Research Brief

A summary of a published research article

Issues in Early Comprehension Development of Children with Autism

By Linda R. Watson, Ed. D., CCC-SLP

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Deficits in comprehension of language is not a criteria for the diagnosis of autism, but evidence suggest that individuals with autism comprehend language (both verbal and nonverbal) more poorly than their age matched typically developing peers and peers with specific language impairment. Researchers are still trying to pinpoint exactly how and when children begin to comprehend language around them, but it is thought there are three important factors in development that are related to how well a child comprehends language.

First, one needs to be attentive to listening and perceiving spoken language (speech perception). Newborns are remarkable at attending to the various sounds we use to make words. Typically, children with autism pay limited attention to speech, which could contribute to difficulties in language comprehension.

Second, one needs to understand that language has meaning and is necessary to exchange ideas, convey emotions, and maintain social relationships. This connection begins early on in infancy when infants share and interpret facial expressions with their parents and caregivers. Parents of children with autism, however, are more likely to report their child had "an expressionless face" as an infant versus parents of non-autistic children.

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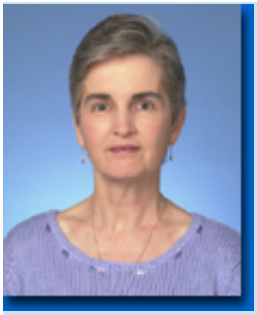
Third, one needs to understand the use of symbols in our daily life. For example, young children engage in symbolic play when they use a banana for a telephone or pretend that a doll is eating. Research has shown that in comparison to children with developmental delays or typically developing children, children with autism do not engage in as much symbolic play.

This research brief is based on an article, Issues in early comprehension development of children with autism, by Watson, L. R. (2001) published in *The research basis for autism intervention* (pp. 135-150). New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.

Speech perception, construction of meaning in social situations and symbol formation are three components viewed as being important to development of language comprehension. Thus, these are areas to address in research on communication intervention for children with autism. Currently there is limited evidence that supports improvement of language comprehension by improving a child's speech perception skills. Other interventions focus on developing meaning in social situations by teaching children with autism to pay more attention to people and improving imitation skills. Targeting these skills in intervention programs for very young children with autism can directly improve their comprehension of language. For very young children with autism there is often a focus on improving functional communication through nonsymbolic means (e.g., use of actual objects) and then moving more towards symbolic communication such as sign language or picture symbols. Most non-verbal children with autism have been able to learn to use non-verbal symbols in communication and this does not inhibit, but may actually facilitate the later use of verbal communication.



Dr. Linda Watson is an Associate Professor of Speech Language Pathology in the Division of Speech and Hearing Sciences at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine. Her research focuses on language disorders in young children, autism, and emergent literacy. She is the principal investigator of the Language Outcomes Project and a co-investigator on the Sensory Experiences Project.