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What is Gestalt Language Processing?

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Gestalt language processing has recently become a trending topic in the world of speech-language pathology. Let's explore more about this subject and how it relates to speech therapy.

How do children acquire language?

There are two main theories regarding how children acquire language — analytic language development and gestalt language development. Let's discuss the differences.

Analytic language development

is a path of language development where a child learns single words, followed by two-word phrases, eventually leading to multi-word sentences.



Ex: "apple" → "eat apple" → "I want to eat apple"

Gestalt language development

is another form of language development where a child begins by learning *gestalts*, or chunks of language, and then learns to break down these word combinations to form original phrases.



Ex: "twinkle twinkle little star" → "I see a little star" → "star" → "Let's sing a song"



What kind of gestalts do children typically learn?



Many times, these gestalts are lines from songs, books, movies, or TV shows the child is exposed to. For example, the child may say "blast off!" each time they want to play with rockets because that is a phrase they have heard many times while playing with rockets or watching a show about rockets. In addition, gestalt language processors often use language rich in intonation, meaning their pitch may vary greatly. This can cause some gestalt language processors' speech to sound song-like.

Who are gestalt language processors?



Gestalt language processors can be both neurotypical and neurodivergent. However, you may hear the term connected to the neurodivergent community more often due to the traditional connection between scripting/echolalia (repeated words or phrases) and autism spectrum disorder. There is not enough research at this time to claim any direct correlations between language processing styles and neurodiversity. It is also suggested that many individuals develop language using a combination of these two styles, so language development may not be as clear-cut as previously believed.





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(cont.)

How do gestalt language processors develop language?

Marge Blanc, SLP and clinical professor, wrote *Natural Language Acquisition on the Autism Spectrum* in 2012, outlining the six stages of gestalt language processing.

- Stage
1

Delayed Echolalia (repeating words or phrases after a time delay)
Ex: "Good night, sleep tight!"
- Stage
2

Mix and Match (partial gestalts)
Ex: "Good night + it's bedtime"
- Stage
3

Single Words and Two-Word Combinations
Ex: "go sleep"
- Stage
4-6

New Original Phrases with Basic to Advanced Grammar
Ex: "I'm tired. I'll go to sleep."

What does speech therapy look like for gestalt language processors?



Typically, speech therapy with gestalt language processors is child-led and centered around the child's unique interests. Speech therapists working with gestalt language processors put emphasis on modeling phrases that can be easily re-combined, such as "Let's go __" or "It's time to __." Speech therapists acknowledge all gestalts/scripting and try to use context clues to discover the underlying communicative purpose of the gestalts.



Related Handy Handouts®:

- [630 – Autism—the Basics](#)
- [120 – Promoting Oral Language Development in Young Children](#)

Resources:

Blanc, Marge. "Echolalia on the Spectrum: The Natural Path to Self-Generated Language." Communication Development Center. Accessed on March 17, 2023. <https://communicationdevelopmentcenter.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/echolaliaonthespectrum.pdf>

"The Stages of Gestalt Language Development." Meaningful Speech. Accessed on March 17, 2023. <https://www.meaningfulspeech.com/blog/Stages-of-GLP>

Evans, Karen. "Let's give them something to gestalt about." The Informed SLP. Accessed on March 28, 2023. <https://www.theinformedslp.com/review/let-s-give-them-something-to-gestalt-about>

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