



Speech and Language Therapy Department

# Echolalia

## Supporting Communication

# Echolalia: Supporting Communication

Echolalia refers to the repetition of words spoken to children by adults/peers. As part of typical language development children often use imitation to practice spoken words and phrases. Echolalia is commonly used with greater frequency and for longer periods of time by children who are blind or visually impaired (Segal 1993).

As with questions, it is important to determine the function of the child's use of echolalia, such as;

- Rehearsing verbal input in order to more fully process it ( for example, a child repeats the phrase “go potty” while thinking about what will happen when he or she gets there)
- Trying to initiate and /or maintain an interaction (for example, a child repeats the phrase “go potty” to keep an adults attention)
- Providing a form of self stimulation ( for example, a child repeats the phrase “go potty” to him or herself for personal gratification)

Imitation is an important strategy for language acquisition for children with visual impairment (Rogow, 2000). While echolalia is a natural part of early communication, it is a concern if the child is repeating many statements that he or she does not have the ability to understand, or if it becomes the child's primary form of communication.

Much of the following strategies are about interpreting a child's communication. It is important that we model the most appropriate language for the child during a specific activity/situation.

The following are some examples of ‘echolalia’ and how a child may be repeating sentences as a form of communication. The main goal is to interpret what a child might be trying to communicate and providing them with the appropriate language. As a child's language develops their echolalic utterances generally decrease.

## Requesting

If a child reaches for, points to or moves their hand toward a ball, you should say “ball” or “want the ball” or “Paul wants the ball” as you give it to him. It is important to note that you are immediately providing a child with the language they may need.

If for example a child who produces echolalic utterances wants a biscuit, they may say, “You want a biscuit?” using a question to request. You should model the correct form e.g. “Sarah wants a biscuit” as you give it to her. She may later spontaneously say, “Sarah wants a biscuit,” which is still a delayed echo but provides a more appropriate intermediate step between the echoed question as request and the more natural form, “I want a biscuit.”

## Choosing

For the child who may have difficulty responding when offered choice, such as “Do you want crackers or an apple?” leave out the question for a while. Show the two items and say, “Crackers...apple...Matthew wants....” If he names one and reaches for it, confirm his choice and give it to him, saying something like “Matthew wants an apple.”

## Rejecting/Prohibiting

If a child pushes food away communicating that they don’t want it, provide him/her with an appropriate response such as “No cake! Don’t want cake!” using a natural tone of voice. Naturally there are times when this is not a practicable option and you may have to overrule the child. If so, pause; say something empathetic like “Don’t like face washing,” and then go on, “Becca’s face is dirty. Mommy has to wash it.”

## Directing

If your child gives you an object to fix or open or puts your hand on an object you can say “Please help” or “Need help” or “Open it,” as if directing yourself. Try not to use a questioning intonation (rising tone towards the end) “Need help?” or else the child will probably say it that way

## Commenting

Modeling comments (commenting on a child’s actions during an activity) is useful not only for building vocabulary and concepts, but also as an early social and conversational activity. It provides many opportunities to use echoing as a teaching tool and provides the child with appropriate language to practice as s/he engages her toys/puzzles during play.

When doing a puzzle, you could say, “Here’s the horse...going to put it in...uh-oh, doesn’t fit...there, it’s in!” Time your words to match the child’s actions. In some ways it could be described as providing a running commentary on their actions.

When looking at books together, use the child's finger to touch tactile items associated with objects as you model comments depending on the child's level of comprehension, like "Shoes...hat," "Here's the soft puppy," "The girl is painting a picture," "Flowers on the table," "The baby is crying, he's sad." If s/he does not spontaneously name some, put his/her finger on a texture so s/he knows—and pause. The established pattern of point and name, and your silence, will often elicit a spontaneous label from the child.

## Some Important Points to Remember

- Model language that is only slightly longer and more complex than words/sentences you've heard the child use meaningfully. For example if the child uses one word utterances e.g. 'cat' you could expand that by saying 'cat in'
- Say things that match what's happening from the child's point of view.
- Try to avoid questions and verbal instructions e.g. instead of asking a yes/no question (do you want an apple) provide choice ('banana .... Apple ... Paul wants ...')
- Use people's names if pronouns (I, you, me etc.) are confusing
- Use words and intonation that will be appropriate and accurate if echoed.
- Respond to the child's speech with words and actions that confirm your understanding of the message, not with praise, which may be echoed.

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