

Encouraging Linguistic Function: Note 1

When attempting to establish effective linguistic function in language-delayed children the primary object is to somehow bring about in him, or her, the basic 'understanding' that the speech directed towards him should inevitably lead to his action and, if he is aware of the speech, that active response is expected of him.

Speech should come to be recognised as portending pleasurable and satisfying activity under conditions of social contact and approval.

That is to say, heard speech must promise 'reward' and *should therefore be adequate of itself to attract a child's attention*; should be capable of arousing his initial interest in virtue of its very nature as a potentially meaningful signal from another human being. Later the semantic content of the message, when potentially significant to the child, somehow selectively excites his interest and attention. (Compare, at a non-linguistic level, the effect of a sweet wrapper sound, ice-cream van, etc; or, at a linguistic level, the 'Cocktail party effect'.)

Hence it should not be necessary nor is it advisable to excite a child's attention by raising the voice or otherwise first attracting his notice (for example by touching him or by moving to within his visual field).

In fact, this procedure of 'getting the child's attention' before speaking, may well hinder progress. By prompting in this way we are insisting on the child's accepting the benefits of the communication: the child may come to expect that the significance of the message will eventually and inevitably be made clear to him, virtually forced upon him, by some means or other, whether he willingly attends or not. Under these circumstances he has nothing to lose by not immediately attending and may even develop a habit of responding to less easily comprehensible verbal signals only after, for example, a preliminary warning tap on the shoulder followed by additional descriptive gesture.

I would suggest then that the child should be spoken to in a quiet conversational voice (by all means, using variation in rhythm and stress pattern) from wherever one happens to be without first deliberately attempting to establish contact by any direct non-linguistic manoeuvre.

Encouraging Linguistic Function: Note 2

Each of us is adjusted to responding to the behaviour of normal children. That is to say to children whose behaviour is closely similar to that of most other children of a similar chronological age.

Thus when we hear certain speech structures from a child we make an implicit assumption that his understanding of the speech of others is even more advanced than that which he himself utters.

Such an assumption is not necessarily valid in the case of the child whose linguistic abilities are slow in evolving or maturing and who may, surprising as it might seem, find articulation a less arduous and exacting task than that of discerning symbolic signification in the speech of another.

Our natural need, as actual or locum parents, to hear our child talk leads us to heavily reward (reinforce) his speech and to recognise early a failure or delay in this function; however we rarely see fit to non-specifically reward understanding (quite properly) and are frequently able to overlook for a remarkably long time a specific delay in linguistic comprehension.

This proclivity to reward talking, which may be useful for the normal child at the appropriate time, can and often does lead to our encouraging vocal and articulatory expression at the expense of linguistic understanding in the dysgnosic child.

The most susceptible conditions obtain when a child of limited linguistic understanding discovers that not only can he diminish the anxiety consequent on his failing to understand an utterance, by fairly faithfully echoing the words (or by other 'talking') but is further rewarded for his action by parental approval. That is to say, he is actually rewarded for not understanding or at least for not responding appropriately to speech; his failure to understand speech or to show that he has understood is deliberately, if unconsciously, reinforced.

This is a special case of the more universal danger of the indiscriminate use of non-specific reward.

Geoffrey Waldon 1967