
Natural Language Acquisition on the Autism Spectrum

**The Journey from Echolalia to
Self-Generated Language**

***by Marge Blanc, M.A., CCC-SLP
Speech-Language Pathologist
Illustrated by Jon G. Lyon***

***Communication Development Center
www.communicationdevelopmentcenter.com***

About the Author

Marge Blanc has been a clinical Speech-Language Pathologist for 35 years and founded the Communication Development Center in Madison, WI, in 1997. Specializing in physically-supported speech and language services for children with ASD diagnoses and others who benefit from physical support and movement, CDC is devoted to helping children become communicators as they move through the stages of speech development and language acquisition outlined in this book.

Marge and her colleagues have presented workshops on Natural Language Acquisition to Speech-Language Pathologists, educators, and families of children with speech and language delays and challenges. She has also written numerous articles and columns for the *Autism Asperger's Digest* since 2004. Topics have included augmentative communication, self-regulation, speech supports with dyspraxia, language retrieval, and, of course, natural language acquisition. Articles can be downloaded from the CDC website at: www.communicationdevelopmentcenter.com

The illustrator, Jon G. Lyon, Ph.D., CCC-SLP, is the author of *Coping with Aphasia* (1998). Combining his love for his wife with his love of drawing, Jon became well-versed in the words and wisdom of the kids at CDC through filming them for a CDC workshop. One of his earlier gifts to the clinic was the logo seen on this page, one rendition of which appears throughout the book.



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Foreward

“Mrs. Carter, I know of a woman who is quite different in her approach to kids like your son. You may want to just visit her clinic and see how it feels as a next step in caring for Ben.” I walked into Marge’s clinic and the sun came out. The place was covered in color: layers and layers of lycra hang from the ceiling, swings and platforms, slides and huge pillows everywhere. Mirrors and TV monitors, rooms of toys and kids running all around with smiling adults who appear to be having such fun.

As a family, we had exhausted every mode of therapy for our boy with autism and in the process, had exhausted him, our resources, and ourselves. Ben was frustrated, angry and bottled up tight as a drum. I scheduled a visit with Marge for Ben. He walked into “Marge’s” and the magic began to bloom from his insides out.

I asked Marge early on, “Is there any way you can make him stop that blasted movie talk? He is making me nuts!” Marge grinned and, with a twinkle in her eye, said, “That boy is brilliant and he is talking to **you!**” From the depths of my heart, I had no idea what she was talking about—and did I just hear a professional say my son was brilliant? I have heard them say retarded, stunted, slow like molasses, autistic, speech delayed and disabled, but this woman is grinning at me, winking at Ben, and calling him brilliant.

A few sessions pass with Marge and Brilliant Ben. I truly had no clue what they were doing together, but I do know that Ben ran down the hall, up the steps and down another hall as fast as he could to get to “Marge’s,” and he did not want anyone to interrupt them when they were together.

In a few short sessions, a change comes over Benjamin the Brilliant: for the very first time in his young life, he made a human connection! Marge owned a knowledge of Ben that captivated him, propelled him to therapy, settled him, and inspired him. Marge was magical with Ben and he could not get enough of her. As the mama, I ask myself, “What on earth are they doing in there?” It was loud, it was messy, a lot of banging and singing and bouncing and most of all, it was a whole lot of fun for that kid. Marge was laughing and my Ben was shining and grinning and changing.

We found a very mysterious help in this woman when brilliant Ben met his friend and teacher, “Marge’s.” Our life as a family was about to improve drastically. If I had known that we would find Marge, I would not have cried so long and so hard and so often all those previous years! Brilliant Ben—she called my Ben ‘brilliant’—imagine: brilliant.

Read on. You will discover the mystery.

*Linda Carter, R.N.
University of Wisconsin Medical Foundation
Madison, Wisconsin*

Preface

This book is written for you, the family member of a child diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Whether the child you love is considered verbal or not, whether your child's speech is considered communicative or not, it is you who will find the hidden gems of meaning inside your child. It is you who will see the uncut diamonds that exist there. Even though you may not feel qualified to be the one who analyzes your child's language or discovers it in the first place, you will find things no one else has the depth of understanding to see. And, just as importantly, you will become your child's best partner in language development. So, this book is for you.

This book is also written for others like me, who have been entrusted with helping parents and family members with their precious children and their children's language. It is a privilege to be here with you; please join me in the journey we will take here together.



You will find the hidden gems of meaning inside your child. You will see the 'uncut diamonds' there.

For me, the journey began eighteen years ago with a wonderful experience. I was working as a Clinical Instructor in the Department of Communicative Disorders at the University of Wisconsin and was introduced to my first group of children with ASD diagnoses. I had worked as a Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP) for 20 years, but only with a handful of children with labels on the autism spectrum. So, working with my new charges might have seemed daunting. But, it was not. They were wonderful children, and I quickly got to know them as 'children, first,' and helped my university students do the same.

Echolalic language systematically develops towards self-generated language.

At about the same time, a clinical colleague introduced me to the work of Barry Prizant, Amy Wetherby, Judith Duchan, and Ann Peters: communication research and linguistic theory that supported the idea that kids who started out echolalic could move towards becoming competent generative language users.

Language emerges naturally in our kids with ASD.

I never questioned that language could develop naturally in the ways these Speech-Language Pathologists and linguists predicted. Somehow, it rang true with what I knew about another group of children, a group of children we often see in speech and language clinics. They are the story-tellers, often boys, who use long streams of well-intoned but unintelligible speech and seem to lag behind their peers on language milestones. That our kids on the Autism Spectrum could be like this, but more so, made intuitive sense to me. It also would help explain what I was seeing and hearing.

So, I went to work with these kids, using the material Prizant and others had added to our clinical knowledge, and we began to systematically facilitate it with the ASD children at the UW Speech and Hearing Clinic. It worked beautifully.

Echolalic language can be analyzed and a progression outlined to move it towards self-generated language.

Eighteen years, a specialized clinic, and scores of ASD children later, I am now firmly ensconced in our local autism community. In our own physically-supportive clinic, we have seen and documented this process of language development unfolding time and time again with considerable individual variation, but always in the direction of more flexible, creative language. It is still wonderful to be a part of this process, but it no longer seems remarkable. It seems only natural, while needing support and facilitation along the way. We diligently recorded language samples of all our kids, wrote innumerable progress reports, and, in this way, the regular process of natural language acquisition in ASD became better documented.

Finally, in the year 2000, we gave it a name. We devised an assessment protocol and began inviting others to look at their kids the same way. More documentation was accomplished, and it was time to write about Natural Language Acquisition (NLA) for the autism community.

What motivated me was the fact that this progression of language emergence in our ASD kids was not more widely understood and targeted in the larger autism community. Largely remaining in the realm of language research circles, it seemed to be silently usurped by innumerable language programs which focus on teaching language rather than supporting natural development. Well-meaning though they are, these programs have made the natural process almost impossible for our kids to access.

Over the years, I have felt determined to reduce this widening gap and to get this life-changing information out there to you, the families and professionals who can use it best. I devoted a column series in the *Autism Asperger's Digest* to this endeavor, and this book is sprinkled with material from "Finding the Words... To Tell the Whole Story" (July–Aug 2005 through Jan–Feb 2006). My colleagues and I have also conducted workshops on the subject, introducing parents to NLA and showing SLPs how to analyze language samples using the principles you will learn here. In this practical way, Natural Language Acquisition became a tool for others to use and, with this book, has come to fruition.

And while this book teaches the ‘how to’s, it is mostly a collection of children’s stories, each one illustrating something important about the development process. Taken together, these stories trace the acquisition of language in children with ASD. Through these stories, you will find parts that speak to you, that remind you of your child. During the course of this journey, you will learn that your child is engaging in a common, natural process: one that is shared with roughly half of all kids, including typically-developing kids. It is that natural and that common.

Yes, most of our kids need some support to get there (sensorimotor supports and an abundance of language models), but the process is just as natural. The biggest help you can give your child is to recognize that this process is one that will unfold over time. And in this book, you will learn everything you need to know to help your child move in the direction of more flexible, creative language use.

The process of witnessing language develop and flourish continues to be an exciting one for my colleagues and families, but it is especially exciting for the children who have benefitted from our faith in them. You are invited to come along and to help your child progress along this path toward intentional, interactive communication.

This book was designed with parents, teachers, and SLPs in mind. It is meant to be primarily reader-friendly and usable, so the theoretical principles involved have been relegated to their own section (Section 2), the assessment and intervention principles have been put into another (Section 6), and the rest of the book is filled with relevant stories you are sure to relate to. All of them are real, about real kids with ASD whom we, in our clinic, have known and worked with. These are kids, some just like yours, who found an understanding ear, just like yours, to help them develop useful, flexible language in this natural way.

Many of the children I have met along the way were already vocal. Some were very vocal. But some were not. There were many who were called dyspraxic, some severely dyspraxic. Some children, in fact, were nearly silent. Here is something important to consider with those children: the echolalia that is a hallmark of autistic language is hard to hear in a child with little speech and impossible to hear in a silent child. We all understand and formulate language in our heads, not with our lips. So even a complete lack of speech doesn’t mean a lack of language or a lack of language development. The language process described in this book is still relevant. If you are one of the many parents who is thinking, “But my child isn’t talking—at all!” please do not despair. We have a chapter especially for you and your child: one that addresses the development of motor speech and which will help you discover the ‘gems’ that are sure to be found inside the heart and mind of your silent child!

So, please join me in this journey. I think you will find something familiar in many of these stories and find yourself identifying with the families featured. Then, as you see where your child fits compared with the children in this book, you will begin to see how you, too, can apply the principles of Natural Language Acquisition for your child.

Echolalia is hard to hear in a child with little speech and impossible to hear in a silent child.

Lack of speech doesn't mean a lack of language or a lack of language development.

section 1

***Getting Started
with Natural
Language Acquisition***

Introduction

“Help! He’s using ‘movie talk’ all day, every day!”



Bevin’s mother was exhausted—and desperate. When she first called me about her ten-year old son, she admitted that the only reason she was doing so was that a friend, a well-regarded person in our local autism community, made her do it! “Kathy told me I had to call you. She told me to trust you and to do whatever you said. She told me that I wouldn’t necessarily understand what you were doing but that I had to do it anyway!”

Our kids’ language is not categorically different from that of other gestalt language processors—just more pronounced.

I laughed at the veiled compliment but understood what she was saying. Our clinic looks a little different, and this makes it harder for some people to ‘get.’ First of all, it looks more like an Occupational Therapy clinic than a typical Speech and Language clinic. It’s filled with colorful lycra swings, slides, pillows, and trampolines. We actually don’t even have a table, except in our waiting room. And we play a lot—all the time.

The most unique thing about our clinic, however, might be our philosophy of language development. We don’t despair over kids’ echolalic language or talk about the challenges it seems to suggest to many people. Instead, we look at language development on the spectrum as a common, natural process. Yes, it usually needs more direct intervention than does the language development of kids off the spectrum, but it is not categorically different, or at least not categorically different from that of the other kids out there who tend to develop language in big chunks, or ‘gestalts.’ Our ASD kids are actually in good company, but they tend to be the extreme of those ‘gestalt language processors,’ and this makes them stand out.

Yes, I know it will take you some time to digest this news. But you will, I promise, as you undertake the journey that is this book. As you travel along, some of your assumptions about echolalia will be challenged. But that's a good thing: thinking of it as gestalt language processing will be much more helpful and hopeful.

But, I digress—more about language development in due time. For now, suffice it to say that our clinic is unique, and our approach takes some rethinking of the common assumptions made about how different our kids' language is. But, believe me, the rethinking will be helpful. It will turn the tedium we often associate with 'teaching language' to our ASD kids into limitless, creative language development. In turn, it will be hopeful, fun, and productive.

Natural language development is hopeful, fun, and productive.

Let's start our journey with a story, the story about Bevin, who, beyond a doubt, was echolalic. According to his family, he was echolalic about 24/7. His mother was more than justified in her fatigue, and I sympathized when she told me that Bevin's "movie talk" was making her entire family tired all day, every day. It was no wonder that his parents pleaded with Bevin to "turn off the movie."

His mother told me that Bevin could recite many things and did, pretty much non-stop. He knew all the words of the Barney songs—at least she was pretty sure he did, because the tunes were familiar even if the words were slurred together. He recited his favorite scenes and would spend hours saying the dialogues, with his sister taking one of the roles until she tired of it.

Bevin's favorites at the time I met him were every Barney movie ever made. He would play one of them over and over, literally hundreds of times, saying all the lines along with the movie. When even his family was beginning to know one by heart, they tried to hide it just to give them all a break.

When his family asked, Bevin could "turn off the movie" verbally. But his family wondered if he was still playing it in his mind. They suspected he was, because the words would erupt again and again throughout the day.

I couldn't wait to meet Bevin!

Chapter 1

Echolalia Revisited: Gestalt Language Development



“The wonderful thing about Tiggers”

Some of the lines our kids say are common; others are more elusive. But family members usually know just where they came from, because our kids sound just like their source. “**To infinity and beyond**” is classic, of course. But other lines are known only to the true aficionados, like these from *Blue’s Clues*: “**Blue skidoos; you can too!**” And we hear our kids say some of Pooh’s lines at vaguely appropriate times: “**You never can tell about bees,**” “**And I’m the only one!**” Even words like ‘cheeky’ find their way into our kids’ speech because of *Thomas the Tank Engine*.

Consider this: when any one of us uses one of these lines, it’s a quote. But when these colorful expressions make up almost the entirety of a child’s language, we refer to it as echolalia. It’s not strange at all, just pervasive. It used to be called ‘delayed echolalia,’ meaning that kids echo the words not right after they hear them (‘immediate echolalia’), but later, or ‘delayed.’ Of course, sometimes our kids do say the lines right after Christopher Robin or Steve, and sometimes right along with them. We even hear our kids anticipating the next line and saying it before the movie even gets there. It’s all echolalia, but it’s the delayed kind we notice. And it’s often when our kids surprise us with a line they got from somewhere else, but somehow pulled out of their heads at this particular moment.

No matter the source or the timing of it, all of this echoed language is what our kids repeat verbatim from other sources: movies, books, things people have said to them, and things they have overheard. Granted, a lot of the time it seems pretty meaningless to us. We think it must just be interesting to our child to hear or interesting to him to say or just **interesting**. We think it keeps our kids “awake” or “alert” or “stimulated.” We even call it a “stim” of sorts; a “verbal stim.” And, truth be told, we worry about it. We try to tune it out. And we ask kids to “turn it off.”

When any one of us uses a movie line, it’s a quote. But when a child quotes extensively, we call it echolalia.

But sometimes it surprises us—in a good way. Sometimes our child might say an echoed phrase at just the right time so that it seems to have real meaning. I remember one of the first parent stories I ever heard about a particularly well-timed delayed echo. Cam and his mom were in an ice cream store when Cam piped up and proclaimed, “**I love chocolate!**” This wouldn’t have been so surprising except that Cam rarely talked and certainly didn’t have the grammar to say sentences. That Cam’s mother recognized this line from an *Arthur* story solved the mystery. But what this mom also learned at that moment was

that echolalia can communicate, and that for her child at that moment it can communicate just what he intended it to. Cam did love chocolate!

Now let's look more closely at the gamut of common echolalia among kids in general. First are the transparent phrases we tend to hear at appropriate moments in kids' lives. We all recognize them as "kid talk" and rarely think twice about their origin. But chances are, they are echoed:

- "Get me outta here!"**
- "Game over!"**
- "It's a match!"**
- "Are you OK?"**
- "That is not OK."**
- "Come on, guys!"**

The next set sounds a little too theatrical to dismiss quite as easily as the first group. They might sound familiar, particularly the drumroll quality delivered with dramatic intonation:

- "It's showtime!"**
- "Coming soon to a theater near you."**
- "And now, our feature presentation!"**

Echolalia consists of the commonplace and the theatrical, whatever catches the ear and the heart of a child who processes them. That these same lines resurface later, under real-life conditions, is what makes them important to gestalt processors, and to us.

It's time to delve further.

Echolalia revisited: in the research

Until about twenty five years ago, we thought of delayed echolalia in ASD as deviant behavior, meaningless at best and a "self-stim" at worst. People tried to ignore it or extinguish it, and thought that kids could be taught "appropriate language" to take its place. Lovaas programs literally beseeched kids, "Don't echo," and tried to replace echolalia with rote statements like "I don't know" (Prizant, 1982).

But during the decade between 1980 and 1990, language researchers discovered the same thing that Cam's mother had discovered: echolalia can communicate. In 1984, Prizant and Rydell reported on their analysis of hundreds of delayed echolalic remarks and found that many of them serve the same communicative functions we associate with generative language. Rydell and Prizant found that most of ASD kids' echolalia fell into "fourteen functional categories," seven of which showed evidence of both interactiveness and comprehension. Those seven functions were labeling, providing information, calling, affirming, requesting, protesting, and directing. The researchers noted that in the case of these seven functions "there was clear evidence of communicative intent." Additionally, kids were seen as using echolalia to take a turn in conversation.



Echolalia communicates.

Rydell and Prizant outlined a process for helping kids move from echolalia to generative language.

With the evidence that echolalia serves the same communicative functions as other kids' language, many of us began to treat echolalia more respectfully. And because language researchers have reported that echolalia is used by "at least 85% of the children with autism who acquire speech," that was a good thing (Rydell and Prizant, 1995).

In 1993, Rydell and Prizant reported that their research subjects "frequently recombined and conjoined language chunks." Noting that "children with autism who acquire spoken language may be limited to an extreme form of a gestalt processing style," they outlined a process for helping kids move from echolalia to generative language. Their first step was to acknowledge the echoic utterances as communicative and promote their increased use for a variety of purposes.

Prizant et al. (1997) further commented on the usefulness of echolalia. "The majority of verbal children with autism use echolalia, the imitation of another person's speech, as a language-learning strategy." They stated that "echolalia of children with autism usually consists of longer and more rigidly repeated utterances, but appears to serve important communicative and cognitive functions for these children" (Prizant, Schuler, Wetherby, and Rydell, 1997). Finally, these researches noted that verbal ASD children "have been found to acquire grammatical and lexical aspects of language in the same general progression as typically developing children."

Research shows that ASD kids develop vocabulary and grammar in the same order as typically-developing kids.

In 1999, Wetherby and Prizant presented assessment and intervention guidelines for "enhancing language and communication development in autism." As they noted, "many children learn to use these 'gestalt forms' purposefully in communicative interactions, and eventually are able to break down the echolalic chunks into smaller meaningful units as part of the process of transitioning to a rule-governed, generative language system." At the same time, research emphases expanded in the area of social aspects of communication in ASD, with increased focus on 'joint referencing' with gestures and language. Wetherby and Prizant stated that "children with autism in the early stages of communication and language development have been found to show limitations in the range of communicative functions expressed." Noting that in 1986 Wetherby had suggested that "the easiest and first emerging category of functions for these children is regulating others' behavior, whereas the most difficult is referencing joint attention," these authors recommended that "assessment should determine the sociability of communicative functions expressed."

But the autism community forgot, and replaced language development with teaching a little functional language.

At the same time, the number of children diagnosed with autism was growing at an unprecedented rate. While echolalia was well recognized as a diagnostic marker, the process of language development from echolalia to generative language seemed to have dropped out of sight. As behavioral therapy quickly expanded to address a growing need, the term "language learning" was used more commonly than "language development," and programs that taught specific pieces of functional language proliferated (Lovaas, 1981).

We all recognize echolalia—but what do we do about it?

The last decade feels like a kind of fast-forward in autism. The sheer number

of kids with new diagnoses has challenged our educational systems, and we read in their IEPs our desperate attempts to help kids become communicatively connected with their environments. We also see our watered-down attempts at providing the growing population of ASD kids with at least a modicum of functional communication tools.

Program decisions often seem to reflect the challenges providers feel. Systems of choice-making have been devised to emphasize functional communication, either with or without language. Even when spoken or written language is addressed, the trend has still been towards ease of communication. Thus, functional language programs for kids with ASD have proliferated. And because behavioral therapy is so often used with children with autism, and it regards language as a behavior, a child is often taught to produce (or choose) something like “I want chips” soon after he can produce (or choose) “chips,” without regard for the developmental appropriateness of the decision.

Those of us who believe that our kids with ASD can achieve much more have felt outnumbered as the term “functional speech” has proliferated in the autism community. Indirectly suggesting that our kids lack the capacity for normal language development, a set of learned survival phrases are selected as practical targets. Sadly, in the name of “function” our kids are short-changed, with little regard for their intellectual or linguistic potential.

In the midst of this trend, too few of us realize or remember that echolalia communicates, and even fewer of us know what to do about it. Since 2004, this author has written articles and given workshops to try to fill this gap. But until now we were lacking a complete source material for Speech-Language Pathologists and families to support their students step-by-step from echolalia to self-generated language.

This progression is embraced by Prizant et al. in *The SCERTS Model* (2006), however. Developed by Prizant and colleagues, SCERTS approaches social communication and emotional regulation in ASD children by targeting shared attention, affect, and intention. As children develop joint attention, SCERTS describes language as developing “from using primarily chunks of language to using more frequent mitigated echolalia ... and ... making novel combinations” (p. 41). The SCERTS assessment notes non-communicative echolalia giving way to communicative echolalia as a child develops from a “social partner” to a “language partner,” and language becomes symbolic. Communicative gestalts become mitigated as joint attention develops.

But in the larger education and autism community this connection appears vague, and echolalia seems to represent an on going conundrum. For example, the *Practical Guide to Autism* (Volkmar and Wiesner, 2009) offered this: “Often, as language increases, unusual aspects of language also become more apparent. These can include echolalia ... Some children use idiosyncratic language ... some word or phrases whose meaning is unique to them” (p. 173). More often than not, echolalia seems to represent a conundrum.

*In the name of
“function” our kids
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linguistic potential.*

Moving our kids forward

Echolalia often represents far more than a conundrum. Frequently seen as simply “self-stim” or “movie talk,” its communicative value is rarely lauded: “Oh, Johnny is so communicative. When he’s about to have a meltdown, he warns us by saying, ‘Sharptooth attack!’” Think how foreign this sounds: “Johnny communicates effectively by saying, ‘Back off!’ when kids brush against him when they line up at the door.”

And we rarely see gestalt language legitimized in an IEP goal: “The student will use his gestalt (“Back off!”) with his peers 75% of the time when they are getting too close to him.” Nor do we read a goal statement that encourages the pragmatic use of a child’s echolalia: “The student will expand his pragmatic uses of gestalts to include ‘Let’s get out of here!’ when he needs a sensory break, ‘Hey, what’s going on here?’ when he has a question, and ‘Game over’ when he’s done with his work.”

We don't honor echolalia because we really don't like it.

The reason we don’t encourage echolalia or want it to generalize, I think, is because we really don’t like it. We have real trouble recognizing that echolalia has value. If we did, we would have to accept it, and we really don’t want to. We don’t think, “I’m excited about helping him use some other movie lines he seems to like.” We wouldn’t think that way because we don’t really like echolalia at all.

Yes, we recognize it, and we might be entertained by it, but, quite honestly, we worry about it—and this determines our strategies for dealing with it. Our strategies, in fact, are almost exclusively limited to one of these alternatives: we try to ignore it or we actively try to make it stop. All too often we still call it “verbal stim” and assume that it can’t be good. We just want it to go away and be magically replaced with “real” language.

If we recognized echolalia as valuable, we would have to acknowledge it when our kids used it.

Our children’s birthright to develop language

Sadly, we’ve misplaced our past. As we valiantly try to replace our kids’ echolalia, their natural language, we feel validated when they learn to say new things. We teach our kids a dozen functional phrases and sentences and feel satisfied that we have taught “functional speech.” The tragedy is that while IEP goals are met, children’s linguistic potential has been ignored—and undermined. We have forgotten how to assess a child’s developmental language level and his capacity to develop generative language. And we have also failed to consider that the functional phrases we’ve taught might actually interfere with his potential to develop language competence. And in the process, the echolalia doesn’t go away.

Teaching language can interfere with language development.

Bevin provides a good example. His IEP contained well-meaning goals which addressed teaching him more typical-sounding language, deemed the functional phrases that would help him communicate his needs. And he did learn some of this language. He could request, “Help me” when he got stuck. He could ask, “Where’s Papa?” appropriately. Amidst his pervasive echolalia, Bevin had a good dozen sentences he’d been taught to say, and he was successful using them.

On further analysis, we can also see that Bevin learned these phrases—as gestalts. People had hoped they would represent “real language” that was different from the movie gestalts, but, to Bevin, they weren’t. Each was learned and used as a whole phrase, just like “Back off!” or any other of the dozen movie phrases Bevin used at school. Bevin had learned a few new phrases that sounded more acceptable, but from a linguistic perspective they were still gestalts rather than building blocks of unique language.

All of us have probably put in our time teaching kids to say phrases like “Help me” or “I need help, please,” that certainly do sound more like typical language. And some of them have great survival value and need to be a part of every child’s repertoire. But think about what’s wrong with this picture. Do kids who have been taught “Help me” ever say, “I need help, please” or vice versa? No, because each one is a different learned gestalt. Kids don’t cross over between them grammatically because neither of them was acquired by the child via grammar. To carry this example a little further: does either group ever vary their request with, “I could use a little help now” or “Could you help me with this one?” Absolutely not, since again, their original phrase wasn’t acquired grammatically, so kids have no way to use grammar to build a new phrase.

Since our friend, Bevin, was dutifully taught language that had nothing to do with grammar, it should be no surprise that none of the language he learned in his in-home intervention lead to developing, or even learning, more language. Each phrase he learned was an entity of its own and had nothing to do with developing a useful, flexible language system. Why? Because Bevin wasn’t ready for anything but acquiring more gestalts. He wasn’t ready for developing useful, flexible language, because that’s actually a later step for a child who is a gestalt language processor. He was only ready for the first step, which is acquiring language gestalts. So, whether these gestalts were supplied by Walt Disney, his family, or his teachers, that’s what he would learn.

It’s time to reframe the misconceptions we have had about kids like Bevin who use echolalia. Being echolalic isn’t what makes our kids different; it’s being echolalic so late in their lives. Typical echolalic kids move on to the next stages by the time they’re five years old. By the time they start school, they’ve been able to break down gestalts, use mix-and-match mitigations, and even isolate single words and start to build phrases and sentences. They might sound delayed, but not deviant. Kids like Bevin are delayed too—just by more years. That’s what makes them different and stand out. They still need to go through the steps that other echolalic kids already have, and we need to recognize that and help them. Because their echolalia sounds so aberrant, we often don’t think they have the capacity to develop language, that they are too “concrete,” that they can’t “generalize,” or that they really don’t want to. We surmise that if they are going to learn “functional speech,” we need to teach it to them.

But now is the time to recognize what has really been going on with our kids. They picked up movie phrases because they could “see” the movie in their heads, internally “hear” the sound tracks, and use their speech skills to reproduce them. Maybe not all our kids could process language in real time, but with enough rewinds they learned plenty of language. In this light, we can now see how competent our kids actually are.

Teaching language outside of a developmental progression fails to lead to developing more language.

Gestalts are a powerful form of language-to-gestalt language processors.

Half of all young children are gestalt processors, often unrecognized because they cannot produce their long gestalts clearly.

The mitigation process involves identifying shorter phrases and, eventually, words within sentences and mixing them in personal ways.

The irony is that using this same competence, our kids learn other gestalts: the ones taught through countless hours with well-meaning adults. So, in addition to their “movie talk” phrases, they now have another set of phrases we taught them. Indeed, once they’ve heard, “Can I have a turn?” a bazillion times, kids learn it—and use it. I’m sure you know the kind of gestalt I mean. “Ready, set, go” becomes so well-learned that kids never seem to be free of it.

Gestalts are a powerful form of language—at least to gestalt language processors!

So, what did we do when we tried to replace “movie talk” with other language? Inadvertently, we acknowledged our kids’ ability to use gestalt language by teaching it to them. And, without realizing it, we proved that our kids are part of a large population of kids who are natural, normal gestalt language processors. We weren’t actually aware that a huge group of neurotypical children are gestalt processors, but it’s true. In fact, half of all young children are gestalt language processors, hard to recognize because their early lack of speech clarity renders their long gestalts impossible to understand. They sound more like jargon. But the legions of children, mostly boys, who eventually “catch up” with their peers, mostly girls, once processed and developed language from a gestalt perspective too.

There is an important segue here: our kids are not alone. A few people once knew this, but their knowledge appears long-buried. It is time to resurrect it, and make it relevant and useful to our current generation of kids. So, let’s begin.

Life after echolalia

Barry Prizant, Amy Wetherby, Patrick Rydell, and others have long reported that kids on the spectrum are capable of moving beyond gestalts. With some understanding among the people around them, kids discover how to change those language wholes or gestalts, to mitigate them, and to recombine them more creatively.

Cases of individuals using mitigated echolalia as they develop language have been reported in our literature for over a century. And 40 years ago, young children who used echolalia were reported to mitigate it, or break it down, and recombine the parts to make the language their own. For too many decades, however, these reports seem to have remained within language research circles, buried under the plethora of information in the larger autism community. Today, too few people remember or understand it. That the SCERTS model acknowledges echolalia helps; now our kids need people around them who can directly help them with natural language development.

So, if we could help give our kids’ language systems new life again, where should we start? We could start with this question: what is this process of mitigation and why is it important? Mitigation means changing the language that the child first heard, not just repeating it in its entirety, or gestalt, but changing it in some way. If the original song phrase was, “It’s a whole new world,” and the child says, “It’s a whole new pizza,” that’s a mitigation. Or if the original jingle was, “Have it your way!” and the child says, “Have it my way!” that is a mitigation. Likewise,

if the question was, “What do you want to do?” and the child counters, “You want to do—counting,” that’s a mitigation, too.

The mitigation process is natural but complex, and there is cause for celebration when kids accomplish it. It involves identifying shorter phrases and, eventually, words within sentences they’ve heard many times, and mixing them in personal ways. Kids who are gestalt processors eventually do this with all their language, and it is truly an awesome process. Neurotypical kids do it regularly, and our kids can do it too. We may need to support them, or at least not make the process more difficult. When we know what they’re doing and why, that’s all the help some of our kids need.

So, the next time your child rewinds and replays a short segment of a movie, consider that he’s not just “stimming” on it (or trying to drive you crazy). He is actually trying to work on language development and communicating. He is isolating it from the whole story: isolating a bit of language so he can study it and use it. He’s heard it so many times that he’s found it in other places. He recognizes its commonality with other sources, and he’s about to mitigate it.

And here’s the proof: when you begin to hear not only “Let’s get out of here!” but “Let’s get out of **there!**” your child has mitigated successfully. This example might not sound too sophisticated, but it will when you hear your child say, “Let’s get **it** out of there!”

This amazing process just continues as long as people acknowledge it as meaningful, and no one interrupts it. Eventually, when a child can use many, many of these snippets of language in a mix-and-match fashion, he or she will be able to communicate with some flexibility.

Temple Grandin is one such person. She is a self-described “mitigator” who can describe the process of language recombination she has used. During a radio interview in 2005, Grandin was asked about her considerable success as a communicator. The interviewer began, “Tell me about the process that you went through to become as remarkably verbal as you are. You write early on that people said that you were a tape recorder. You had certain phrases that you said over and over again. And listen to you now!” (Conversations with Kathleen Dunn, Wisconsin Public Radio, 2005).

Grandin then described how mitigation worked in her own life: “Well, what happens is, as I put more and more and more information on the hard drive—and I do have a big hard drive; tiny processor, big hard drive—as I get more and more phrases on the hard drive, I can recombine them into different ways, and then it’s less tape recorder-like ...”

Grandin continued: “The thing is, it’s a gradual learning. You know, you gradually just keep getting better and better and better, and ... gradually get more and more insights. And more and more details are loaded onto the hard drive.” It’s hard for us to even imagine the complexity of the recombinations Grandin achieves, given the formidable size of her “hard drive.”