

A QUICK GUIDE TO DEFINE, IDENTIFY, AND BEST SUPPORT AUTISTIC CHILDREN WHO ACQUIRE AND PROCESS LANGUAGE DIFFERENTLY

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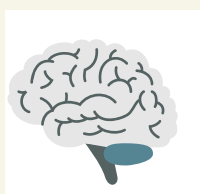
1 Introduction

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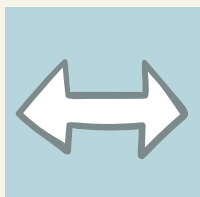
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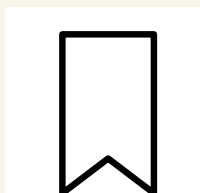
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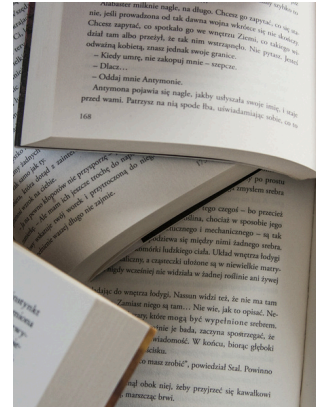
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WHAT IS CHUNKING?



Children typically acquire language through bottom-up analytical language processing, where they learn single words first, and over time progress to produce multi-word utterances (Blanc et al., 2023). However, research and clinical experience in the field have shown that some children, especially autistic children, acquire and process language in a top-down manner. This means they acquire language through larger chunks, such as phrases, rather than through individual, discrete words. For the purpose of this brochure, we are going to refer to this as chunking. To describe the individuals who process and acquire language this way, we will refer to them as “children who learn language in chunks” (CWLLC). Chunking is used as an overarching term to describe this “nontraditional” way of processing and acquiring language. Chunking includes terms such as, echolalia, scripting, and/or gestalts. Regardless of how you refer to this, our goal of this brochure is to help identify, and best support autistic children who acquire and process language differently.

DEFINITIONS

Autism Spectrum Disorder- A lifelong condition characterized by persistent difficulties in social communication and social interaction across various contexts, along with restricted and repetitive behaviors, interests, or activities. Symptoms emerge during early development and significantly impact social, occupational, or other key areas of daily functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Gestalt- A gestalt is a whole phrase, sentence, or conversation heard in real life or through media, memorized and reproduced verbatim, often without an implicit understanding of its lexical, semantic or syntactic structure. Sometimes, a gestalt is categorized as situational, where an autistic gestalt language processor remembers every element of a situation in which they acquired a gestalt, including the sensations, emotions, smells, feelings, actions, things they saw etc. All of these sensations are forever embedded into the gestalt alongside the verbal production of the message (Blanc et al., 2023)

Example: Ben is at his first soccer game. He loves watching the ball on the field, the feeling of the wind in his hair, and he is feeling an intense amount of joy. While in this blissful state, Ben hears the announcer say, "He shoots...he scores!" After this event, anytime Ben is feeling excited, he says "He shoots... he scores!" When Ben says this phrase, he is communicating the feeling and the experience from the initial occurrence of the phrase.



DEFINITIONS

Echolalia- Echolalia is the exact repetition of words or phrases spoken by someone else, repeated in a way that may not fit the current context or conversation (Filipova et al., 2023). Echolalia can be categorized as “immediate echolalia” or “delayed echolalia.”

Delayed echolalia- Exact or slightly adjusted echoed responses that occur more than two conversational turns after the original statement. These echoes show a greater level of language complexity than the individual would typically produce on their own or are recognized as learned routines from communication partners or situations (Stiegler, 2015).

Example: Emily says “goodnight moon” when she is tired across all contexts. This phrase is important to Emily because her dad reads Goodnight Moon every night before bed. Since this phrase is used frequently in her bedtime routine, she associates this language chunk with feeling tired. When Emily says “goodnight moon” to an unfamiliar listener to communicate that she is sleepy, the communication attempt is hard to understand.

Immediate echolalia- Exact or slightly adjusted echoed responses that are produced within two conversational turns of the original statement, closely resembling it in tone and rhythm (Stiegler, 2015). It can also be used as a strategy for processing and comprehension of the initial speaker’s message

Example: If an adult asks “do you want a snack?” The child may respond back by saying “do you want a snack? This could possibly serve as the child’s indication of yes, they do want a snack.

Scripting- A specific type of delayed echo which involves repeating long segments of language from favorite movies, books, or music (Paul, 2017).



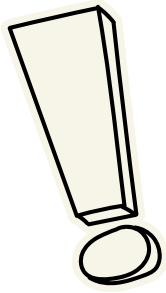
CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDREN WHO LEARN LANGUAGE IN CHUNKS (CMLLC)



DO YOU HAVE CLIENTS ON YOUR CASELOAD WHO PRESENT WITH THE FOLLOWING CHARACTERISTICS? THEY MAY LEARN LANGUAGE IN CHUNKS!

My client...

- ☒ **Utilizes immediate and/or delayed echolalia to communicate**
- ☒ **Often uses long strings of communication i.e. singing songs, repeating phrases from movies, television, or books**
- ☒ **Has difficulty comprehending and/or using single words**
- ☒ **Has difficulty creating novel, self-generated sentences**
- ☒ **Uses spoken words that tend to run together and can become highly unintelligible**
- ☒ **Appears to have strong emotional connection to phrases**



REASONS WHY CHUNKING MAY LOOK DIFFERENT FOR EVERYONE

01

Not all CWLLCs begin developing chunks of language at the same age

02

Not all CWLLCs have access to neurodiversity-affirming care or an SLP who understands what chunking is and how to foster communication through this style of language acquisition

03

Some CWLLCs may use different communication modalities (spoken language, Alternative and Augmentative Communication, etc.)

04

Some CWLLCs may have comorbid conditions or diagnoses

05

CWLLCs can belong to all different cultural and linguistic backgrounds

06

Caregivers and family members of CWLLCs can have differing beliefs and values regarding communication

WAYS TO FACILITATE LANGUAGE LEARNING FOR CWLLCS:

TIPS FOR SLPS AND COMMUNICATION PARTNERS

Implement neurodiversity-affirming practices into speech and language intervention (Haydock et al., 2024)

- Honor all modes of communication [immediate echolalia or delayed echolalia]
- Consider the child's sensory needs
- Accept and honor an individual's need to stim or self-soothe
- Do not require eye contact
- Avoid extinguishing behaviors that may lead to effective communication (Stiegler, 2015)



Identify and figure out the meaning of the child's chunking:

- Do they contain elements that are used elsewhere? Is this chunk immediate or delayed echolalia? Is it from a TV show, movie or YouTube video? Is this a common saying heard from a family member?
- What are the levels of flexibility in their use? How often and in what contexts is the chunk being used?
- What's the appropriateness of the context of their use? Can a nonfamiliar listener understand its meaning?
- What is the child's purpose of the chunk? What is the function?



WAYS TO FACILITATE LANGUAGE LEARNING FOR CWLLCS:

TIPS FOR SLPS AND COMMUNICATION PARTNERS

Connect language to ideas the child already understands. Instead of teaching the child to memorize specific, fixed phrases only for basic needs, focus on helping them develop the ability to use language in a flexible way. The goal is to encourage real communication where they can express a wide range of ideas and adapt their language in different situations, rather than relying on a set of memorized responses that may not always fit their needs (Stiegler, 2015).

Example: A child consistently uses the phrase “let’s go” when leaving the house to go to the park. You can help the child generalize the phrase “let’s go” to other contexts by using it in other ways such as saying “let’s go” when going to school or going to the swimming pool.

Consider reframing your perception of chunking. Chunking can be used to convey a message quickly, efficiently and with ease and to seamlessly tie emotions and memories together (Haydock et al., 2024)

Design intervention to encourage verbal initiation (Stiegler, 2015).

WAYS TO FACILITATE LANGUAGE LEARNING FOR CWLLCS:

TIPS FOR SLPS AND COMMUNICATION PARTNERS

Model meaningful, flexible phrases that a child can “copy” and use in their own communication. Provide smaller, more adaptable language units that a child can use as a “building block” to formulate their own original, self-made, multifunctional phrases (Stiegler, 2015).



Example: A meaningful phrase to “copy” could be something used in everyday social interactions, like “can I have a turn?” This phrase can be used in a variety of contexts. For example, while playing board games, sharing school supplies or toys, while pretending to play, etc.



WAYS TO FACILITATE LANGUAGE LEARNING FOR CWLLCS:

TIPS FOR SLPS AND COMMUNICATION PARTNERS

Build rapport, trust, and connection with clients by following their lead and providing space for their unique expression of communication by trying different techniques including imitation, incorporating gross motor movements, silence or pausing, engagement in the client's preferred activities or topics of conversation (Blanc et al., 2023)

Expose CWLLCs to phrases that have prominent emotional and/or situational ties, so the child is more likely to use these chunks in linguistically and contextually appropriate situations (Haydock et al., 2024)

If the CWLLC is an AAC user, consider altering the layout, vocabulary, language structure, type of voice output, phrase/sentence selection, to better align with their communication style and their commonly used phrases (Blanc et al., 2023)

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