

Grammar: How and When to Teach It

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Our kids process, and use, what they are ready for – naturally.

Let's begin our grammar discussion with remembrances of school winter pageants, and the endearing ways kids interpret the words to the songs they sing. "Sleep in heavenly peas" is one of my favorites. Think about how "Let it snow..." might become, "Lettuce – no!" in the mind of a child who doesn't recognize the intended grammar, but does recognize "lettuce." As cute as these kid-meanings are, we want to think carefully about language development in our kids and avoid as many pitfalls as possible. Sentences hit our ears all slurred together, and unless we recognize word boundaries and how words can fit together with grammar, they can be misunderstood, or not understood at all.

So, what do we need to know to help our kids decipher grammar? How and when do we help them fashion their own meaningful sentences?

We first want to direct you to prior AADigest columns that will help. Please see "First Words: Their Real Significance to Language Development" in the Sept-Oct 2010 issue for a description of the stages that precede grammar. Earlier *Communication* columns, available on the author's website*, discuss pre-verbal development of communication, speech, and social reciprocity.

Preceding grammar, there are three stages of Natural Language Acquisition (NLA) in our kids with ASD:

1. Processing strings of sounds at a holistic level (echolalia). Deriving meaning from the context of sentences, songs, and sound. Understanding what sound strings mean in the situations where they were first heard: "It's a clue!"; "It's time for you to go to bed"; "I have no idea"; "I have something for you!"

2. Processing commonalities (phrases) among those wholes. Mixing-and-matching these phrases to create semi-unique sentences: "It's...no idea"; "It's...something for you"; "I have...a clue" "I have...time for you to go to bed."
3. Processing commonalities (single words) among these phrases. Isolating words: It, no, idea, something, you, I, have, clue, bed. Mixing-and-matching these words to create unique, two-word phrases: "It...idea"; "It...something"; "I...clue"; "...bed."

Stage 3 is a magic time for all kids, on or off the spectrum. Even kids who experience a relatively short, even imperceptible, time at Stages 1 and 2, broaden their thinking when they spontaneously combine single words. As they form unique linguistic combinations, they play with concept combinations at the same time. Take this example from speech and language literature: "Mommy" + "sock." Combining these two words in either order, kids can juxtapose concepts to mean everything from, "Mommy, can I wear those socks?" to "Pink socks are exceptionally pretty, Mommy." Albeit fraught with misunderstanding without the grammar to tell which version of "Mommy sock" a child means, from his perspective each message is clear! Meaning pre-dates grammar...and this is part of the answer to our original question, and key to the next part.

Yes, our kids need grammar eventually, to make their messages clear to everybody else. Stages 4-6 on NLA are about grammar – in a developmental sequence. That sequence has been reported in myriad sources, and the version we use in NLA is Development Sentence Scoring (DSS), a longitudinal compilation of

natural grammar development in children. Laura Lee's DSS has stood the test of time, and is included in the column series *Finding the Words: To Tell the Whole Story*, originally published in the AADigest in 2005, and available on the author's website.

Grammar develops in a natural progression. So whenever we try to teach it out of a cookbook, it fails to "generalize" because it's out of sync with individual development. We are often tempted to teach a child to use a phrase like, "I want ..." way before it's time. Kids learn it, but through the lens of their own particular language development level. If a child is at Stage 1, he learns "I want chips" as a gestalt, and then has to break it down to get to Stage 2 mix-and-match. He learns "I see a ball" the same way, and has to break it down before he can use "I want..." and "I see..." productively.

A child at Stage 2 can learn to mix and match these sentences much more readily, but this is not the same as developing grammar. As illustrated earlier, this is just Stage 2 mixing of phrases!

A child at Stage 3 is less hampered by stock phrases, but they still constrict him from the free-form combining that is natural at Stage 3. Without packaged phrases, this child benefits from the single words we introduce. As we listen and respond to the unique two-word combinations, our child is supported to move on to Stage 4, where he is actually ready for beginning grammar.

Ah, grammar! Finally! How do our kids develop it? With the same mix and

match strategy, as we surround them with little bits of beginning-level grammar. Avoiding packaged phrases, we opt for a broader swath of grammatical territory. Stage 4 grammar includes DSS levels 1, 2, and 3, and offers us a smorgasbord of possibilities. We pick the ones that match our children's interests the best, starting with a small assortment of DSS 1 structures, adding some grammar at DSS 2 or 3 to match a situation. At DSS 1, we try to use a plethora of these grammatical structures:

- Pronouns: I, me, mine, you, yours, it, this, that
- Verbs: is (That's cool; This is an A), is + verbing (It's working), uninflected verbs (I sing; I read; I see it; You see it?)
- Negatives: not (That's not a dog; I'm not looking)
- Question form: Is it blue? Are they ok?

DSS 2 and 3 gives us plenty more variety to gingerly pick from: more early pronouns, question forms, and verb forms such as irregular past tense like "saw," beginning future tense like "gonna," and "Let's..."

So how do we introduce this grammar? How do kids "practice" these structures? There are four rules to remember. First is the **Developmental Rule**: Our kids process, and use, what they are ready for – naturally. Grammar is no exception; surround them with what they are ready for! Secondly, remember the **Mix and Match Rule**. By introducing a child to many examples of several structures at

the same time, we can avoid the "over-learning" of one particular pattern – a common pitfall in language programming. Avoid words kids commonly mix up (mine/yours), but use a nice variety: "I got that ball"; "I need a green one"; "I like yellow!"

The third rule is, **Make Sure it Matters**, which means that the right grammar for your child is what he would want to use. Try modeling several structures, and when your child begins using one (or more), give him a variety of words to use with it, and watch generalization happen. If he picks up, "It's not a block," but not "Is it a block?" use what means the most to him.

The last rule is, **Context Matters**. This rule reminds us that our kids are naturally gestalt thinkers, so context is the source of meaning. Make sure to use language in meaningful play contexts, so that grammar is real in the context of your child's life!

In summary, we can say, "Grammar rocks!" but only when the time is right. When your child is ready, it will matter to him, and you will begin to hear his language sound not only original and flexible, but more like you thought language was supposed to sound! Sleep in heavenly peas... ■

Reference

Lee, Laura L. (1974). *Developmental Sentence Analysis*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

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