

The Natural Language Acquisition Guide: 'Echolalia' is all about gestalt language development

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'Delayed echolalia'! It's all about gestalt language development!

Welcome to an adventure in natural language development — one in which you are a crucial player, because you support a child or young adult who is using, and probably developing, language — naturally — the gestalt way!

Please join our growing community of people who understand that gestalt language processing and gestalt language development are natural, and all around us. Your eyes will be opened.

To get you started, please read these 'echolalic'/gestalt comments, and realize something profound.

These phrases and others like them are vitally important because they make up the first, critical stage of language development, real language development, for children and young adults who process and store language gestalts. When they use them later, their echolalia is 'delayed,' which is how that term was coined. But more accurately, these individuals are gestalt language processors (GLP) and they develop language naturally! They start with whole 'chunks' of language: some short, some long — some from media, some from songs, and plenty from the other people in their lives, including you! From now on, you will never see echolalia the same way! It is gestalt language processing — and gestalt language



processors use their gestalts to communicate, and in natural language development!

See if you recognize these common gestalts:

“Howyadoin?”

“Wow!”

“Toinfinityandbeyond!”

“Letsgetoutofhere!”

“Wantsomemore?”

“Abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz”

“Happybirthdaytoyou”

“Ifyourehappyandyouknowitclapyourhands”

See what we mean? Familiar language, often spoken indistinctly, often melodically, and sometimes not spoken at all, but cued up on YouTube, ready to be played — and shared. And, yes, echolalia communicates. So get ready to learn more!

First some background:

Research in the natural development of language is foundational to the field of Speech-Language Pathology. More than two decades of research was

summarized by Ann Peters (1983) and Barry Prizant (1983). Re-released by Ann Peters in 2021, *The Units of Language Acquisition* describes how children naturally acquire their first ‘units of meaning’ from the speech stream around them. Some ‘units’ are single words, often the ones parents ‘reference’ by pointing, looking, and naming. These words provide the foundation for what we have called ‘typical language development.’ More accurately, this is ‘analytic language



development,' the kind we are most familiar with: starting with single words, then two word combinations, then short phrases — and longer sentences.

But there are other kinds of 'units' — gestalt units. The word 'gestalt' means 'whole,' so gestalt units are typically long 'wholes,' whole sentences, whole songs, whole stories. And GLPs naturally recognize their importance when they hear them because they're part of whole experiences. Gestalts are like the sound track of experiences, or life episodes. And when they're spoken or sung in their environment, children recognize their boundaries by the silences that surround them. The speaker or singer pauses momentarily, and gestalt kids pay attention. These 'units' are whole chunks of language, and if spoken or sung later ('delayed echolalia') the foundation of gestalt language development. Yes, they can be single words like 'Wow!' or 'No!' but are more often longer. "How ya doin'?" "If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands; if you're happy..." The language of any important experience or 'episode' of life might be a gestalt that a child spontaneously acquires and uses later. And any language 'whole' that is acquired naturally represents a 'unit of meaning' for a gestalt child. The meaning isn't the adult definition, but the emotional/social 'whole' of the situation as experienced by the child: happy moments expressed by the two examples above, and other emotion-filled moments experienced in real life or via media.

The meaning of any gestalt is singular to the individual who picks it up. As the sound track of an important experience, a language gestalt carries the emotion felt by the GLP at the time. "We gotta get going" says Mom as she herds the kids towards the door. "I don't wanna go" responds big brother as he pulls away. The feelings of the situation matter to the younger sibling, and "I don't wanna go" is the sound track of resistance. But big sister is excited. "Yay, let's get McNuggets!" she shouts as she prances towards the door, and the gestalt of a fun-filled adventure includes a very different sound track. "Yeh geh nuheh!" our little gestalt processor yells and he's ready to go.

See how natural this all sounds? It is all spontaneous extraction of meaning from the 'language soup' that young ones are immersed in whether by single word pointing and referencing for analytic processors, or multi-word 'gestalts' for gestalt processors, delivered with emotion-filled intonation.

Barry Prizant and colleagues recognized this natural process in autistic children who used ‘delayed echolalia.’ And even more exciting, using Ann Peters’ description of gestalt language processing, they discovered that ‘delayed echolalia’ in autism changes over time, just like with neurotypicals, and develops into spontaneous, self-generated language. Prizant presented this natural process as four consecutive stages, developing from gestalts at Stage 1 to self-generated language at Stage 4. As it had for neurotypicals, this natural process became part of the literature on language development in autism!

Natural Language Acquisition and Gestalt Language Processing

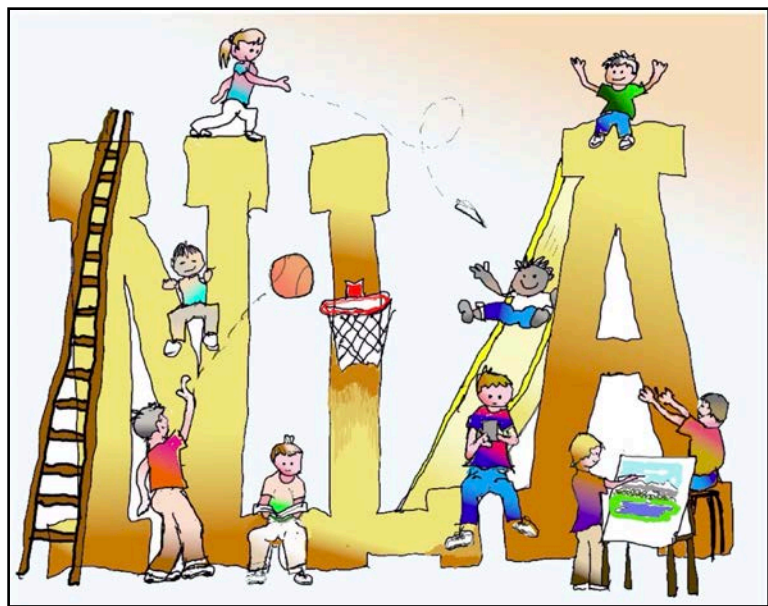
Using the framework discovered by Barry Prizant and colleagues with autistic children, our clinic collected longitudinal data on the language development of autistic children, and other GLPs who were our clients. At a time when even the intentionality of autistic children was questioned, we elicited and analyzed longitudinal language samples, describing that four-stage process in detail. As the data emerged, we recognized two additional stages, Stages 5 and 6 which acknowledged more advanced grammatical development detailed by Developmental Sentence Analysis (L. Lee, 1974).

Calling this process ‘Natural Language Acquisition,’ we highlighted the natural quality of this progression, distancing it from the pathologizing history of ‘echolalia.’ Almost all of our clients were autistic, but we found the same process in our neurotypical gestalt clients as well. In 2005, preliminary NLA data were first published in the *Autism-Aspergers Digest* as, “Finding the Words: to Tell the Whole Story.” With greater longitudinal data, we presented NLA in the book, *Natural Language Acquisition on the Autism Spectrum: the Journey from Echolalia to Self-Generated Language* (M. Blanc, 2012). The longitudinal data Barry Prizant had felt was necessary in 1983 was finally there, and in 2015 Prizant endorsed the book as “the most comprehensive consideration of echolalia and language characteristics of persons with autism to date.”

To reiterate the connection between Natural Language Acquisition and gestalt language development, NLA is a detailed description of the natural gestalt language development process — detailed by longitudinal language development data. NLA describes the four developmental stages identified by Prizant and colleagues, expanded to six, and quantified so the natural language of each

gestalt processor can be assessed, followed, and used in planning natural environmental supports at each stage.

Data-collection was part of regular clinical services. The children were all receiving speech and language services at the Communication



Development Center in Madison, Wisconsin, and data collection was through natural language sampling using the guidelines developed by Laura Lee (1971). Since almost all clients were autistic, ranging in age from three to fifteen, their language development data served to expand the documentation of Prizant and colleagues. Like the classic ‘intonation babies’ described by early qualitative researchers, these were all gestalt processors whose musicality, frequent lack of intelligibility, and general lack of referential language distinguished them from the classic ‘word babies’ known in the research literature as ‘analytic processors.’

The NLA book served to complete the story begun many years earlier by Barry Prizant and others. As noted by Prizant in 2015, “In this seminal work, Marge Blanc, an experienced clinician and clinical researcher, brings us back to a crucial understanding of language characteristics and language acquisition in ASD based on her deep understanding of language development from a social-pragmatic, child-centered perspective.”

The NLA book became the cornerstone of the courses, trainings, webinars, and podcasts which have followed in these venues among others: American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, Northern Speech Services, Legado Universal del Autismo, New Jersey Autism Center of Excellence, Meaningful Speech, a large number of Instagram accounts, and a variety of Facebook groups, including AAC and Gestalt Language Development, Canadian SLPs and CDAs for Natural Language Acquisition, a UK/Ireland study group, and a francophone group in Canada. In addition, the Communication Development Center website has become a home for existing qualitative and anecdotal data, and a place to expand internationally.

Gestalt Language Development and Analytic Language Development

Having described gestalt language development in some detail, it's now time to revisit the larger context of language development for all children. Besides the two natural styles of language development, ALP and GLP, there is a combined process possible when children are very young (A. Peters, 1983). While it is important for all of us to realize this is possible with our 'littles,' it is usually witnessed only by parents — and often goes 'under the radar' completely, as unintelligible utterances are seen only as 'jargon.' While most of us never see this process, it is important to the big picture, and more about this 'dual processing' will be presented later in this guide.

Now let's go back to what most of us know: the style of acquiring 'units of meaning' first through single words as 'analytic processing.' This is the familiar process in which single-word 'units' become the building blocks of phrases and sentences. ALP is easy-to-recognize because it seems straight forward, and looks 'transparent' to us. Much of the child development literature refers to it as 'typical,' even though we now know it is just one style of 'typical.'

In contrast, the other style of naturally acquiring language, gestalt language development is harder to recognize, but perhaps no less common. Gestalts are often identified by their melody, sometimes songs sung without identifiable words, or intonational

contours spoken without identifiable speech sounds. Since long multi-word gestalt units are hard for young children to say, they are often unintelligible. We misunderstand, and call this language 'jargon.' Far from jargon, these gestalts are just as meaningful as single words, and generally more-so because they represent whole events.

They are just harder to understand. And their meaning is harder to decipher. They are spoken later ('delayed' in time) so their origin is often a mystery (to us). Sometimes called



‘unconventional,’ they are anything but, just longer, harder to say, and harder (for us) to match with meaning.

To complicate matters (for us), some of these gestalts come from sources other than everyday language, often media, so uninformed people may think gestalt processors are ‘just echoing,’ ‘just stimming,’ or using echolalia that should be ignored. Gestalt processors are very often misunderstood, and need our understanding. A poignant quote comes from a source included in a recent survey of the literature, “Repeating purposefully: Empowering educators with functional communication models of echolalia in Autism (E Cohn, K McVilly, M Harrison L Stiegler, 2022) “Dyer and Hadden...offered a six-category model of communicative functions in delayed echolalia...and pointed out that the onus is on the communicative partner to discover what the Echolalic is attempting to say. They wrote, “Often it is only the person who manages to deduce the ‘clue’ who can make a response that does not lead to panic in the autistic child at not being understood” (Dyer & Hadden, 1981) As any of us knows, the importance of being understood as a communicator cannot be overestimated.

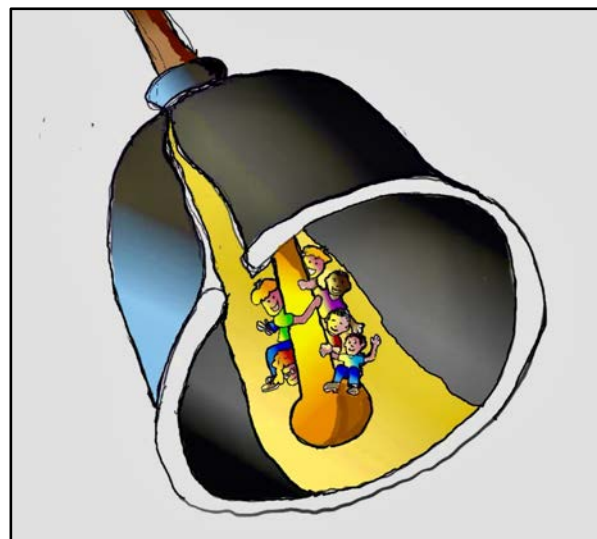
Older individuals have time for gestalt language development

The good news for GLPs is that once we understand the process, we can help. Too often, people have thought that children older than 6 or 7 were too old to acquire grammatical language. If a child is autistic, we have often presumed they were incapable of developmental language at all. When we underestimate minimally-speaking and unintelligible children, we sometimes decide to ‘teach’ them to say (or access) rote sentences instead. If they are considered ‘disordered’ analytic processors instead of gestalt language processors, they are then subjected to drills and prompts to say the things they are not neurologically-designed to say. They are met with IEP goals that target seemingly-functional phrases like, “I want...” and “I need help, please,” on the premise that these ‘language skills’ or ‘language behaviors’ will at least give them something to say in order to make choices and begin to advocate for themselves.

This compensatory strategy is misguided, however, undermining both neurodivergent and neurotypical gestalt processors, and interfering with natural language development. NLA is changing all of that. Sharing among SLPs and parents has filled in many of the gaps in our qualitative data bank, and the various NLA groups, regionally and on Facebook, abound with success_stories

about gestalt language processors who are being supported naturally and successfully as they move toward self-generated, and naturally-acquired grammar. Additionally, collaboration between parents and experts in Augmentative and Alternative Communication and literacy are paving the way for language development among multi-modal, non-speaking, minimally-speaking, and unreliably-speaking gestalt language processors.

Children who could have been misunderstood are now being understood, and are proving their capacity for language development — even into their teens and 20's, as long as they have begun by age 9 or 10. While progress is certainly possible for individuals recognized as GLPs at an older age, it is yet-unknown if useful grammar will be achieved. But, even progress to Stage 2 increases communicative flexibility significantly! The light is coming in through the 'crack in the bell,' and GLPs are resonating with that light!



We want to continue this enlightenment! To do so, what do we need to do? What are the basics of language development that we all need to understand? Here are the first ones:

- (1) some children use an analytic language development process much more than an gestalt language development process
- (2) other children use the gestalt process much more

- (3) some children are young enough to use both. Generally speaking, the younger the child, the less it matters which style is dominant, or if both styles are used and supported.

With a limited number of gestalts in their minds, young gestalt processors can often break down their gestalts between the ages of 12 and 36 months, discover the parts, and then the single words, within them — and start to build phrases and sentences much like an analytic processor. They may be ‘delayed,’ but catch up with their analytic peers. This is especially true when someone recognizes their process, and ensures that they hear everyday language that is easy to break down and recombine for more flexible communication.

Very young children using both styles of language processing were reported in the original research — and with the re-releasing of Ann Peters’ work in 2021, reported again today. We would love to hear from parents of such children as we look towards a new wave of qualitative research. So-called ‘dual processors’ can pick up ‘Fivelittlemonkeysjumpingonabed’ as a whole — melodic but unclear — gestalt, and ‘trampoline’ as an important single word, and sing “Fivelittlemonkeysjumpingonatrapoline.” This combined style was described by the ‘frame and slot’ research of Ann Peters, so we know it can quickly lead to further language development. With the combined support of families and their SLPs, such children’s progress promises to expand our understanding of language processing. Please pay attention to your child and believe in their process. Please report back to us; we are listening.

The trajectory of language development from a gestalt perspective

To illustrate the entire process of gestalt language development, let’s look at an overview of how it progresses over time. While this ongoing process is never completely predictable or ‘clean,’ and its often-simultaneous parts are exciting to witness, the general trajectory described by Natural Language Acquisition allows us to naturally support our children and young adults along the way. NLA gives us the confidence to believe in our gestalt language processors!

	Natural Language Acquisition Stage
1	Language gestalts (wholes, scripts, songs, episodes)
2	Mitigations (mitigated gestalts, partial scripts) Mix and match combinations of partial scripts
3	Isolated single words Two-word combinations of referential single words
4	Original phrases and beginning sentences
5	Original sentences with more complex grammar
6	Original sentences with a complete grammar system

Stages 1 and 2 address language gestalts and their mitigations. At Stage 3, further mitigation into single words appears, and the emphasis shifts to isolating the building blocks of future grammatical utterances. At Stage 3, GLPs show the qualities ALPs demonstrate as they begin their analytic language journeys with single words: pointing, referential naming, greater speech clarity, and pausing to consider the next referential word to be chosen — qualities that suggest the greater volitional nature of Stage 3. These feel like new qualities in language processing that usher in the shift to the semantic relationships coded by grammar at Stage 4, and then more advanced grammar at Stages 5 and 6.

The next three displays are expansions of the first chart. Stage 1 utterances are followed as they are mitigated, ‘mixed and matched,’ and made more flexible so they can be used in a greater variety of situations. Children are amply rewarded then, as people are much more aware that they are speaking in a way we understand — and communicating. Some Stage 2 communicators are so facile with their mitigations, in fact, that they are seen as using original grammar, which they are not. They are not self-generating until Stage 3, however, when single words are derived — and then combined in completely original utterances at Stages 4-6.

The next chart shows the first two stages, starting with the use of stored/processed gestalts at Stage 1. These can be as short as one word like ‘Wow!’ or ‘Thanks!’ and as long as whole books and movies. Stage 2 follows with three processes: shortening of long gestalts, dividing gestalts into parts, and recombining parts in a ‘mix-and-match’ fashion.

1 Storing, processing, and use of whole language gestalts

“Let’s get out of here!”

“Want some more?”

“ABCDEFGHJKLMNOP”

“Upabovetheworldsohigh”

2 Mitigating gestalts and use of mitigations

2a Shortening long gestalts

“ABCDEFG” “So high”

2b Dividing gestalts into smaller chunks

“Let’s get” + “out of here!”

“Want” + “some more?”

2c Recombining chunks to create new utterances

“Let’s get + some more?”

“Want + out of here!”

The next chart shows the second mitigation step, where GLPs naturally divide shorter chunks into single words. Adequate time at Stage 2 is necessary for Stage 3 readiness, so we should not attempt to lead children to Stage 3. As a natural process, Stage 3(a) happens in due time, and we should not try to rush it. But when Stage 3 spontaneously happens, children quickly move from (3a) to (3b), combining two words in a mix-and-match fashion much like analytic processors do at the ‘two-unit’ stage of language development.

This is vocabulary-development time, the rich period of using referential pointing and eye gaze to ‘refer’ to nouns, locations, and qualities in the environment, much like the ‘Mommy + sock’ combinations (3c) that precede grammar development in analytic processing. Our support at Stage 3 is the partnership we give our children as we discover these noun + noun, noun + adjective, and noun + location combinations together. We model, we take turns, and we play with language that has no word order or grammar, and prepares our children for the next Stage, the addition of more semantic relationships, those expressed through grammar. It is highly important that the early ‘semantic relationships’ at Stage 3 become second-nature to the gestalt language processor as they transition to Stage 4. Very young children may be ready very quickly; older individuals may take weeks or months. But, if we play our parts right, all our GLPs will be ready for grammar.

3a Further mitigating/dividing mitigations into single words

3b Recombining single words

“Get ... more” “Want ... out?”

“Out ... some” “Here ... more” “Out... more” “Here ... out”

3c Creating combinations of two referential words

‘Ball...there’ ‘Ball...here’ ‘Red...ball’ ‘Red...blue’ ‘Floor...table’

‘Ball...mine’ ‘Table...under’ ‘Under...over’ ‘Outside... kitty’

‘Door...window’ ‘Kitty...window’ ‘Tree...flower’ ‘Rain

puddle’ ‘Rain...cloud’ ‘Raincoat...wet’ ‘Boots...here’ ‘On

boots’ ‘Coat...off’ ‘Mommy...coat’ ‘Coat...wet’ ‘Wet...dry’ ‘Cold

outside’

The next chart shows the process of creating further two and three-word combinations at Stage 4. Stage 4 begins with pre-sentence grammar, and is really a continuation of Stage 3: expressing conceptual and semantic relationships that involve the other parts of speech: verbs, pronouns, wh-question words, conjunctions, negatives — all at the pre-sentence level. This is where

Developmental Sentence Types (DST) is invaluable as a guide to the semantic relationships that precede sentences. Stage 4 grammar naturally moves from pre-sentence grammar to sentence grammar once the semantic relationships of DST have been explored.

Sentence-level grammar is outlined in Developmental Sentence Scoring (DSS), and the beauty of its natural progression is that all the constructions at each level emerge at about the same time. So it behooves us to be aware of the Level 1-3 structures at Stage 4, so we can use them to express ourselves with language models that incorporate basic grammar. The ‘mix-and-match’ of grammatical functions continues within our conversational partnership with the child, and playing with grammatical possibilities can be part of conversational exchanges just like pre-grammatical possibilities were.

Our language modeling should never stray from meaningful contexts. We use meaning as our guide always. Function remains our focus, with form being just a ‘tool.’ At early Stage 4, grammar is experimental, and continues to reflect semantic relationships more than accuracy. We never need to ‘correct’ a child’s experimental grammar or ‘expect’ a child to ‘say-what-we-say.’ The other caveat at Stage 4 is to refrain from using the hallmark words from Stages 1 and 2. Avoiding ‘mini-chunks’ like ‘It’s...,’ ‘I’m...,’ ‘Let’s...,’ etc. will help keep our GLPs from retreating back to the familiar world of Stage 2 mitigations.

Stages 5 and 6 continue the self-generating process, with the order of grammar development reflected in the work of Laura Lee’s description of eight levels of self-generated grammar development. Equated to NLA Stages, NLA Stage 4 = DSS 1-3; NLA Stage 5 = DSS 4-6; NLA Stage 6 = DSS 7-8. Stages 5 and 6 naturally follow Stage 4 when GLPs are ready, and even though ‘form’ does become more complex, the value of grammatical structures remains grounded in function. Stages 5 and 6 are the higher levels of grammar for analytic processors as well, with the caveat for our GLPs that they may be tempted at various junctures to ‘revert’ to the old mitigated gestalts under some conditions. Dysregulation is one of them, as retrieving words and grammatical structures takes time and thoughtfulness. When formulation is taxing, old gestalts and mitigations may be retrieved more automatically. Having them to fall back on can be very useful, however, as long as the GLP remains aware of the two processes: automatic gestalts vs thoughtful formulations.

The following chart shows the second three Stages of self-generated language, with particular emphasis on the three phrases of Stage 4: first pre-sentence phrases (4a), first sentences (4b), and all basic sentence patterns (4c). Stage 4 takes considerable time, but the results are astounding.

4a Generating first phrases

‘water get it’ ‘got water dish’ ‘clean now?’ ‘where dish?’ ‘not dish blue’ ‘and red?’ ‘because cold’ ‘take out’ ‘maybe not out’

4b Generating first sentences

‘Kitty get more water.’
‘I get more water kitty’
‘Kitty want out, ok?’

4c Generating all basic sentence patterns

‘My kitty likes to play with his toys.’
‘My kitty and I are good friends.’
‘We played in the snow last winter.’
‘Is your kitty climbing that tree?’

5 Generating more complex sentences

‘How long do you wanna play outside?’
‘Can we play with the kitty outside?’

6 More advanced grammar; a complete grammar is developed

‘I don’t think we can play outside if we want to play with the kitty!’
‘Do you think it’s ok to leave the kitty all alone for about an hour?’
‘I know what we can do: play together so kitty won’t get bored.’

The entire process of gestalt language development is exquisite, and fully natural. If it seems ‘strange’ to us at first glance to begin with gestalts, we have only to wait for the child to begin to move through the Stages in their language development to see how natural it is. The gestalt process does not need to ‘make sense’ to us because it makes sense to the gestalt child.

Our description of the NLA Stages is now complete and leads us to the natural supports at each stage of gestalt language processing. This section begins with natural supports at all stages, including the foundational pieces of establishing trust, engaging in regulating activity, and observing so we can follow the individual's lead in play or activity, and superimpose language on real life events.

Natural support for gestalt language development:

At all Stages: trust, regulation, observation

Language develops naturally if we recognize the processes involved and partner with our children. That means recognizing analytic processing vs gestalt processing, knowing the stages of language development for each, and allowing each individual adequate time at each stage. But the foundation also includes deeper principles of child development. It all begins with trust. Trust defines a supportive relationship with the child, and it is up to us to earn and keep that trust. Without trust, we have little right to try to second-guess (and model) language the child might want to keep as their own.

Trust comes first, and allows true partnership to evolve. Within partnership, we can observe the child's natural inclinations, and 'follow the child's lead' even as we supply the 'ramps' for them to demonstrate it through motoric means. Co-regulation means we figure out how we both can feel good, and can play freely together. With self-regulation as a long-term goal, we watch all aspects of physical development and coordination, and make sure they continue as the child gets older.

We pay close attention to the language the child uses and accesses. That language may be songs sung with only a slurred tune, intonational contours that are attempted, unintelligible sound-making that we mistaken for jargon, YouTube clips that are chosen over and over — all mistaken for nonsense by someone who is not as aware of gestalt processes.

Stage 1: Storing and using/accessing whole language gestalts

As we are well-aware, gestalt language processors naturally acquire language gestalts from their environment: real life and media. At a young age, these are the ‘sound tracks’ of lived (or witnessed) ‘episodes of life,’ and carry emotional relevance to the child. When the child stores a language gestalt, language development is launched. We become witness to this language development once the child chooses to use (or access) any gestalt in another situation, to communicate and to share their experience with others. Since it is their best rendition of the initial sound track, it may be unintelligible: just a partial melody or sound blur — very often impossible for listeners to decipher.

And as we also know, the child’s use of Stage 1 gestalts is ‘delayed’ from their first experience with it, and has, therefore, been called ‘delayed echolalia.’ And as we also know, if language is imitated immediately after hearing it, it has been called ‘immediate echolalia.’ This imitation of language is helpful, and often gives a child the chance to take a conversational turn, or another chance to process it, but it is not a part of language development per se unless it is stored for later use. Not until it has been selected, and spoken or accessed later to communicate, do we recognize it as part of language development.



“Let’s get out of here!”
“Want some more?”
“Abcdefghijklmnop”
“Happybirthdaytoyou”
“Toinfinityandbeyond”
“ihuhaaeehuhohhehclapyourhands”

Gestalt language development can begin at any age GLPs find themselves in an environment that supports it. A very young child in a linguistically-rich environment may have an easy time of mitigating — naturally using the ‘frame + slot’ process described by Ann Peters. But for most children who are older, it takes the cognizance of at least one partner who recognizes it is happening. With the conversational partnership of at least one person, the child can begin a journey that takes place over in a matter of several years. But even if gestalt processing is unrecognized until a person is a teenager, the journey can begin, and continue, into an individual’s 20’s.

But the commonality of support, at all ages, is trust.

Trust allows us to add to a person’s language environment, and to judiciously and naturally introduce easily-mitigable language gestalts that person might want to acquire. With this ability, we can support easier language progress through the stages, since some gestalts are much easier to mitigate than others. The decision to acquire a particular gestalt is up to the individual, of course, but if we have modeled just-the-right language for a person’s particular experience, we may find that they have stored it away as part of their language, and chosen to use it later. We are thrilled when that happens, but when it does not, we try others until there is a match. We remain watchful and add language to the ‘teachable moments’ we share. That defines a supportive linguistic environment.



The older an individual, the more complicated the process, however. If ‘echolalia’ has not been understood to be communicative, the individual may have given up on sharing language — and the use of gestalts may have gone underground. With trust comes opportunity, however, so the process of gestalt language development can begin at the age of 10, 15, or even later. It will always begin with trust, but once that is established, the individual may well become more willing to share — and more willing to consider other gestalts we might share.

The bottom line here is that there is no reason not to get started with supporting gestalt language processing! And every reason to start! Even if the individual is older than 15, and we are not certain that a full grammar can be achieved, experiencing successful communication with gestalts, and mitigated gestalts, can make all the difference to a life of hope and sharing.

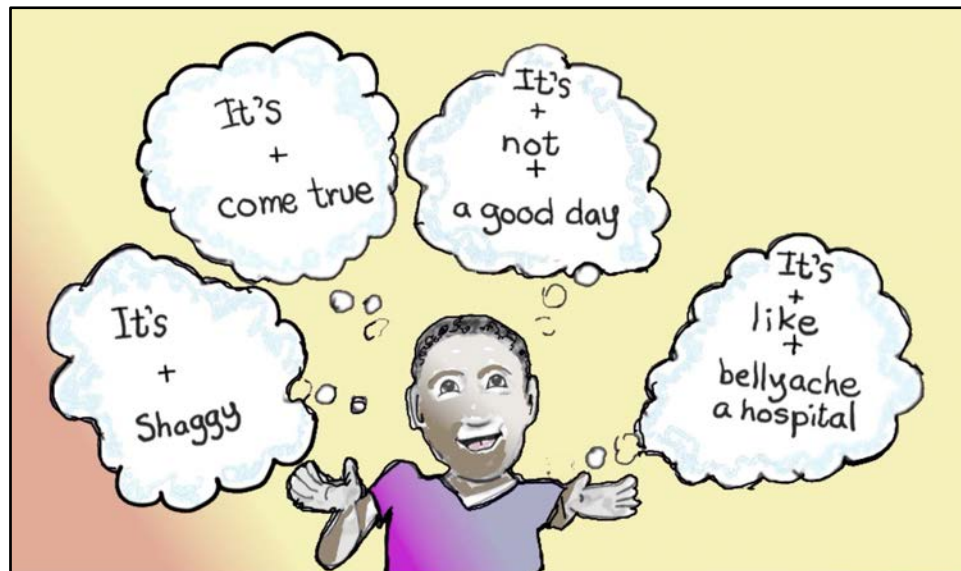
Stage 2: Shortening and dividing gestalts; creating new combinations

After sufficient time processing/storing/using Stage 1 gestalts, the GLP naturally discovers that gestalts can be shortened to better reflect (or still reflect) the essence the person felt about the original gestalt. So “Once upon a time, in a land far away, there lived a grumpy troll” can be said more simply in several ways, depending on the part of the original that resonates most. Maybe “Once upon a time” or “in a land far away” or maybe “lived a grumpy troll.” Not only is a mitigated gestalt easier to say, but it’s easier for other people to understand — and realize the GLP is talking. Mitigating is natural, and relatively easy when children are young and don’t yet have an encyclopedia of gestalts in their minds. If they are older than 5 or 6, however, they may have so many gestalts in their heads, that these scripts are very hard to break down. It may take many rewinds for the GLP to discover, and isolate, the more salient parts.

The rewards of mitigation are many, however, and one reward is being about to exercise the second part of Stage 2. It is visibly exciting when GLPs discover the commonalities among favorite gestalts, and even more exciting when they can move towards the ‘mixing and matching’ of them! To be able to say “Once upon a time + to infinity” and “Happy birthday + clap your hands” is empowering, and leads to more of the same.

The process is natural even with older individuals, but often daunting without a partner who understands the process. If we do our job right, we make it all easier. Mitigable gestalts are mitigable because they share a commonality with other similar gestalts, which is exactly what gestalt language processors are born to discover. This ‘redundancy’ in the language environment makes it possible for GLPs to hear ‘Let’s’ in many of the language models around them, ‘It’s’ in others, and ‘I’m’ in still more. Once GLPs recognize this commonality, they can say ‘It’s a ball,’ and ‘It’s a flower,’ and then a new sentence they’ve never heard before, ‘It’s a caterpillar.’ They gradually achieve success with communicating more flexibly with smaller chunks and combinations of smaller chunks, which offer them greater intelligibility, greater acceptance among their communication partners, and more precise communication.

With this ‘mixing and matching’ of partial gestalts (mitigated parts) comes easier reciprocity with others, which means a greater ability to demonstrate both understanding of language and intentionality.



Once intentionality is easier to recognize, it begins to grow more nuanced as GLPs experience greater success with their communicative ‘bids,’ and are happy to continue exploring more Stage 2 possibilities. The illustration here is of one older individual who began the gestalt language development process at age 10, and achieved this level of linguistic success within a two-year period. Known as ‘Bevin’ in the NLA book, real-life Benjamin became a respected communicator once he had mastered Stage 2. His communicative intentions were more apparent, and it was clear they were as broad as any ALP. Not limited to those identified in the research, the sky was the (limitless) limit.

Stage 2 is natural, and works best when individuals have play and conversational opportunities during which they can discover and create a wide variety of combinations. As with Ben, individuals at Stage 2 are often seen as competent. This is good, of course, but their success sometimes makes the step to Stage 3 seem confusing — to others, that is. For Ben, it seemed quite natural. Our job at Stage 3 is to believe in that naturalness, and discover along with the GLP. If we are comfortable with Stage 3, their natural inclination to discover will be supported.

Stage 3: Isolating and recombining single words

Gestalt language processors naturally move to this next stage after they've experienced enough success using Stage 2 language to express myriad communicative intentions. Success supports success, and NLA has found that when 50% of an individual's communication uses a nice variety of Stage 2 language, GLPs naturally break down language chunks even further. This time it's into single words.

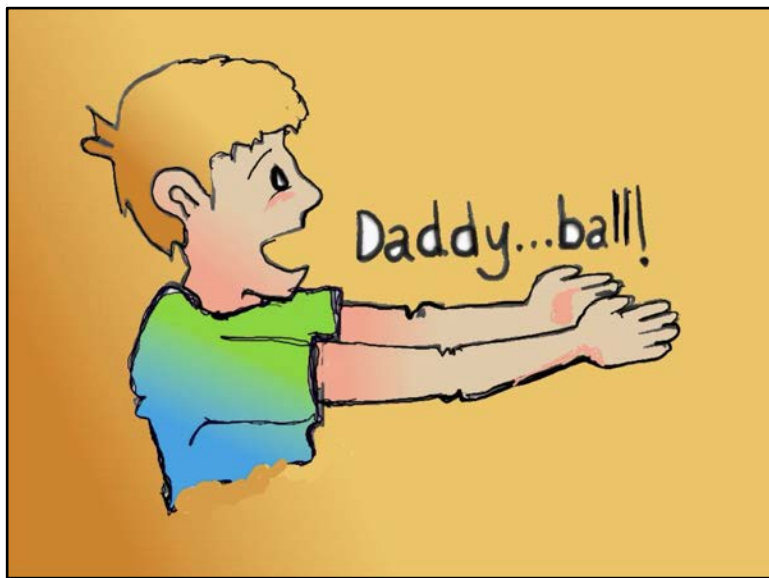
The first Stage 3 moment can be dramatic to witness; and probably always is dramatic to experience for the GLP. Having witnessed several of these 'Aha' moments, I could feel the confusion + excitement of individuals who were used to making long intonationally-supported comments like, "I gotta have that toy" all-of-a-sudden declare "I toy!" The moment is magic.

The significance of the 'Aha' moment seems to be two-fold. First of all, the gestalt processor is dissolving all the 'frames' from Stages 1 and 2, and recognizing that all words can be used in isolation to convey meaning. Virtually simultaneously, the GLP is recognizing the value of single words as 'building blocks' of larger meaning. The first single word isolation/combo 'packs a punch' just as strong as the phrases they were derived from, but almost-simultaneously hints at the potential each of these two words holds, especially if combined.

Sometimes this quantum change occurs virtually overnight, or in a single moment. I've had the privilege of witnessing several classic Stage 3 moments. Each had the leap-of-faith quality similar to the one Mary McLaughlin reported in her blog, MOM-Not Otherwise Specified, in which she described her son, Bud's language progression:

- Stage 1: Quick, Dipsy. Help Laa Laa catch the ball!
- Stage 2(a): Quick + Daddy. Help Mama + catch the ball!
- Stage 2(b): Daddy catch the ball!
- Stage 3: Daddy ball?
- Stage 4: I playing ball with you, Daddy!

The magic of Bud's Stage 3 discovery is captured in this illustration. The confusion of the question also communicates the statement. It all happens at the same time!



Another significance of this magic Stage 3 is that, for the first time, GLPs have the opportunity to fully 'refer' to single words. On the surface, this may seem similar to the way analytic processors 'refer' to single words at a much younger age — but for the older and wiser GLP, each single word 'unit' is more than an analytic-style 'label.' It is a meaning-filled reference point the GLP has worked hard to get to, one that can be used in all the ways that grammar will eventually allow — starting with first, two-word 'semantic relationships.' Semantics is the meaning of individual words and 'semantic relationships' refer to how one word relates to another word. It's a process that grows as grammar grows. And once a word has been used in all the constructions of Stages 4-6, it becomes part of a

multi-point constellation that conveys more and more ‘relationships’ that multiply all the rest of our lives.

But here’s the caveat. Once GLPs arrive at Stage 3, they almost immediately begin to combine single words into these conceptual two-word combinations. This is natural, of course, but which combinations will set the tone for the rest of their language development? The only combinations that have ever known so far have been combos of mini-gestalts. How will they realize the power of the newly-minted possibilities, if we are unaware of how important Stage 3 is? We owe it to our GLPs to ‘push pause’ in our desire to move on to sentences, and have some fun with the word + word combos we can see around us. In order to realize the power of grammar, we need to help GLPs get a feel for the potential of the word as a building block. We are the ones who need to pause and savor the moment, and realize how Stage 3 feels and sounds, so we can recognize it and honor it. It does not sound like the language of Stage 2, so we need to recognize it and its importance. Stage 3 naturally moves forward, not back into Stage 2. That temptation was minimal 15-20 years ago when the NLA data was taken, and even 10-15 years ago when the book was written. But in our media-rich, pandemic-altered world of today, it is quite real. Stage 1 and 2 language surrounds us all, and the drama of it can trump self-generated language unless GLPs’ natural process is allowed to flourish. We truly need to partner with our Stage 3 GLPs to ‘push pause,’ so they can move forward — naturally!

Stage 3 two-word combinations have great potential for the GLP’s future. They are the first ‘relationships’ between independent, and independently-chosen single words. It is crucial that we recognize that. If we ‘push pause,’ we can take stock of that, and support our GLPs through our example. If we don’t, they will have no other language partners to engage with. Partnering in this natural Stage 3 place is how we support our GLPs.

First Stage 3 word + word combos express relationships among things and qualities: tangible things we can see, hear, touch, and point to — attributes we can notice and reference — places we can gesture towards. They are not mini-gestalts any more. They are not anything that sound like Stage 2. They open our minds to other possibilities. They presage grammar, but are not grammar. They are vocabulary, tangible, referential vocabulary. And without vocabulary, grammar is irrelevant. Now is the time to consider vocabulary and set the stage for a lifetime of developing more vocabulary.

The time spent at Stage 3 varies for each GLP. A very young child needs only a modicum of single words, and two-word referential combos, to set the stage for future development — but a GLP who is older has a library of non-referential language in their heads, and will naturally develop a dictionary of single-word building blocks — as long as they are not made to feel babyish or strange doing so. That’s our job. It’s important to realize that GLPs at Stage 3 feel good about it. They feel surprised, and empowered. It’s natural to them, even if it feels awkward to us. We are emerging from the misconception that ALP is the only way, so we need to remind ourselves of that fallacious thinking, and recognize the goodness-of-fit that Stage 3 is for the GLP.

So how do we do that? We practice by ourselves until we can feel the naturalness of it. We practice as we cook dinner, as we drive our car, as we walk the dog. Then we play word games with our family. We can play these games with our child in private. The decision depends on what is fun and empowering for the child. But it is up to us to feel comfortable with Stage 3, which then creates a supportive atmosphere for our GLP. Look the examples on page 24. Try making some combos yourself — right now — try it for a full minute. It gets easier with practice.

Empower your family, then your GLP.

Have fun.

Now let’s look more specifically at Stage 3 supports:

1. Acknowledge the first Stage 3 utterance the GLP naturally offers. When the child naturally and spontaneously splits up a Stage 2 utterance and says “I... toy” instead of “I gotta have that toy,” acknowledge it, and recognize its importance.
2. Depending on the child’s age, think about what to do next. Find a time of day you can play the referencing game together. Play for anywhere from 5 minutes to a half hour; then return to talking naturally. Resist Stage 2 mini-gestalts as much as you can, and resist moving into Stage 4 grammar.

- if the child is very young, and has a small repertoire of Stage 2 utterances to split up, support the child to play at Stage 3 until you sense the child is completely comfortable, and ready to move on. Try for several minutes each day for a week.
 - if the child is older than 3 or 4, they will need more time at Stage 3. Try for several minutes each day for a few weeks. Make sure you play the word + word game in different places, so the vocabulary from each environment is different.
 - If the child is much older and has a virtual library of Stages 2 utterances, partner with the child in the word + word discovery process for as long as you can. Think several weeks at least, if not a whole month or two. Re-read the chapters about Bevin's Stage 3 in the NLA book, and feel empowered by the naturalness of it to an older GLP.
3. Play at Stage 3 by taking equal 2-word turns: focusing on nouns, location words, and attributes. If the GLP moves on too quickly, they will have to retreat to Stage 3 again. That's not bad, but does take more effort.
- Physically 'reference' the nouns, qualities, locations with models
 - Point, gesture, or look to each word, pause, then reference the next
 - Make it fun; model referencing, but don't require it
 - If your child doesn't play this time, try again later
 - If they didn't play, consider why; change it up next time
 - Make it more fun; use a flashlight to highlight each word; turn the lights on-off and recall what you saw; use a flip book that creates funny combinations; play an I Spy game, or a spinner game, or a memory game; create a scavenger hunt (with two things in each location); pick fruits and veggies to put in your shopping cart
4. Again, know that you can come back to Stage 3 if/when you discover some mini-gestalts that need to be separated.

Here are examples of the types of combinations that are good:

Table + brown, Brown + table, Chair + table, Table + chair, Milk + table, Milk + white, Chocolate + Milk, Cookie + Chocolate; Outside + clouds,

Rain + sun, Sun + park, Park + slide, Puppy + there, Puppy + furry, Fur + soft, Funny + kitty

5. Please stop for 30 more seconds and practice this yourself. Every little bit of practice helps make this easy and automatic — for you! It will help you model Stage 3 combos with confidence.
6. Please remember that word order is irrelevant. Referential combinations are just that. They also point out two important Stage 3 principles:
 - Avoid language that sounds like the student’s own Stage 1 or 2 language. We want to give gestalt processors every opportunity to move forward in language development, and not retreat to Stages 1 or 2 as a ‘default.’ Of course GLPs will include more Stage 1 and 2 gestalts and mitigated gestalts in their ‘language soup’ well into the future, but right now is their opportunity to play the ‘referencing game’ so they can move forward.
 - Avoid verbs. Verbs tend to make word combinations sound like Stage 2 — and Stage 4, and tend to reduce the opportunity for gestalt processors to remain at Stage 3. This is first opportunity a GLP has to experience semantic relationships among referential words, the ones ALPs experienced early in language development. We want our gestalt processors to have an adequate opportunity to develop vocabulary in the form of true referential units of meaning, vocabulary. Yes, they will develop a vocabulary the rest of their lives, but time spent at Stage 3 is invaluable as a template for the future.

Stage 4: Self-generating phrases and sentences

As we have pointed out in the last section, the first step into grammar involves word play similar to that in Stage 3, but with greater variety from other classes of words: verbs, articles, pronouns, negatives, question forms, adverbs, conjunctions, and a greater variety of nouns and adjectives. Developmental Sentence Types includes a wealth of grammatical combinations that further extends the ‘semantic relationships’ accessed at Stage 3, but includes the other grammatical constructions that ALPs — and GLPs — acquire before sentences.

First Stage 4 phrases are known for their experimental grammar, which helps us know that children are playing freely with the words that reflect relationships among concepts — which is what grammar is all about! We love the naturalness of early grammar. Grammar itself is only a ‘code’ within a culture. It’s nothing ‘real,’ so experimenting with possibilities is just right. First try, second try...it’s all good!



Support at early Stage 4 involves play-based and judicious introduction of those first elements of grammar identified by researchers and catalogued in DST (Laura Lee, 1974), and monitoring of the variety the GLP uses.

Once all the combinations that ALPs had a chance to acquire early in their development have been experienced by GLPs at Stage 4, it’s time for us to support sentence grammar as outlined in Developmental Sentence Scoring. Age norms for ALPs were derived in the 1970s, and cannot be applied to GLPs, of course, but they serve to guide our first supports of gestalt processors who are ready for early grammar.

Experimental self-generated utterances sound like this: basic grammatical structures, lots of trial-and-error, simple present, past, and future tenses, sometimes strung loosely together with ‘and.’ Here are examples of early grammar:

- ‘Gots water’
- ‘Kitty gots more water.’
- ‘Kitty want out?’

Over time, and with lots of experimenting, Stage 4 includes generating all basic sentence patterns:

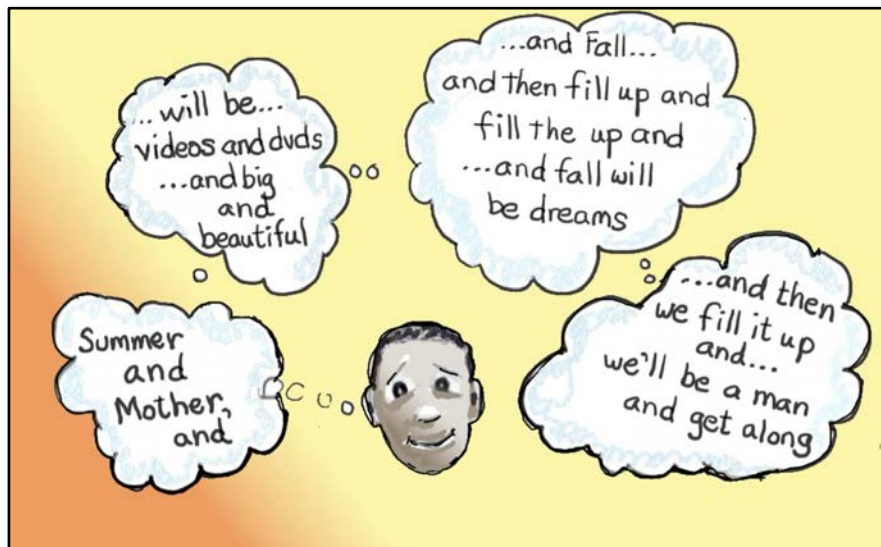
- ‘My kitty likes to play with his toys.’
- ‘My kitty and I are good friends.’
- ‘We played in the snow last winter.’
- ‘Is your kitty climbing that tree?’

A wonderful progression! But one caveat needs to be mentioned specifically, and that is: please make sure that every word a child used at Stage 2 is 'freed up' to stand alone. You may have noticed that there were no contractions ('I'm...' 'It's...' etc) in the examples above. Each word was freed up from every other Stage 1 and 2 context, and could be used alone. So, at Stage 4 we need to inventory all contractions, and practice freeing up each word as an independent agent. Later on in Stage 4, GLPs will use contractions again (because everyone does). But, at the beginning of Stage 4, we need to make sure that every-single-word is a free agent.

How? By playing with word + word versions of them, including freeing up 'I' (from 'I'm'), 'We' (from 'We're'), 'It' (from 'It's'), 'is' (from 'It's' and 'That's'), and 'are' (from 'We're' and 'They're'). And to practice the freeing-of-single-words-from-contractions, we have to be a bit creative: think single words!

Moving along in the Stage 4 process, DSS is our guide, but we know that we might have to dip back into early Stage 4 if necessary, and even into Stage 3 as a refresher.

But, eventually, it all comes together. The illustration below features the language produced by my friend, Benjamin ('Bevin' in the NLA book) as he developed confidence with Stage 4 grammar accuracy, and Stage 5 grammar experimentally! It shows how grammar can sound when a GLP begins the process at age 10, and by age 13, achieves grammar. At some point in Stage 4, GLPs will use contractions again (because everyone does). But we will support them best if that time comes 'later' rather than 'sooner.'



Stage 5: Self-generating sentences with more complex grammar

Gestalt language processors naturally move into Stage 5 grammar as they realize the power of verb forms to express past tense and future tense, a variety of pronouns, the power of question forms, and the conjunction ‘and.’ Our support continues to include recognizing the natural order of grammar development, partnering with individuals in their discovery of its power, and a good dose of grace as we focus on the message of self-generated language and forego critique of its accuracy.

Stage 5 encompasses the grammar of Developmental Sentence Scoring Levels 4-6, which follow naturally after Levels 1-3. Secondary verbs, conjunction forms ‘or,’ ‘but,’ ‘because,’ and negative forms such as ‘don’t’ and ‘can’t’ emerge here, with the caveat that ‘do’ and ‘can’ need to precede them so those common negative forms aren’t used as ‘mini-gestalts.’

When individuals are able to develop Stage 5 grammar during their teen-age years, their academic use of higher-level language in speaking and writing will be well-served. And we now know that Stage 5 can continue into many individuals’ 20’s, so our time spent in continuing partnership is well-justified.

Stage 6: Self-generating sentences with a complete grammar system

After sufficient success acquiring all the grammatical structures at Stages 4 and 5, Stage 6 is where gestalt language processors have the opportunity to acquire the full grammar of their native language. Depending on the age a GLP has arrived at this juncture, the natural expansion of grammar development is available. Our experience has included seeing individuals continue the process through their teen years, and this avenue may be available to even-older individuals. Certainly achieving some aspects of Stage 6 has been documented into one’s 20s.

Support at Stage 6 involves a continuation of careful assessment and conversational introduction of the grammatical structures of more advanced grammar, while carefully addressing the meaning behind the grammar, and insuring, as always, that ‘form’ does not outstrip ‘function.’

Since this process can naturally continue at least through the teenage years, maintaining the cognitive and communicative value of each addition to a grammar system is imperative. Form without function counts for very little.

Life-long Learning: After grammar development has ceased

Rest assured that even when a full grammar system is not achieved by a particular gestalt language processor, communicating with Stage 4 grammar allows self-generated language adequate for most day-to-day situations. Stage 4 grammar includes all pronouns, basic past tense verbs, basic future tense verbs, basic question forms (both interrogative reversal and most 'wh' questions, and basic negation) Please refer to the Stage 4 sentences in the earlier chart and imagine how these types of sentences satisfy most of our daily needs.

Rest assured also that even without achieving a full grammar system, individuals who begin the gestalt language development process in their teens or even 20's can achieve something in their partnership with you. It may be this: "being respected as a communicator." Without you, they may not have been acknowledged as using language at all, and might have spent the rest of their lives being ignored. With your partnership, they can come out of hiding behind their 'whisper' or 'silent' scripting, and use their gestalt language in the light of day. And, while we have recently begun the gestalt language development process with individuals in their 20s, we have yet to determine their ability to achieve Stage 2 mitigation. We have no reason to doubt the possibility, however, so whether they achieve Stage 2, or only Stage 1, they will be honored as communicators — because of you!

Review gestalt language development:

Gestalt language development is natural, and natural strategies of language development are applicable as long as we recognize when an individual is a GLP! Some strategies are intended for 'before' getting started with language development; others are most relevant during the first steps, and others are more important at specific stages:

Principles at all stages of gestalt language development:

- (1) Check in with yourself about your partnership with your child — and make sure you fully believe in the premise and promise of child development. Know that development is child-led, and the timing is child-specific. Know that the timeline allows for development throughout the teen years, and that your partnership allows you to be supportive but does not allow you to expect compliance or ‘skills’ outside of natural development.
- (2) Review all aspects of the gestalt language development process, and make sure you believe in language development in children: both analytic and gestalt. If you do not, your intervention not only undermines the individual’s potential trust in you, but undermines the process of language development itself. Language that is taught, prompted, and/or reinforced outside of natural gestalt language development interferes with language development itself.
- (3) Ensure that you have your child’s trust, and can maintain it. Without it, you really have nothing. At a practical level, without trust, your language models will have no relevance. Again, know that you can come back to Stage 3 if/when you discover some mini-gestalts that need to be separated.
- (4) Honor your connection with the child. If it ever lapses, go back and repair it or rebuild it.

Getting started with natural gestalt language development:

- (1) Now that you understand gestalt language development, acknowledge what the Stage 1 child says or sings. These are gestalts, whether we understand them or not. Stage 1 gestalt language processors are sharing as best they can. They have done their part to communicate. Our acknowledgment communicates that we know they are communicators.
- (2) If you understand anything the child says or sings, acknowledge what you understand. When you do, you have taken a conversational turn. But even if you don’t understand anything, your response is a ‘turn,’ and it can be as

simple as making eye contact, smiling, nodding — whatever you sense your child might wish you to do to be a good communicator.

- (3) Try to tune into the meaning, feeling — or intention of the gestalt. The child cannot make their message any more clear, so it's up to us to tune into them. Do you recognize the melody? How does the child seem to feel when listening to that song? When sharing that song with you? What might that song mean to your child? Why might the child be singing it now? It may take time to uncover the meaning, but it's worth it! Once the child 'knows that we know,' we are in this together!
- (4) Don't worry if you are not successful with this endeavor. There will be more. In the meantime, there is plenty to do!
- (5) Talk naturally while you go through your day, whether at school or at home. Allow plenty of silent time too, but when you talk, talk from your heart — with your authentic emotion built in. Talk without expecting your child to do anything but enjoy a new 'sound track' that they can voluntarily choose to store to become part of their language development.
- (6) All of our language is actually unintended 'language modeling' to a Stage 1 gestalt processor, so it helps when we become conscious of what we say. Just talk naturally 50% of the time. But instead of a complex sentence like: 'After we get home, we'll ask your dad to help us find your book,' think about simple sentences: 'We're almost home. We can look for it together.'
- (7) Be aware of your own language. Use these constructions, because what you say is an unintended language model:
 - first person, that is use 'I' sentences: ('I love that one,' 'I'm thinking about lunch')
 - your joint perspective ('We gotta...', 'Let's find...', 'We're making...')
 - a neutral perspective ('It's time for lunch,' 'That's the best,' 'There's another one,' 'Where did it go?' 'What's happening?') Questions can be used as language models, but not for eliciting answers until Stage 4.
 - Avoid using 'you' which promotes 'pronoun reversal.' Try not to say 'You look so cute' (instead say 'I love that cute hat.') Avoid saying 'Do you want some more juice?' (instead say 'We can get some more juice' and

then get it, while you watch your child's expression for concurrence or rejection)

- (8) Think about language your child might like, but don't overly worry about how useful it is, or how quickly your child might use it. If one model doesn't resonate, another one will. Common language 'frames' in American English include: 'I'm + x,' 'Let's + x,' 'Where's + x,' 'Look at + x,' 'It's + x' (or 'That's + x'), 'How about + x?' 'Don't + x.' Whatever you pick, it's important that they sound natural in the context of your home or school environment, and that you not over-think this. 50% of your time can then be spent just listening to your child, responding to them, and being yourself with your child. Here are some examples.

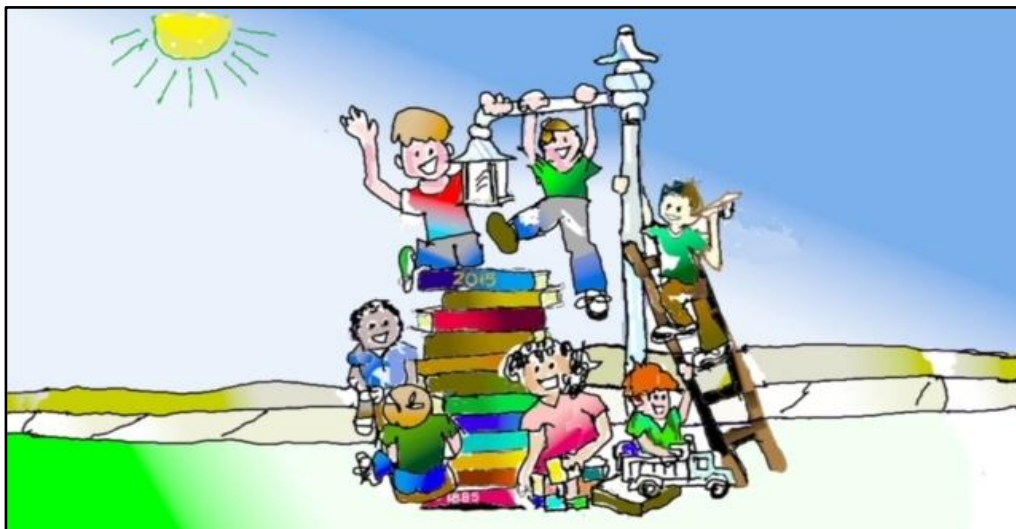
- Let's + get some more; Let's + make a castle; Let's + run! Let's go outside; Let's + find your stuffy; Let's + do that together!; Let's try it!
- I'm + so excited; I'm + gonna eat lunch; I'm + working so hard; I'm + thinking about it; I'm + getting tired; I'm + fixing a sandwich for us)
- We're + a great team; We're + the best; We're + good friends; We're + going to lunch now; We're + taking the bus; We're + gonna ride together
- It's + the best; It's + so pretty; It's + mine; It's + not scary; It's + for our lunch; It's + up there; It's + happening tomorrow; It's + working.
- Look at + that shark!; Look at + the snow!; Look at + our colors!



- (9) Try to use natural variety in your language. That helps to provide the ‘redundancy’ that kids need to hear so they realize there are smaller parts inside. Then they can extract those parts to help them move to Stage 2. Once a child is solidly in Stage 2, the variety of possibilities are endless. Children will discover their own combinations, but your additions will make their language richer.
- (10) Media gestalts offer possibilities (and challenges) of their own. If they’re easily accessible for replaying like on YouTube, they can be heard again and again which helps with hearing them well, saying them more intelligibly, and committing them to memory (perhaps even without the visual). The challenges may include their length (impossible to say), their limited mitigability (sometimes challenging to mitigate from “To infinity + and beyond” to “To infinity + and the store” or “To +the store + and beyond”)
- (11) Unless we are familiar with the origin of media gestalts, children can be at a disadvantage if their language gestalts are not easy-to-break-down — and no one understands what they’re saying or why. Some language, particularly media language, cannot be mitigated easily — and may remain in its gestalt form for years until someone recognizes that their ‘echolalia’ is really gestalt language. This phenomenon isolates children from language development until we realize that the best support for gestalt processors is providing a rich linguistic environment.



(12) All children benefit from hearing natural language that matters. If the language matters to us, we deliver it with authenticity. If it matters to the child, the child can spontaneously make it a part of their language development. Delivered during child-directed play, SLPs, teachers, parents, and others can gauge how resonant our language models are, and use natural phrases and sentences the child relates to, freely chooses to acquire, and when they're ready, uses them to continue their natural language acquisition journey. If we sense that another (more mitigable) gestalt could be paired with a media gestalt and be acceptable to a child, we can offer it — without expectation. It is imperative that we first honor the child and their original language, however. Not until we have the child's full trust should we take this step. We must be incredibly careful that the child has no reason to think we find their own language to be deficit in any way.



(13) Questions and answers can be modeled as units: “What’s happening? Oh, I know,” “What’s next? Oh right. Pajamas are next,” “What’s that animal? Oh, it’s a squirrel,” “What’s under there? Oh, it’s a salamander,” “What’s that letter? Oh, It’s a Q!” So the form of Q/A itself becomes a language model, which is helpful and very different from asking a Stage 1-3 child to answer questions. Not until Stage 4!

Gestalt language development support guidelines:

Gestalt language development is natural, but unless a child is very young, usually needs to be supported by someone who understands that it is natural. As long as the child is not taught, prompted, or made compliant with ‘contingent’ requirements for adult-selected language, their natural language development is possible. Unless the child is younger than three and has a rich linguistic environment, having someone who understands the process is imperative. Also imperative are natural language models that the child can freely-adopt. If those requisites are available, the child has the opportunity to develop a full grammar system they can use into their future.

Even if the process begins when the child is much older, and a full grammar is not possible, the outcome can make all the difference to that individual! Some self-generated language opens doors of flexibility that mitigations cannot. Rest assured also that even without a grammar system at all, individuals who begin the gestalt language development process in their teens or even 20’s can achieve something profound in their partnership with you:

- * The flexible use of Stage 2 mitigations can be life-altering. For many GLPs, this is where they are often recognized for the first time as communicators!
- * Even without achieving Stage 2, the Stage 1 communicator can be respected as a communicator! Without you, they may not have been honored as using language at all, and might have spent the rest of their lives ignored as simply ‘echolalic.’
- * Whether an individual achieves Stage 2, or only Stage 1, they will be honored as a communicator — because of you! Just get started!



Where to turn for more resources:

The NLA book, and a variety of articles, courses, podcasts, webinars, and other resources further describe NLA, including the research and background:

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association:

Echolalia and Its Role in Gestalt Language Acquisition

<https://www.asha.org/practice-portal/clinical-topics/autism/echolalia-and-its-role-in-gestalt-language-acquisition/>

From Echolalia to Self-Generated Language: Case Studies in Natural Language Acquisition (on demand webinar) (Marge Blanc, Lillian M. Stiegler, Alexandria Zachos)

[https://apps.asha.org/eweb/OLSDynamicPage.aspx?Webcode=olsdetails&title=From+Echolalia+to+Self-Generated+Language%3A+Case+Studies+in+Natural+Language+Acquisition+\(On+Demand+Webinar\)](https://apps.asha.org/eweb/OLSDynamicPage.aspx?Webcode=olsdetails&title=From+Echolalia+to+Self-Generated+Language%3A+Case+Studies+in+Natural+Language+Acquisition+(On+Demand+Webinar))

Book and articles by Marge Blanc:

Natural Language Acquisition on the Autism Spectrum: The Journey from Echolalia to Self-Generated Language (Marge Blanc, 2012) <https://www.northernspeech.com/echolalia-autism/natural-language-acquisition-on-the-autism-spectrum/>

Finding the Words... To Tell the “Whole” Story

<https://communicationdevelopmentcenter.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Finding-the-words-to-tell-the-whole-story.pdf>

The Natural Language Acquisition Guide: Spanish (Guía para la Adquisición Natural del Lenguaje) https://communicationdevelopmentcenter.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Guia_de_la_ANL_web.pdf

When Speech Gets Stuck. A Hierarchy of Practical Supports for Dyspraxia in Children with ASD. <https://communicationdevelopmentcenter.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/When-Speech-Gets-Stuck-.pdf>

Courses by Marge Blanc:

Natural Language Acquisition Levels 1, 2, and 3 Courses:

<https://www.northernspeech.com/echolalia-autism/natural-language-acquisition-in-autism-echolalia-to-self-generated-language-level-1/>

<https://www.northernspeech.com/echolalia-autism/natural-language-acquisition-in-autism-echolalia-to-self-generated-language-treatment-level-2/>

<https://www.northernspeech.com/autism-assessment/natural-language-acquisition-in-autism-echolalia-to-self-generated-language-level-3/>

Natural Communication Courses by Amanda Blackwell, Paulina Elias, and Marge Blanc: <https://comunicacion-natural.com/products/one-hour-introduction-to-nla-w-marge-blanc-paulina-elias-and-amanda-blackwell>

New Jersey Autism Center of Excellence Webinars by Marge Blanc:

Making Sense of Echolalia: It's All About Language Development! (3/04/21)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eVgTud-IhQA>

Gestalt Language Development: the 'Other' Natural Language Acquisition Style!
(9/16/21)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JwzkwkyjSLY>

Echoes of Echolalia: Looking at Autistic Language Development Through a New Lens (10/27/21)
<https://www.njace.us/webinars/echoes-of-echolalia-looking-at-autistic-language-development-through-a-new-lens>

AAC: Connecting with Language Learners (Kate Flaxman and Marge Blanc, 12/02/21)

<https://njace.us/aac-connecting-with-language-learners/>

Podcasts:

The Gestalt Get-Together (Corinne Zmoos) <https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/gestaltgettogether/episodes/Communication-Development-Centers-NLA-Stage-1-e26nhvb>

Conversations in Speech Pathology Podcast Interview (Marge Blanc):
<https://podtail.com/en/podcast/conversations-in-speech-pathology/csp-006-echolalia-asd-supporting-natural-language-/>

Research and history (Lillian N. Stiegler)

Examining the Echolalia Literature: Where Do Speech-Language Pathologists Stand? American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology (Lillian N. Stiegler, 2015) https://pubs.asha.org/doi/pdf/10.1044/2015_AJSLP-14-0166?casa_token=sJYaKBUa4qcAAAAA:OSJZvKXaVhQAoalkGOqHYcLMGExOF4q8vzCO6voj91o1IxCNuj8iNycBrJYVocac4DruVi2xVG7Q

A Language-Based Approach to Managing Echolalia (On Demand Webinar)
[https://apps.asha.org/eweb/OLSDynamicPage.aspx?Webcode=olsdetails&title=A+Language-Based+Approach+to+Managing+Echolalia+\(On+Demand+Webinar\)&utm_source=asha&utm_medium=facebook&utm_campaign=wecholalia](https://apps.asha.org/eweb/OLSDynamicPage.aspx?Webcode=olsdetails&title=A+Language-Based+Approach+to+Managing+Echolalia+(On+Demand+Webinar)&utm_source=asha&utm_medium=facebook&utm_campaign=wecholalia)

Background research (Barry Prizant and Ann Peters):

Language Acquisition and Communicative Behavior in Autism: Toward an Understanding of the “Whole” It. (B Prizant, 1983)
<https://communicationdevelopmentcenter.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/1983Towardwholeofit.pdf>

The Units of Language Acquisition (A Peters, 1983, 2021)

<https://communicationdevelopmentcenter.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Units-of-Language-Acquisition.pdf>

Post Script:

To insure a person's language develops naturally, we have to refrain from teaching and prompting rote language —ever!

Rote language is learned as a skill (or verbal 'behavior'), but learning such 'splinter skills' interferes with natural language development.

This is the bottom line: language 'learning' is a skill; language development is a life-long natural process!

We have no reason to give up...and every reason to **Just Get Started!**

