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2001-02-01

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### Original Publication Citation

Dyches, T. T. (21). Language acquisition in children with autism. *Utah Special Educator*, 21(4), 14-15.

### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Taylor, Tina, "Language Acquisition In Children With Autism" (2001). *Faculty Publications*. 1098.  
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/1098>

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# Language Acquisition In Children With Autism

By definition, children with autism have deficits in communication. Often, when parents notice that something is “different” about their child, it is that he does not acquire language at the same rate as his peers, that the child uses what language he has in an idiosyncratic fashion (e.g., repeating phrases from videos, using pronouns incorrectly), or that the child appears to understand only that language which might be reinforcing to him (e.g., not responding to “Look at Mommy,” but responding to “Do you want a cookie?”) When these “red flags” are apparent, parents should beware of misguided advice such as “Don’t worry. He’ll grow out of it.” Patterns of communicative behavior are developed early, and if left to chance, the child is not likely to “grow” out of delayed or deviant patterns. The child must be specifically taught to become a successful communicator.

Another factor that impedes the acquisition of language in children with autism is their social skill deficits. Successful communication requires not only transmission and reception of an intended message, but social skills to assist in the communicative interaction. For example, a child who has learned to say, “I want a drink,” but has not learned to direct the request to another person, is not engaging in successful communication.

Communication is a “transactional” process because it requires give-and-take between both communicative partners. That is, the child responds to the adult’s communication, who in turn, responds to the child’s communicative response. When the interaction is shared between the partners (e.g., each is able to send and receive the intended messages) then they both are reinforced for their communication. However, when one partner does not share in the interaction

(e.g., the child is unable to adequately respond to the adult’s request, or the adult does not respond to the child’s non-specific communicative attempt), future attempts to communicate are likely to be avoided. This pattern of avoidance leads to further delays or deviancies in the communicative process. Communicative partners must learn not to give up when the interaction is not successful, for this is the time when children with autism need help the most.

Many people unfamiliar with children with autism wonder if language acquisition is possible for these children. The most commonly reported statistic is that approximately 50% of children with autism remain primarily non-verbal. However, these data are based upon a narrower definition of autism, which does not include many individuals with high-functioning autism or Asperger’s Disorder. It is likely that if a more current statistic were available, it would report more than 50% of those who are functionally verbal, given the wider band of functioning levels in the autism spectrum and the wide-spread provision of early intervention services. Professionals should approach treatment with young children with autism as if they should be included in the verbal group. Prognosis for those with language is substantially more positive than for those who do not use language. If a child does not acquire a symbolic form of communication after many good-faith instructional efforts have been proven unsuccessful, then alternative methods can be taught. Such alternative methods will not be discussed in this article, as the purpose is to provide strategies for parents and professionals working with children who might acquire language.

Several skills must be present in order to acquire language. Not all of these prerequisite skills will be discussed, but the skills that are typically difficult for young



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children with autism will be discussed briefly, with suggestions for facilitating the acquisition of each skill.

**1. Imitation.** Many young children with autism do not learn to imitate naturally. This skill must be specifically taught. One approach to teach imitation is for the adult to imitate the behavior of the child and reinforce the child when he “accidentally” imitates the adult when he engages in the same behavior. A more direct approach is to model a gross or fine motor action while stating, “Do this!” then reinforcing successive approximations to the desired action. When a child can imitate gross motor actions, fine motor actions, and actions on objects, then he can be taught to imitate oral-motor movements and eventually speech sounds or words.

**2. Attending skills.** Children with autism often appear to be inattentive to the social world around them. If not directly taught, many children will selectively attend to only that which is reinforcing to them. Formal programs (such as the Behavioral Attending Program developed by Children’s Behavior Therapy Unit) are often used to teach a child to sit quietly and attend to a teacher. One informal method includes the systematic reinforcement of attending behaviors while the child engages in learning activities. Children with autism should also be taught to establish and maintain joint attention on an object or action. This means that a child should be taught to get the attention of a communicative partner (e.g., by pointing, verbalizing, gesturing) to look at something or engage in an activity together.

**3. Establishing interactive turn-taking routines.** Because communication involves give-and-take, children with autism need to be taught how to take turns. Simple activities can be directed for such learning, for example, while a child plays with a toy, the teacher says “My turn” and starts to play with the toy. She then directs the child to say or gesture “My turn” and gives him the toy. This interaction continues until the activity is still desirable, but nearing a point of boredom.

#### **4. Having a desire and reason to communicate.**

Adults who live or work with children with autism become astute mind-readers, that is, they see a need in the child with autism and immediately fulfill it. This is a valuable skill to possess, but it may inhibit the development of higher-level communication. Communicative partners must provide opportunities for children to communicate. A child who is allowed to fulfill his needs by himself will often learn that being independent is easier than communicating with others to fulfill his needs. One strategy to decrease the level of dependence on others (to facilitate communication) is to set up an activity and not providing an item necessary for the completion of an activity (e.g., providing all ingredients to make toast except for the bread). The child then has a reason, and if motivated, a desire to communicate for the missing item.

When the young child with autism becomes an intentional communicator, then his communicative partners can further enhance language acquisition by using the following facilitative strategies:

- 1. Responding to apparent intent of communicative behaviors, including maladaptive and self-stimulating behaviors,**
- 2. Talking about the here and now,**
- 3. Using simplified language forms,**
- 4. Expanding and emending the child’s utterances, and**
- 5. Encouraging and rewarding the child’s efforts at talking (McLean & Snyder-McLean, 1999).**

Early, effective communication training is essential for the success of any child with autism. With proper training, most children with autism will learn to communicate their wants and needs, and many others will be able to engage in “normal” or “near-normal” communicative interactions. When able to communicate effectively, children with autism have no need to resort to maladaptive behaviors to express themselves. Can we expect early language acquisition in autism? Yes! Is it essential to their success? Absolutely! ■



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