundation of expressive language development. When we honestly appraise our language-delayed children, it seems more like words *emerge* from somewhere - only after months or years of hard-earned language development. So, how are first words interwoven with the language development that comes before them - and after them?

We know that our kids were communicating long before they used words. And even though we didn't understand them, most of our kids were talking! When our child reached towards a cookie with a plaintive "Uh uh!" she stretched our definition of talking. Even though it didn't sound like a word, we knew what she meant! Talking predates first words, and we understand its general importance. But if our child was already talking, what was she talking *with,* and where do words fit in?

To answer this question, let's look more closely at children's pre-word talking:

1. Did your child continue to use "jargon" after you expected him to outgrow it? Did your child utter strings of undifferentiated sound with a variety of inflections? And did you surprise yourself when you understood some of it…not as words, but as meaning?

   Looking back, we often realize that our kids were talking far earlier than their first identifiable, understandable word. And we even sense, in retrospect, that words actually emerged from the haze of language development that occurred beforehand!
2. Consider your child now. Does he have some words that were not specifically taught? Does he have some that developed naturally? And do they sound like any of the pre-word talking your child did?

   In other words, did some of his words become separated from the whole strings of his sound-making? Although none of those earlier sound strings made it into the baby book, something emerged that sounded like a word…and, in our heart-of-hearts, we realize those sound strings were actually whole phrases, sentences, and songs!
3. What if your child does not have identifiable words yet? Does he produce some recognizable sound strings: phrases or sentences, or songs or slogans? Can you detect a slurred version of, "Barney is a dinosaur…" "Let's get outta here" or "It's a clue; it's a clue!" Can you almost hear words that are about to break off from the sound strings they are embedded in?

What we are talking about here is the stage of language development where kids pick up whole language chunks from their environment. Known as "gestalt language processing," we commonly call it echolalia, and it is a hallmark of autism. Actually, all children go through a stage when they process sound – and

language – holistically, and at least half of all children remain holistic language processors for years. If this is your child now, there is plenty of material for you to read, and to use with your child. Please refer to *Finding the Words: To Tell the Whole Story*, originally published in the AADigest in 2005, and now available from the author's website.

One effective strategy from that column series is the introduction of sets of similar phrases throughout your child's day, so your little gestalt processor can hear, and extract, the common parts of them. Know that this is where first words are embedded, and that they will emerge when the time is right. "It's a clue" might be a whole unit of sound to your child, but coupled with "It's a dog," and "It's a cow", for instance, "It's a…" begins to emerge, to become "mitigated." And then when, "It's a dog" is coupled with "See a dog?" and "I found a dog", the word "dog" emerges too. Half of all kids, and most of our ASD kids, naturally develop single words this way.

But can't we just teach single words? Well, like so much in life, it all depends. If your child is currently processing language holistically, single words will also be learned as "wholes." And they will function as wholes (like a whole sentence), and won't be used as the natural building blocks of grammatical language. Wholes just don't readily combine with other wholes; that would be like asking a child to combine two whole sentences. At this early stage of language development (Stage 1), our kids need to figure out how to break down wholes, that is, whole sentences into short phrases, and then mix and match those shorter phrases into new combinations (Stage 2).

Finally, First Words!

Once your child has naturally developed skill at Stage 2, he moves on to mitigating short phrases into single words and recombining them (Stage 3). At that point, the time is right to increase his repertoire of single, highly-meaningful, words. You would still be wise to introduce new words in larger contexts like meaningful sentences. But as long as kids can isolate single words, they can mix and match them with other single words to form all manner of interesting pre-grammar combinations. This stage is highly productive for our kids, and leads eventually, and naturally, to grammar (Stage 4).

This completes our thumbnail sketch of the process that leads to first words for our kids, and a hint of what comes after that. Now you are ready to look at the detailed materials recommended above. And after that, you will be ready to take the appropriate next step with your child:

1. With the help of a Speech-Language Pathologist who understands "gestalt language development," determine if your child is processing language as whole chunks (Stage 1), and if so, set up conditions that will help your child move from wholes to parts (using easy-to-mitigate phrases with something in common, like, "I got a book", "I got a ball", "I got a bike" etc.).
2. If your child has been constructing new sentences from short phrases for some time (Stage 2), you are ready to plan activities that will promote breaking down phrases into single words ("I got a ball" vs. "Mommy got a ball" vs. "Isaac got a ball" helps the child isolate "ball"), helping your child move on to Stage 3.
3. If your child is naturally and comfortably combining single words, it's time to introduce others that are important to him. These might be "cat", "milk," "apple," "banana," "Daddy", "go," "play," "ride," "eat," "sleep," etc., whatever vocabulary he is particularly drawn to. At Stage 3, your child is ready to mix and match single words into limitless two-word combinations, expressing more than you ever imagined. Stage 4 grammar is next, but Stage 3 is not to be rushed. It is both intellectually and linguistically important, and should last weeks or months before the child moves on to beginning grammar.

So what have we learned about our kids' first words? As tantalizing as they are, they are often hard-won and delayed in emerging. But, if achieved the natural way, they become building blocks for concept formation, and, eventually, self-generated phrases and sentences! If they develop as a natural step in the language development process, they form the pivotal stage for all that is to follow!

Grammar: How and When to Teach It

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Our kids process, and use, what they are ready for – naturally.

Let's begin our grammar discussion with remembrances of school winter pageants, and the endearing ways kids interpret the words to the songs they sing. "Sleep in heavenly peas" is one of my favorites. Think about how "Let it snow…" might become, "Lettuce – no!" in the mind of a child who doesn't recognize the intended grammar, but does recognize "lettuce." As cute as these kid-meanings are, we want to think carefully about language development in our kids and avoid as many pitfalls as possible. Sentences hit our ears all slurred together, and unless we recognize word boundaries and how words can fit together with grammar, they can be misunderstood, or not understood at all.

So, what do we need to know to help our kids decipher grammar? How and when do we help them fashion their own meaningful sentences?

We first want to direct you to prior AADigest columns that will help. Please see "First Words: Their Real Significance to Language Development" in the Sept-Oct 2010 issue for a description of the stages that precede grammar. Earlier *Communication* columns, available on the author's website*, discuss pre-verbal development of communication, speech, and social reciprocity.

Preceding grammar, there are three stages of Natural Language Acquisition (NLA) in our kids with ASD:

1. Processing strings of sounds at a holistic level (echolalia). Deriving meaning from the context of sentences, songs, and sound. Understanding what sound strings mean in the situations where they were first heard: "It's a clue!"; "It's time for you to go to bed"; "I have no idea"; "I have something for you!"
2. Processing commonalities (phrases) among those wholes. Mixing-and-matching these phrases to create semi-unique sentences: "It's…no idea"; "It's…something for you"; "I have…a clue" "I have…time for you to go to bed."
3. Processing commonalities (single words) among these phrases. Isolating words: It, no, idea, something, you, I, have, clue, bed. Mixing-and-matching these words to create unique, two-word phrases: "It…idea"; "It…something"; "I…clue"; "I…bed."

Stage 3 is a magic time for all kids, on or off the spectrum. Even kids who experience a relatively short, even imperceptible, time at Stages 1 and 2, broaden their thinking when they spontaneously combine single words. As they form unique linguistic combinations, they play with concept combinations at the same time. Take this example from speech and language literature: "Mommy" + "sock." Combining these two words in either order, kids can juxtapose concepts to mean everything from, "Mommy, can I wear those socks?" to "Pink socks are exceptionally pretty, Mommy." Albeit fraught with misunderstanding without the grammar to tell which version of "Mommy sock" a child means, from his perspective each message is clear! Meaning pre-dates grammar…and this is part of the answer to our original question, and key to the next part.

Yes, our kids need grammar eventually, to make their messages clear to everybody else. Stages 4-6 on NLA are about grammar – in a developmental sequence. That sequence has been reported in myriad sources, and the version we use in NLA is Development Sentence Scoring (DSS), a longitudinal compilation of

natural grammar development in children. Laura Lee's DSS has stood the test of time, and is included in the column series *Finding the Words: To Tell the Whole Story*, originally published in the AADigest in 2005, and available on the author's website.

Grammar develops in a natural progression. So whenever we try to teach it out of a cookbook, it fails to "generalize" because it's out of sync with individual development. We are often tempted to teach a child to use a phrase like, "I want …" way before it's time. Kids learn it, but through the lens of their own particular language development level. If a child is at Stage 1, he learns "I want chips" as a gestalt, and then has to break it down to get to Stage 2 mix-and-match. He learns "I see a ball" the same way, and has to break it down before he can use "I want…" and "I see…" productively.

A child at Stage 2 can learn to mix and match these sentences much more readily, but this is not the same as developing grammar. As illustrated earlier, this is just Stage 2 mixing of phrases!

A child at Stage 3 is less hampered by stock phrases, but they still constrict him from the free-form combining that is natural at Stage 3. Without packaged phrases, this child benefits from the single words we introduce. As we listen and respond to the unique two-word combinations, our child is supported to move on to Stage 4, where he is actually ready for beginning grammar.

Ah, grammar! Finally! How do our kids develop it? With the same mix and match strategy, as we surround them with little bits of beginning-level grammar. Avoiding packaged phrases, we opt for a broader swath of grammatical territory. Stage 4 grammar includes DSS levels 1, 2, and 3, and offers us a smorgasbord of possibilities. We pick the ones that match our children's interests the best, starting with a small assortment of DSS 1 structures, adding some grammar at DSS 2 or 3 to match a situation. At DSS 1, we try to use a plethora of these grammatical structures:

- Pronouns: I, me, mine, you, yours, it, this, that
- Verbs: is (That's cool; This is an A), is + verbing (It's working), uninflected verbs (I sing; I read; I see it; You see it?)
- Negatives: not (That's not a dog; I'm not looking)
- Question form: Is it blue? Are they ok?

DSS 2 and 3 gives us plenty more variety to gingerly pick from: more early pronouns, question forms, and verb forms such as irregular past tense like "saw," beginning future tense like "gonna," and "Let's…".

So how do we introduce this grammar? How do kids "practice" these structures? There are four rules to remember. First is the **Developmental Rule**: Our kids process, and use, what they are ready for – naturally. Grammar is no exception; surround them with what they are ready for! Secondly, remember the **Mix and Match Rule**. By introducing a child to many examples of several structures at the same time, we can avoid the "overlearning" of one particular pattern – a common pitfall in language programming. Avoid words kids commonly mix up (mine/yours), but use a nice variety: "I got that ball"; "I need a green one"; "I like yellow!"

The third rule is, **Make Sure it Matters**, which means that the right grammar for your child is what he would want to use. Try modeling several structures, and when your child begins using one (or more), give him a variety of words to use with it, and watch generalization happen. If he picks up, "It's not a block," but not "Is it a block?" use what means the most to him.

The last rule is, **Context Matters**.This rule reminds us that our kids are naturally gestalt thinkers, so context is the source of meaning. Make sure to use language in meaningful play contexts, so that grammar is real in the context of your child's life!

In summary, we can say, "Grammar rocks!" but only when the time is right. When your child is ready, it will matter to him, and you will begin to hear his language sound not only original and flexible, but more like you thought language was supposed to sound! Sleep in heavenly peas…

Reference

Lee, Laura L. (1974), *Developmental Sentence Analysis*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

*www.communicationdevelopmentcenter.com