

Language Strategies for Home and School

By Stacy Hultgren
PDD NETWORK Newsletter

Courtesy:

Dr. Nancy Schwartz has been servicing children in CT with autism spectrum disorders for many years. She spoke to the Atypical PDD/Asperger Support Group in Fairfield recently, and offered some truly sage advice in teaching practical language skills to kids with autism spectrum disorders.

Dr. Schwartz began her presentation by stating, "I can't make any of your kids talk. I can only ask you to be a partner, and if anything, I can help YOU get your kids to talk." She feels that, with 45-minute sessions once or twice a week, she is with them for only a "miniscule moment" in their lives. She also stressed that, "these kids teach us. These kids tell us how to teach them, and it's our job to observe, it's our job to watch their behaviors, and it's our job to understand how they learn." She reminds us that the autism spectrum itself is so vast and encompasses so many differences, that each child is unlike any other, and what works for one may not work for another. You have to get to know the individual kid.

Dr. Schwartz feels that it is imperative that the responsibility for communication be placed on the child, and that they understand that that is what is expected of them. You must, she says, "view your child as a *talker*". You need to expect him to talk. If you only use direct questions to elicit answers from the kids, they are not really learning functional communication, which requires far more skill than responding to questions. Once you view him as a talker, you can begin to also view him as a *thinker*, and expect him to think. "And," she says, "it's now through thinking that he has something to talk about."

Beginnings

Even before a child is verbal, a basic concept that they must understand is that they have to listen. Because many children on the spectrum are visual learners, they run the risk of letting the language "go right over their heads", and they don't pay attention to language. It is imperative to set up situations throughout their day so they learn to listen. This can begin with simple choices that are stated. For example, you might, while they are dressing, put out a shoe and a block (use two things that are obviously different for beginners). Say the word "shoe" and hold out your hand forming the expectation that 1) they're listening to the command, even if not the specific words, and 2) that they're supposed to hand you the shoe. You are expecting the child to have the responsibility for handing over the shoe. You may, of course, have to begin this process with hand-over-hand assistance so that he can understand what it is you expect of him. As they become more adept, change to

less contrasting choices – for instance, while dressing put out a shoe and pants. Since both are dressing items, he now has to listen directly to the word, rather than associating your verbal command with the situation. School settings can utilize the same methods, asking for a pen vs. paper in the art room. She says to “build receptive or comprehension pieces across the board, across the day, in everything the child has to do.” Many kids on the spectrum have greater expressive language skills than receptive, so they can *appear* to understand far more than they do, partly because they are good at memorizing and echoing. When putting out contrasting items, they are forced to depend upon the word itself, and you are not permitting him to let the language go unnoticed. He is learning, rather, that when he hears language he is expected to respond, and that there is a *specific* response required. The sequence of events that you are teaching is that 1) you requested it, 2) he handed it to you, 3) you received it and commented on it, and then 4) you can look away. He needs to learn the parts to an ‘interactional circle’. This not only serves to teach listening skills, but she says that if he’s merely a passive observer, he has the opportunity for self-stimming – he’s not involved. As we’ve heard many times from behavioral experts, you cannot take something away without giving a replacement – let ‘*involvement in an interaction*’ be the replacement for ‘*stim behavior*’. This can, and should, happen across his day, in whatever tasks that child needs to do, and wherever he needs to be, so that his basic comprehension will continually build. If a child uses a cup at mealtime, he can be expected to go and get the cup out of the drawer (but you may have to make sure there is only one cup in the drawer along with other items at the beginning). Eventually, you can ask for a specific cup – the blue cup – so he is now not only learning to pay attention to nouns, but also to attributes. In doing exercises like these, he is learning to lose some of the dependence on visuals and learn to listen to specific information.

‘Carrier phrases’ are a helpful method to improve listening skills - these are little phrases that you use consistently where the last word in the sentence is the one you are focused on. “Turn it ON”, “Put it IN”, “Do you want MORE”, are examples of phrases that help the child anticipate what will be asked of him. Because our kids learn in chunks, it is easier for them to learn the carrier phrase, and then to learn the individual words. Carrier phrases can also serve as a cue for kids who have apraxia (many on the spectrum do), which is a motor planning problem, and they need a cue of some kind to get started. Be careful not to use the same carrier phrase for different words though – do not use “turn it OFF”, select instead another carrier phrase for the command OFF, and be sure all the carrier phrases sound distinctly different so as not to confuse the child.

Carrier phrases, she says, can serve another purpose. “Our language is just so weird,” she points out, and we use the same word to mean different things – OPEN the door looks very different from OPEN the bottle of water. “Why is pulling up the top – why does that mean OPEN? And why should it mean the same thing as OPENING up the door?” When using carrier phrases, you can let them know that there are several situations for OPEN. “Who would have thought that all these words should mean the same thing? Kids certainly don’t, and we have no way to explain it to them except by language usage.” They need to understand the words in context, rather than

just modeling the word OPEN for one usage, because then the child doesn't take the responsibility for calling up the word when he needs it. Eventually, you want to phase out the carrier phrases, as you would with any kind of prompt, but phase them out slowly, and only in those situations where the support is no longer needed.

Dr. Schwartz says that, when giving directives, (such as '*get your shoes*') it is important to be available to the child immediately if needed. Use very clear language, and if they don't respond, help them respond. That means, you can't be talking on the phone while repeating over and over '*get your shoes*'. In this scenario, you don't want to leave room for mistakes, "so the first time, if you say to the child '*come here*' and he doesn't come, go and get him and bring him back to where you want him to come to. You've taught him to listen and to listen the first time, not the fourth time." This requires consistency on the part of the adult, but it is a critical skill to teach because otherwise conflicts develop in determining whether the child does not understand what you want him to do, or if he does understand but the behavior is getting in the way. If you can consistently count on him to respond to a command on the first try, and he is now not responding on the third try, it is most likely that he does not understand what he is supposed to do. She emphasizes the "need to know what he knows" when making program decisions, and not simply be guessing.

Dr. Schwartz says that, while Discrete Trial (an Applied Behavior Analysis technique) is known as a behavioral approach, it does not just apply to behaviors – "you can teach ANYTHING through the behavioral approach." And that, she says, includes teaching language skills like greeting, calling for Mommy (not just labeling a picture of Mommy), etc. They can learn that their language can affect their environment or what is happening around them. They can learn to use words for a function instead of standing and screaming, but it requires specific interventions and setting up situations for generalization within the natural environment.

Kids who have already developed more complex verbal skills can learn to use their language in different ways. If the child can only use a word when they see the picture and hear the prompt '*what is it?*', then it is not a useful skill. They need to be able to call that word up in their own mind when they want to make a comment or a request. If they can only respond to direct questions, they may be learning vocabulary, but they are not learning functional communication. She says they need to learn *vertically* (in increasingly difficult stages) and *horizontally* (across different environments and situations within the same stage). They need to understand that there are different ways in which to use their words – for questions, responses, requests, comments, etc. She gave an example that, if a child pulls a toy car from a bag and says '*Oh! Car!*' he has not only labeled the item, he has also made a comment – that's a social interaction, and he is using his words in a more functional way. When using their words to get something they desire, they are naturally reinforced – they get what they want. They also need to use words for things that are not so directly reinforcing, and that become more and more complex – commenting, asking a question, giving a direction, reporting, requesting, negotiating, joking, - there are many different functions involved in language. You want the child to generalize, and everyone involved with the child needs to understand that, just because he can label a picture or an object, that does not mean he has '*learned*' the word.

Nonverbal Communication Skills

Dr. Schwartz was very clear – MAKE THEM WORK. Always up the ante – if they can make eye contact across a table, great. That's not the end. Try sitting *next* to the child, so the kid has to turn their head to establish the eye contact. Again, making them take the responsibility for the communication. "*Pointing*," she says, "is not just '*pointing*'. What we want them to do is point,

look at you, and look back at what they want." Once the child has learned to point to something they want, MAKE THEM WORK – ask them, *'what do you want?'* So they have to say, *'I want the ball.'* It is so important not to drop the nonverbal skills once the talking starts – they need to incorporate the verbal with the nonverbal, because that is how we all do it. We all look and gesture while talking, we don't do one at a time. She wants the kids to learn to be better "whole-communicators", not just better talkers. She also explained that *'pointing'* is a more complex skill than we think it is – *'pointing'* without actually touching the desired object is similar to using a word – it is an abstract communication skill. They may first learn this skill by taking your hand and physically placing it on the object, making it more concrete. *'Pointing'* is actually a symbolic substitute for the actual contact.

Reading

Dr. Schwartz stated quite adamantly, "Do not read to your kids – talk through the book. The reason is, you can adapt and change the language to the language level of the child. More than that, we - not being on the spectrum - don't have the memory skills our kids do. So that when we go and tell the story a second time, we are not going to tell it exactly the same way. So the likelihood of the child memorizing the book – which we do not want – is minimized. We don't want the kid memorizing the book because as soon as it's memorized, they're not processing exactly the same way. So you don't want to read text, you want to tell stories."

She also says she does not recommend Dr. Seuss books for kids on the spectrum (though she admits that she herself loves Dr. Seuss) because they get caught up in the melody and the poetry and they are not understanding – they are memorizing and the rhyme itself helps them memorize even faster. There is also no way to read Dr. Seuss in different ways without interfering with the rhyming, and, because Dr. Seuss is extremely creative, he makes up a lot of nonsense words and meanings that have the potential of confusing children who are very concrete learners.

In beginner reading books, she tends to change the items in the pictures. For example, in a picture of a boy eating a cookie, she will cover the cookie with a picture of an apple. The kids often have difficulty with this at first – they don't like things to change and they can get frustrated and angry at first. "They know the book, they know what's supposed to happen, now I'm asking them to be flexible, I'm changing an element." They do get used to this, she says, and it teaches them not only to be flexible, but that they need to always be attending to the different elements to comprehend the meaning.

She suggests the use of a 'personal book' – take pictures of things the kid knows. Teach him not only to label the pictures, but to point, look up at you, and label. It becomes more interactive that way, and he doesn't end up talking to the book. Sometimes, kids can use books as a stim behavior or a very isolated behavior, and she says, "if you never look up, you can't have a conversation about what you're reading."

She also develops 'topic books' to show that different words can have different meanings in different contexts. One topic might be "Dirty" and the book is filled with pictures of different ways kids get dirty. This teaches the child the meaning of the word 'because'. *'She's dirty because she fell in the mud.'* *'He's dirty because he ate chocolate'*....as well as the concept that different kids might get dirty for different reasons. If the child is only exposed to the word 'dirty' when he painted a picture, he will associate the word with that incidence only, and the generalization may not happen spontaneously. Emotions are also subjects of topic books – 'Happy' – containing pictures of what makes the child happy. Angry, sad, any emotion will do. She uses the books at other

times as well, such as when the child is NOT happy, and she goes through the book to remind him what makes him happy. Books can be developed for others as well, so that a teacher could have her own 'Happy' book – with things that make HER happy, so the child gets the message that different things can make different people happy.

Sentences

The kids lack the natural creativity that most children have with their language, but that creativity can be directly taught. The essence of a sentence is a central word (typically a verb), and then around that word the actors and objects can be varied. The child can learn that forming a sentence is a little like taking from column A and adding it to column B or C. Mommy eats a banana, Daddy eats a banana, Mommy eats an apple, Daddy eats an apple....If they don't learn to intermix the words for different meanings, they may only be learning the chunks. "Our kids are memorizers, they have incredibly good memories," she says, "and our goal is to teach them that they can't rely on memory, they have to rely on comprehension of the entire situation."

She uses sets of pictures that can be defined in different ways. One has a man cooking hot dogs on a grill, for instance, along with other pictures. She asks the child to hand over the picture of the man. Then she might ask for the picture of hot dogs, or cooking, or Daddy. With all the pictures, the object is to have the child be able to identify what, who, and what is happening, in the pictures and they learn this by understanding that one picture can be made up of different aspects. After the child gives her the picture for the command "man", she expands on the language by responding, "right, the man is cooking hot dogs", rather than just praising him for choosing correctly.

Often, kids just learning language will begin learning a variety of nouns, but Dr. Schwartz stressed that we also need to be sure to teach a lot of verbs. These can be taught through pictures, or live-action activities. For instance, when teaching 'throw' - throw balls, paper, shoes, anything to teach 'throw' without connecting it to only a single noun. Verbs, she reminds us again, are the center of the sentence, and you can't make sentences without verbs. Through the use of modeling and tapping the child as a prompt, they can be taught to 'picture read' in books. Without the more direct prompts of 'what is that?' or 'What's the girl doing?' the child needs to take on the responsibility of saying what he knows (through the modeling and tapping) – even if it's as simple as 'boy in tub'. When they can master that, she says, "they can look at books all by themselves", and that is an independence skill they need. She also uses live action to make different sentences, and will stop at nothing to develop those sentences. If the child is riding a truck and says, 'ride truck', she gets down on that truck and says 'Nancy ride truck', and then she will expect Mom to get on the truck and will say, 'Mommy ride truck' (parents have to work a lot, too!). Then she'll change that to 'Nancy ride horse'; 'Mommy ride horse' (and yes, they actually have to ride the toy horse). It is important to get away from too much dependence on pictures, because the kids need to learn to talk about things that are happening around them, which will help later on when they graduate to learning concepts such as 'reporting'. Teachers can have the child talk about what is going on around them by taking them by the hand whenever there is free time and walking around the room (especially if it is a room divided into Centers) to see what the others are doing – i.e. 'Look, Mary paints a picture', 'Scott is doing a puzzle'...

While Dr. Schwartz understands there is a place for direct questioning of a child (i.e. 'do you need help?') as a prompt, she insists that, whenever possible, the child should be encouraged to make the initiation, rather than have him become comfortable in the role of 'answerer'. Wait to see if they ASK for help, but don't let the child get frustrated and walk away from a task if they don't

ask, push him back to the task and prompt him to ask for the help. Too often, parents and professionals jump in too soon to be helpful, and the child is never put in the position of making the decision for asking or not – they simply expect the help to arrive as if by magic, not as the result of their use of language.

Kids need to develop the skill of talking about things that are not immediately present, and just like pointing, this is a more abstract task for them. She starts by prompting the child in a very specific, no-room-for-error way. She takes the child aside while the parent waits, and, while the bike is still present, she tells the child, “go tell Mommy, ‘I ride bike’”. Rehearse as much as needed to be sure he can succeed, even if she has to stand behind him prompting him “tell Mommy, ‘I ride bike.’” This is a better strategy, she says, than Mom asking, ‘what did you do today?’ “Because the minute you have a conversation, if somebody takes over and does all the questioning, it’s their responsibility now for the conversation.” Then after they can succeed with this, move on to the more difficult task of going to another room where the bike is not immediately present, and using a picture of the bike to remind him what to say. The child holds the picture while someone prompts him what he is supposed to say without him being asked.

Sequence language

This is a more complex task of teaching the child to string more than one sentence together in order to make more than one point. She uses a chart with a picture in the middle (perhaps of the zoo they visited) and a group of circles around it. Those circles can contain pictures of a tiger, an elephant, ice cream, whatever the child did at the zoo. The child can learn to make multiple comments about the topic (the zoo) by following the pictures and listening to the prompts. For example, he can make comments such as ‘When I went to the zoo, I saw a tiger’. Then prompt: What else did you do? while pointing to the next picture. ‘I had ice cream.’ She encourages kids to hang the charts on their refrigerators so that comments can be added later on, or he can be reminded of the zoo and can use the pictures to prompt for the beginning of a conversation.

Higher level skills involve putting together extended language, such as ‘storytelling’, giving a ‘procedure’, or an ‘explanation’. To teach ‘procedure’, give the child a toy, and a series of pictures that describe how the toy works. Have them follow the picture sequence in telling, “how the toy works” with the last picture making a final statement of some kind. In teaching how to tell a ‘story’, it is important to focus on teaching basic story grammar and background information – who, when, where, what were they doing, what happened, etc. In telling a story, a key element is that there needs to be an event, and there needs to be a reaction of some kind (she notes that some basic books for young children aren’t actually stories – they can be just a procedure, such as dressing, outlined in pictures). Stories can be made very simple for beginners, and consist of only a few sentences, or they can become more and more complex for those more able. Dr. Schwartz stressed that care needs to be taken when reading or acting out stories only one way.

She uses “flip books” that she constructed where the pages of the different elements are interchangeable – she can change the people, the action, and the result. She changes one element at a time, and can construct a variety of stories with the same book. The child is learning that you can change a story, that they are not based on fixed content. This can help with creative play as well as flexibility. If there is no bike available but there is a scooter, he can still play.

To increase reporting skills, she recommends starting with simple descriptions, and then gradually pushing them to report more and more. Reporting means talking about something that is not immediately present, and using skills involving sequencing the language. One idea is to send

the child to school with a picture of something he did at home attached to his backpack. The teacher can prompt him, with the picture at first, to tell her about what he did at home. He can then, likewise, bring a picture attached to his pack home from school so parents or other family members can prompt him about his activities at school.

Dr. Schwartz feels it is important to always make sure the child is basically having a 'conversation'. This involves multiple turns in an interaction. She prompts them with reinforcers, when needed, to continue conversations that would ordinarily be quite short. For instance, if she typically gives a cookie as a reinforcer for another task, when the child is looking for delivery of that reinforcer, she will change the action. She gives a TINY, TINY piece of a cookie, so the child will protest. She questions him/her about the problem – *'what's wrong?'* And waits for him to say something like *'I want the big cookie.'* She then continues the conversation by asking, *'do you want it in your pocket?'* *'No.'* *'Maybe I should give it to Mommy?'* *'No, I want to eat it.'* Now the two individuals in the exchange are taking multiple turns, and the adult is pulling language out where it wouldn't normally have been. By using the reinforcer as a topic, the child is motivated to stay with you because it is a topic he is very much interested in. She suggests using other things the child is interested in as well (and many of our kids have very special interests that can be used for conversational practice, but don't let them simply recite all of their extensive knowledge on the subject – that is not a 'conversation').

When the child wants to go somewhere, she says, "Make him do something before he goes to leave the house. Make him help. Make him do multiple steps, you make him talk about – *'what did you just do? Oh, you got the socks, and you got the shoes'...*" Have the child help others around the house. **"These kids are not guests in the house," she says, "even though they have a disability, these kids should learn to help other people."** They can learn a great deal about perspective and responsibility by, for instance, helping Mom with a baby sibling. Or, she says, "if you're sitting there and you cut yourself and blood's dripping, the child should understand that you need a Band-Aid just like they might need a Band-Aid, and that they might help and be able to get it." There are many, many opportunities that happen throughout a day that can be used as a training ground.

Thinking and Knowing

Kids need to learn the thinking skill of 'planning' for an activity – that things just don't happen, that an activity doesn't get put together all by itself. Picture sequences are very important in teaching this skill, so that they can learn to pull apart activities and be able to figure out sequencing. Often parents, and teachers as well, tend to do things for the kids rather than having them piece together how to do it. **"Every time you do something for your kid and not put out a picture sequence or not get them to do it, feel guilty. It's not so much that you're being good to the child – you need to get them to understand. We don't have the luxury with these kids to assume that if they watch you make their lunch twenty times, that on the twenty-first time they're going to be able to make their lunch. They've got to be able to do it."** This also applies to school, she says, and rather than getting the glue and crayons for him, it is important that he learn how to organize those materials. She suggests, as a method of teaching planning skills, to use picture sequences with the final outcome first. For example, she used a picture of a boy, and in a thought bubble she puts a picture of him riding a bike. Then the child needs to plan out the steps the boy needs to do to reach that goal of riding the bike by using pictures of each step (go to the garage, get the bike out, open the garage door, etc.) The last picture in the sequence has to match EXACTLY the picture in the thought bubble. Eventually, you

can progress to where the child needs to plan out the sequence without the picture prompts. This, she says, teaches him that he needs to organize what he thinks about, which is an executive function, but it also can help with conversation, because they can also learn how to talk about what they think about, i.e. the plan to ride the bike and how to go about doing that.

*The basic idea is, she says, we have to teach the kids to think. Planning out strategies like the ones listed above is one way. She stressed the need, though, to also sabotage situations, so they have to learn to come up with alternatives. She gave the example of using a bag with a hole in the bottom. She has a table nearby with a scissor, tape, stapler, a marker, etc. She puts some blocks in the bag, and they, obviously, fall out. She instructs the child to go to the table and get something to fix it. The child comes back with a marker. Rather than just saying 'no, that won't help', she takes the marker, marks the bag, and then puts the blocks back in. When they inevitably fall out again, she asks him to get something else. He comes back with a scissor, so she cuts the hole even bigger, shows him that once again, the blocks fall through. Try something else. He comes back with the stapler, which she uses, and he sees that the blocks DON'T fall out. He solved the problem. But it doesn't end there (Nancy can be incredibly devious) and the next day she has another bag with a hole and blocks and NO stapler on the desk, but there is still the tape. He needs to find another way to fix it. She says that, while kids very often can have an emotional reaction to the situations themselves, they do get it under control, because **"learning how to solve your problems empowers you in a tremendous way."***

The child also needs to learn, in a more concrete way, what 'knowing' is about. 'Knowing' is a very abstract term – how do you know if you 'know' something? She suggests that parents talk about evidence and tying the evidence to 'knowing' things. She gave examples of: 'I know it rained last night, because I can see the street is wet.' 'I know the dryer is on; I can hear it.' Ask the child to draw 'conclusions' – 'how do you know it rained last night, what do you see?' Then progress to where you don't need to ask about what they see, hear, etc. so the child has to pull that out himself.

Teaching these kids to learn concepts such as 'thinking', 'knowing', and 'concluding' requires complex planning and execution. But accept the fact that they will NOT learn these concepts if not taught directly and in a very concrete way. How important are these skills in terms of later independence, and are you willing to risk the chance that they won't learn it because the effort isn't there? I suggest we use Dr. Schwartz's advice and remind ourselves on a daily basis that we all need to see our kids as talkers, we need to see our kids as thinkers, and that we have expectations of them to assume the responsibility to achieve that. You will get your reward for all of your hard work as you see your child become more and more able to handle decision-making and problem-solving.

Thank you, Dr. Schwartz for your dedication to our kids over many years! You have positively affected the lives of so many here in CT.