

Ontario Association for Families of Children with Communication Disorders



H: Parent Stories

What do you mean my child can't understand me?

By Susan Strachan

It came as a shock when the Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP) tried to explain that our child has receptive and expressive language disorders. It is easy to understand that the mechanics of articulation can be difficult and who hasn't had trouble remembering names and labels? But what do you mean my child can't understand me? He talks all the time. He follows directions.

It seems our language is full of secrets – so secret that most of us don't realize the rules, and my child definitely doesn't. My child is trying to figure out the puzzle that I didn't even realize I use.

I often explain his language difficulties as “the man from Mars, who has landed on Earth, and doesn't understand what we are trying to say.” Of course, my child does have language. He has been speaking since he was little. He has spent years learning and has succeeded. But his language is the comfy and familiar, like wearing “house clothes” verses “daywear” or “work wear.”

I now understand that his early language was very “.com” style. He didn't speak words, he spoke phrases. “Time for bed” or “get in the tub” was perceived in his mind as “timeforbed” or “getinthetub”. Ironically, a very “now” concept in this age of the Internet. However, when it came to reading, no knowledge of each word being separate causes immense difficulty especially when trying to decipher a book.

Thank you, to the Speech Language Pathologist who I treated like she was crazy. Understanding my child's Communication Disorder is and was the first step to helping him. She has become my best resource in a crazy world where I discover how much I don't know about language. My puzzle is not the hidden language secrets but how to share those secrets with my son and the society we live in.

So how does my child learn?

It was the beginning of a new school year and, as none of the school staff who were familiar with my son were returning, I had to meet with the new educators to try to explain my son and his needs. After describing receptive and expressive language disorders, everyone looked just as confused as before I started. The inevitable question came up - “How does he learn?” “How do we teach him?”

Most of us are familiar with different learning styles; verbal, auditory, hands on, etc. and although most teachers plan lessons that allow for these learning styles, the complication of a language disorder turned every teacher my son had into Charlie Brown's teacher - so that all he heard was; “wah wah wah!”

Previous teachers had tried many things. My tongue-in-cheek favourite was when the Special Education Teacher (SET) described how he was using a computer program to learn to read. Apparently he loved it, but he was becoming frustrated because he wasn't able to move on. The program wouldn't let him because he wasn't grasping the basics. Our frustration over the lack of progress became so intense that I appreciated the honesty of the one SET who after almost a year of trying confided; “we don't know how to teach him.”

As his parents, we were desperate for him to read. We believe reading is the building block for learning and that it would open many doors for him. Research brought us to a teaching method called Direct Instruction. Pioneered in the 1960's Direct Instruction (D.I.) refers to the specific programs designed by Siegfried Engelmann and his staff at the University of Oregon.

Direct Instruction is an interactive, mastery based style of teaching that introduces skills in a carefully sequenced manner. For a new skill to be consolidated, concepts need to be taught one at a time, and objectives need to be taught from simple to complex in continuous strands of activities. Once a skill is mastered in isolation, it is then gradually expanded for generalization, integration with other skills, and independent application. The massed repetitions, cumulative review, and ongoing testing ensure that once skills are introduced they are practiced and consolidated for generalization.

After enrolling our son in a tutoring program using the D.I. method we observed lessons that utilized reading decoding hints similar to those that his Speech Pathologist was using to teach him to speak. For example hand gestures and modeling that, in our mind, essentially explained and practiced the hidden rules.

We knew we had found a good teacher match when, during a bedtime chat, my son was surprised to learn that his new teacher was teaching him to read. He exclaimed how easy it was. Two years later he now says, "Thanks for my reading life."

My favourite E.A.

She wasn't my favourite because she taught him to read. She wasn't even his Educational Assistant (EA) for very long. She was my favourite EA because she "got it." She got that my son was not a behaviour problem. She got that he wasn't the result of poor parenting. She got that he had a Language Disorder. She got that he had a Communication Disorder. She got that all he needed was protection. He needed protection from himself. He needed protection from others. He needed protection from the confusion around him.

Children with Communication Disorders struggle to understand the world around them. They also struggle to interpret the language and social clues, which results in feelings of frustration, which may lead to poor behaviour choices.

These children react to what they perceive is happening, to them and around them. If their interpretation is incorrect, then their behaviour may not be appropriate, and it may escalate unnecessarily without the proper interference. Further danger lurks in the misinterpretation of their behaviours by others.

Misinterpretations and perception are the dangers that these children face daily and the dangers that they need protection from. They need guidance, they need support, they need an interpreter and they need the reassurance.

Behaviours are a way of Communicating

I cheered the day my son stuck his tongue out at his teacher. He was in Kindergarten. He was communicating!

Children with Communication Disorders have huge struggles when communicating. It is my belief that any and all attempts at communication should be encouraged and respected. It is my belief that such unconditional support encourages further attempts at communicating and fosters self-confidence and further gains. The challenge is to see such communication as positive attempts at communicating.

Let me clarify - I was at the school for the parent observation part of his first term, Kindergarten, reporting period. He was unhappy about what she wanted him to do and he was telling her so. I would never have accepted this kind of behaviour from my “verbal” children but because of this child’s Language Disorder, it is acceptable behaviour.

Behaviours are reactionary. Behaviours are communication. They tell the world when we are happy, sad, confused etc. Behaviours should be “listened” to. It should be normal for kids who can’t make themselves understood verbally to “act out.” It should be expected that they will use body language to communicate. It should be a good thing - fun, like a game of charades! Truly, all the world is a stage and our children merely actors.

Parent Perspective by Susan Strachan submitted to OAFCCD Newsletter January 2009.