



MY THERAPY HOUSE

Gestalt Language Learners

Children who learn language as whole chunks of information

Adapted from Marge Blanc's Work



Who is a Gestalt Language Language Learner?

Many children we work with use whole chunks of information to get their messages across. Sometimes this information is clear and meaningful, other times it may not make sense in the context they are using.

For example, children might repeat words, phrases or sentences they have heard on the TV, their favourite movie, a story, or what others have said and use it in their everyday communication e.g. 'hang on a minute', 'watcha doin' there?', 'To Infinity and Beyond', 'Bouncy bouncy bouncy ball'.

Some children may not be intelligible (use clear speech) when they are using chunks of information to get their message across.

Gestalt language learning is also a normal way of developing language, it's just different to the traditional or 'analytical' language development journey. Both Gestalt Language Acquisition and Analytical Language Acquisition are normal language development pathways.



Neurotypical gestalt processors

“In neurotypical gestalt processors, the stage of echolalia takes place at a very young age, before kids are intelligible. It sounds like ‘jargon’ so we usually don’t recognize it as language. Kids are usually able to break it down into some component phrases or single words by the time they are intelligible, so we see those ‘first words,’ and their language as just emerging.” Blanc, M.



Individual Differences in Language Acquisition (Blanc, M.)

‘Word Babies’ (Analytic Processors)

- Focus on referential use of utterances (i.e. labeling objects) and semantic relationships of language
- Basic units of language are single words
- Language use is generalized to relevant objects and events quickly
- Language is productive and generative early on in the language acquisition process
- Early language acquisition moves from single words to two and three word utterances
- Rule induction of language forms allows for increased grammatical complexity
- Early language acquisition involves multiword phrases functioning as single words
- Most common in girls



Analytical Language Acquisition



Ball



Throw



Individual Differences in Language Acquisition (Blanc, M.)

‘Intonation Babies’ (Gestalt Processors)

- Focus on intonation and social interaction structure of language
- Basic units of language may be words, phrases, and/or complete sentences
- Language use remains specific to situational contexts for longer periods of time
- Language is relatively inflexible in the early stages
- Increased language complexity is achieved through recombinations of established gestalts
- Most common in boys and ASD children

Gestalt Language Acquisition



Bouncy Bouncy Bouncy Ball



Bouncy Bouncy Bouncy Ball



Who is a Gestalt Language Learner?

These gestalt language learners have taken the essence of information they have seen or heard and are now using that sound/word/phrase/sentence to communicate something in their interaction with others. Often adults need to interpret what they mean in that moment because it may seem to be out of context for the listener, but it makes sense for the children.

Sometimes this is referred to as Echolalia or repeating what they have heard and learnt in different contexts and superimposing it in the here and now context to communicate what they may be thinking or feeling.



What do the words actually mean?



Says: Ball

Means: 'It's a ball'

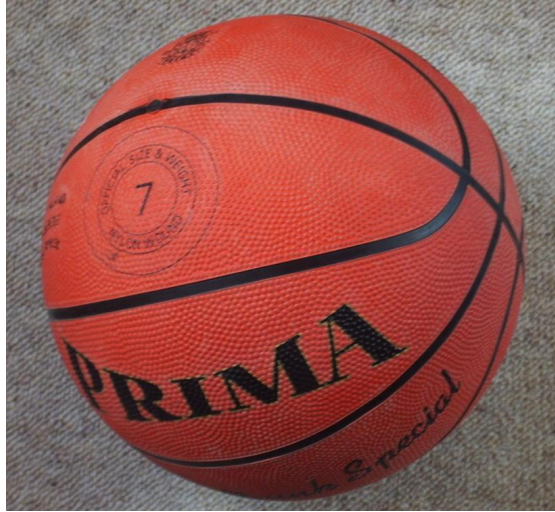


Throw

Means: 'Throw the ball'



What do the words actually mean?



Says: 'Bouncy Bouncy Bouncy Ball '

Means: 'It's a ball'



Says: 'Bouncy Bouncy Bouncy Ball'

Means: 'Throw the ball'



Echolalia

Echolalia is when children repeat back a sound, word, phrase or sentence.

“Echolalia is an integral part of language development for all gestalt language processors, including those on the autism spectrum. As the first step in the natural language development process for all gestalt processors, echolalia provides the ‘language soup’ from which useful phrases, and eventually single words, will be extracted — and then combined into phrases and grammatical sentences.” Blanc, M.

Immediate Echolalia - repeating back straight away

Delayed Echolalia - repeating back something they have learnt after a period of time

Both of these types of Echolalia are functional communication for the child and are a way the child communicates with others. Therefore, we as the child’s communication partners, need to be mindful of what the child is trying to communicate. We do this by understanding the context the child is taking the words from and superimposing it in the here and now context to understand their intent and meaning.



Echolalia

“In autism, the language development process is the same as for neurotypical gestalt processors, but delayed — often considerably delayed. Children with ASD remain echolalic much longer than their neurotypical counterparts, a phenomenon that calls attention to their echolalia and creates concern. So, echolalia in autism signals a delay, not a disorder.” Blanc, M.

Playing Detective - What do the child's words mean?



Adult: Let's play hide and seek

Child: Some people are worth melting for

Adult: Are you ready?

Child: Some people are worth melting for

In the first instance the child's words don't make sense in this context. We see the child as being able to string 6 words together, however if we don't understand the context the child is taking this sentence from, we cannot understand their intent. So what could the child mean by using this sentence as a gestalt language learner?



Playing Detective- What do the child's words mean?

“Some people are worth melting for”- Olaf from the Disney movie, Frozen.





Let's interpret, knowing the context of the language

Adult: Let's play hide and seek

Child says: Some people are worth melting for

Child means: I love playing with you

Adult: Are you ready?

Child says: Some people are worth melting for

Child means: 'I'm always ready to play with you'

Now that we understand the context where the child is getting the words from, we are better able to understand the intent behind the child's words in the current context and respond in a way that will support the child's language development as well as social emotional development.



Language development is complex

At My Therapy House(R), we understand that language, as well as social and emotional development are complex. It is important to understand the child's world and their way of thinking, feeling, perceiving and how they learn concepts, feelings and words and how they communicate these with others.

We work as a multidisciplinary team with the parents to work out what the child may be communicating and meaning and structure our therapeutic programs around this.

We use sensory motor input, play, rhythm, songs and music to support the children's extension of experiences, help them get into the 'just right space' which support their social emotional and language development. Language and social emotional goals are superimposed on the children's regulation, sensory motor and play goals. Hence we work as co-therapy teams.



Further Information

For more information about Natural Language Acquisition in Autism, please go to **Marge Blanc's MA, CCC-SLP** excellent online course.

<https://www.northernspeech.com/speech-language-acquisition/natural-language-acquisition-in-autism-echolalia-to-self-generated-language-level-1/>