LANGUAGE DISORDER AUSTRALIA

Language Acquisition and Echolalia

Language acquisition refers to how children learn and use new words to communicate. It is crucial to highlight that communication includes verbal and written expression, gestures, and multi-modal communication (e.g., augmentative and alternative communication). For education staff working with students, information on how students may use language, and a variety of principles and strategies have been provided to support meaningful communication within the classroom environment.
Keywords: *language processing, language acquisition, echolalia*

Language Acquisition

The language acquisition process includes the awareness and development of the following language domains:

- Phonology (sounds within words)
- Morphology (word structure)
- Syntax (sentence structure)
- Semantics (meaning of words and sentences i.e., vocabulary)
- Pragmatics (the use of language in conversations and play)

During the process of learning and using language, some children may be observed to use language in “chunks” which may also be referred to as echolalia. The term "Gestalt Language Processing" (GLP) is sometimes used to describe a particular style of language acquisition in which children acquire language in larger chunks before developing more flexible, spontaneous language. However, while echolalia is a well-documented linguistic phenomenon, there is currently no strong empirical evidence supporting GLP as a distinct processing style or its associated intervention approaches. This handout outlines information on echolalia and evidence-based, neurodiversity-affirming principles that educators can use to support their students’ language acquisition.

Echolalia

Echolalia is defined as an immediate or delayed repetition of previously heard speech from people, TV shows, movies, or songs. Within research, echolalic speech has been identified as commonly occurring at some point in the language development of autistic children and some older autistic people.

Echolalia may, at times, serve as a communication function. This may include making comments, protests, requests, directives, initiating and continuing interactions and conversations, and expressing emotions. It is also theorised that echolalia can be used to support sensory regulation, a cognitive tool, or to explore sounds and prosody.

Principles to support language acquisition

When working with a child you believe is using echolalia, use the following principles to best understand and support their language acquisition:

Child-led play to increase connection:
Build an authentic connection with the child by following their interests and preferences.

Respect and honour their communication:
Do not attempt to extinguish echolalia as this could be removing the child's most robust form of communication or a self-regulation tool. Instead, observe their communication attempts and consider the underlying purposes.

Know the context and background:
Become familiar with the child's interests, routines, and favourite activities. Collaborate with the child's primary caregiver(s) to tap into their expertise in their child's current language use and functions.

Build on current language skills:
Respond to the child's echolalia and always assume communicative intent. When you know the meaning of the echolalia utterance, restate the utterance and the meaning. This will both confirm that you understood the child and provide a model for mitigated echolalia (i.e., when a child alters the original repetition in some way).

Use visuals and support comprehension:
Sometimes, echolalia can be used when there are difficulties understanding language. Visuals can help to scaffold, understand, learn and practice communication. Visuals should be individualised and used in conjunction with communication. Ensure simple, functional phrases are used.

Regulation and sensory needs:
Always include sensory supports and strategies for the individual to support their regulation.

Want to learn more?

To learn more about Language Disorder and how to support children and young people for whom language is their primary disorder, please **contact us**. Language Disorder Australia provides holistic, innovative and effective therapy, education and support services and has a transdisciplinary team of speech pathologists, occupational therapists, educators, psychologists and physiotherapists.

Contact: 1300 881 763 or **hello@languagedisorder.org.au**

Website: **languagedisorder.org.au**

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Version 1.00