

Laughter: The Universal Language of Childhood

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Kidspeak is melodious... and is the “language” or shared sound that underlies verbal language.

The title of this issue’s column was the theme of a cartoon I saw some years ago. It showed a bevy of happy children running and laughing, wordlessly communicating their pleasure through the “language” of shared sound that underlies verbal language. Let’s examine how this works.

The Sounds of Speech

To begin with, kidspeak is melodious. It is the sing/song we mimic when we speak to our children in “motherese.” Around the globe, the tonal patterns of speech have some surprising consistencies. For example, the musical interval within different words for “Mommy” is a third, and the interval for “Daddy” is a fourth. Who knew we all shared such a universal song?

Enter cacophony, however, and the picture is much different. Distress calls have little music in them. The sounds of pain hurt our ears; tantrum is deafening. So, to truly build a “sound” foundation for our kids’ verbal language, we have to find the laughter! I know this is not easy with many of our children, and I have seen how confounding the twists and turns of the road can be. But, when we get there, and a child experiences safety, pleasure, and freedom from pain, we discover the joy-filled, intonational underpinnings of verbal language. We have the stuff that words can ride on, and from which verbal communication is born.

Let’s look more closely at this “sound wave.” Sound comes from our air stream; breath is released from the relaxing of the muscle at our core, the diaphragm. As it rushes through the larynx in our throat, it is vibrated into different musical pitches. And it can be shaped into pitch contours that sound like real talking! You know how people sound when they’re

talking in the next room? Or how a teenager sounds when he grunts, “I don’t know” without opening his mouth? It’s like that...and it’s the “goo goo goo” of baby talk.

We have underestimated babies, it seems to me, when we say they are “just” babbling. We tend to ignore their “music language” for months and months, until one day, seemingly out of the blue, they say their first isolated word. We celebrate that day, of course, but rarely do we rewind the movie to re-live how it evolved. With our ASD kids, we do remember, though. The years leading up to the first word are often agonizingly long, but when the great event occurs, we often have considerable data to show what the path looked like. We can replay our kids’ voices in our minds, and hear the sound strings when they were all slurred together, when talking sounded like a jumble of vowel sounds, something like “goo goo goo” but not as clear.

In the field of Speech-Language Pathology, we refer to the intonational string of sound as “suprasegmental” (meaning above the segmentals) and to the speech sounds themselves as “segmentals.” From a purely sound standpoint, this makes sense. Think about your experience when you hear a foreign language. You can’t segment the sound stream, having no idea where one word ends and the next begins. From a developmental perspective, this also makes sense. In the early years of life, it’s all about the sensory context. Sound plus the other senses within the experience form a gestalt, a whole, and meaning is embedded in that context. But once kids are ready, bits of it become isolated, and individual words are born.

The Meaning of Sounds

What is meaning to a young child? The work of Jean Piaget provides a useful answer. Until

two years of age, during the sensorimotor stage, the young child is engaged in learning to use his body to interact with the world. The thinking and the language that develop during this period mirror his exploration. The sounds of contentment - safety, satiation, and satisfaction - are built in. Let's consider some of them. "Whew!" has an unmistakable feeling. Think of what "Mmmmm" and "Yum yum yum" conjure up. Say these kid-words to yourself, and notice the delightful rise in your voice, and the fall that comes when you run out of air. The "Aaaah!" of satisfaction is calming and satisfying all by itself!

Now try a very different exercise, and express these feelings: danger, need, discomfort. Listen to the sounds emitted: a shrieking "Aaaa!", a whining "Unh!", a struggling "Uh!" or "No!" Do you hear the lack of melody, the constriction of the air stream, the tightness of your throat? These sounds are painful to produce, and painful to hear.

So, what did we learn from this little experiment? First, that to reflect the joy of life, our language system needs to find some pleasurable contexts and expressions within which it can grow. We need to coax the smiles from inside our kids, and create the "Ah!" and the laughter! No small task, of course, with many of our kids, but our autism community is replete with resources. Many good folks are out here, and our community is a sharing one.

And after that? Sounds of pleasure, intonational contours of joy, suprasegmental sound patterns of self-expressed

happiness lead to the words you want so desperately to hear: "Yea!" "Yes!" "I love it!" "I love you!" They are there in your child, I assure you. Happy sounds come with free breathing, rich intonation, an open mouth, and bursts of gleefulness. Words are embedded in these riches... and, over time, they can be chiseled out of the intonational background as the diamonds in the rough they are. When the circumstances support them, they will be part of the sensorimotor experience of your child. Create the circumstances, and the words will follow.

Your assignments, then, are these:

1. Take some time each day this week to find a smile in your child. Jot down ten situations that made him happy. Pay special attention to any sounds he made. Did he shout gleefully as the water comes out of the faucet? Did he giggle with a particular pitch when you tickled his knees? Did he shriek with joy when Barney appeared on the TV? Can you sound just like him in each instance? Practice each of these sounds, mirror your child, and internalize the sound track.
2. Next week, when you meet these situations, mirror sounds back to your child. You know your child's gleeful sounds now, so let him hear them from you! You are creating a sound library for your community of two - the beginnings of a language you share.

3. The following week, be a mirror again. Use the sounds you learned from your child, but this time, make them sound a little more like words. "Whewee!" "Ohhhh!" "Uh huh!" are a few we all recognize. Make sure the sound contour continues to flow, however. You are not trying for vocabulary yet, just a little step up from pure sound.

4. Finally, the fourth week, add a word or two, still making sure the sound continues to flow, and still sounds like your child. You might try, "Whewee... wow!" or "Ohhh...yeah!" or "Uh huh, you got it!" Have fun with your dictionary, and see if it adds to the fun. You know how contagious laughter is, and there's huge value in laughing uproariously together!

You are now truly on the road to language - with a strategy for discovering the sounds and words your child will be able to call his own. You know which situations support happy sounds, and happy language, and have begun to write a personal dictionary for your child. With your dictionary in tow, go have some fun! 📖

Marge shares past AADigest articles and columns at her website. Check them out to learn more about communication and language issues in spectrum children!
www.communicationdevelopmentcenter.com.
