

Language and Speech Development

Introduction

Many children with autism can have language and speech development delays. Language and speech are both a part of verbal communication, however, they are not the same thing. Language is defined as a set of shared rules that allow people to express their ideas in a meaningful way. Language can be expressed verbally, or by writing, signing or making other gestures such as eye blinking and even mouth movements. Language can be further divided into receptive and expressive language. Speech on the other hand is a verbal means of communication. It includes the articulation of sounds, voice and fluency. Children with autism can have only speech development delays, only language development delays or both.

Language

Language as we know it, is made up of several different parts. These include:

1. Semantics, or the meaning of things,
2. Syntax, or how we combine words together,
3. Pragmatics, or how we use language in social situations, and,
4. Morphology, or how we break words down into smaller, meaningful pieces. For example, dogs is made up of dog + s.

Typical Language Development

For neuro-typical children, language abilities begin to develop at birth, when children hear people around them talking. Between the ages of one and two, children can understand simple phrases, commands and questions, such as “Where is your shoe?”, or “Eat your peas.” They may begin to learn how to point to body parts when asked to, and use single words or two words together to ask for things that they want, such as “cracker”, or “blanket”. They also begin to enjoy simple stories and rhymes. Language further develops between the ages of two and three, when children have words for the things they want or need, and can use two to three word phrases to express themselves. Between the ages of three and four, children can also answer simple who, what, where, why questions, and talk about their day in sentences that use more than four words. Between the ages of four and five, children begin to pay attention to short stories and are able to answer questions about them. They can use sentences to share many details about different topics, they can tell stories, and communicate with other children and adults, and begin to use rhyming words, letters and adult grammar.

Speech

Speech is a verbal means of communicating. It includes:

1. Articulation, or how speech sounds are made. For example, a child may say “sopping” instead of “shopping”.
2. Voice, or the use of vocal folds and breathing to produce sound, and
3. Fluency, or the rhythm of speech. Stuttering for example, is an issue with fluency in speech.

If a child does not produce speech, it does not mean that they do not understand language, or have the inability to think in language.

Typical Speech Development

Many children may not appear fluent when they are learning language. Young children often demonstrate dysfluencies or stuttering in their speech when they are learning language. A child who stutters does not necessarily have a fluency disorder. It is important *not* to rush a child who is stuttering.

Helping a Child Develop Language

Speech and language delays need to be assessed by a professional, because they may have an underlying physical disruption such as a hearing impairment. A Speech and Language therapist can conduct a thorough evaluation to determine the type of delay your child may be having, and the underlying cause for the delay. However, once you understand what your child needs, there are a few things you can do at home to encourage language development.

1. **Self-Talk:** Self-talk includes describing what you are doing or experiencing. For example, you can say things like, “I am pushing the train, CHOO-CHOO!” or “You need to brush your teeth. First I will put toothpaste on your toothbrush, then you can brush”.
2. **Parallel Talk:** Parallel talk includes describing the actions of the child while they are playing or busy with something. Examples of this are, “Mikey is going down the slide”, or “Sandra is making a puzzle”, or “Jimmy is coloring with a green crayon.” Even though this may feel awkward at first, it will help your child associate actions with language.
3. **Expansion:** Expansion is a way of re-wording a child’s utterance, which may be incomplete or short, into a complete sentence. For example, if your child says “baby crying”, you might say, “A baby is crying.” However, do not excessively correct a child as this can discourage them from using new words.
4. **Reading:** Reading is a great way to teach your child language and speech. Books with pictures can help a child learn simple words and concepts.
5. **Language Games:** You can play simple Yes-No games to help your child develop language comprehension. Ask your child questions such as “Is this pen blue?” You can also use pictures and play sorting games by asking your child to sort pictures into the right groups, such as fruits, colors, toys etc.

You can use these techniques throughout the day, and during most activities, such as playing a game, eating a meal, or riding in the car.

Conclusion

You can support your child’s language and speech development by modeling the use of speech and language. You should work with your child’s Speech and Language Therapist to identify more ways to encourage language development. We hope you have found this information useful. You can find additional resources on our website, www.porchlighteducation.org.