

Finding the Words...

by Marge Blanc

To Tell the "Whole" Story Natural Language Acquisition on the Autism Spectrum Part 4

"Mom! Spike is talking!" announced Bevin, referring to the previously speechless dinosaur in the movie, *Land Before Time*. **"Yes,"** his mother said, **"And we're so happy."** When Bevin continued, **"Mom! Spike says more words,"** his mother reiterated, **"We're so happy!"** But Bevin persisted, **"Mom! Spike can talk!"** **"Really?"** laughed his mother, pleas with Bevin's pride in "Spike," who clearly represented her son. Then Bevin added his own twist, **"...when he wants to!"**

It wasn't like this six months earlier, however, Bevin used "movie talk," as his mother called it, all day long, every day. Bevin's family was understandably tired...tired of hearing video dialogue repeated at fast forward speed, without any indication that Bevin meant any of it to be communication.

But after his second week in our clinic, Bevin said something remarkable. He sought out his mother and declared, "Spike talks! I found it! Yea!" Bevin's mother told me, "It's the first time Bevin ever talked to me! All I did was repeat what he said, like you told me to, and he looked at me like I understood him! Now, he says things to me, knowing I'll listen!"

An impressive story, yes...but unusual only in the speed with which Bevin successfully mitigated from his gestalts, and generated his own, original sentences. His process is the same one we see with every child we have worked with in Natural Language Acquisition!

We will address that process here: first, by helping you know what your own child's natural language is; where the language fits developmentally; and, finally, how to facilitate your child's progress.

Step 1 seems simple, but, until you get used to it, it isn't! Find a time when you and your child are alone, and you hear your child say something you think you can repeat. Do just that...repeat it back to your child, just like you hear it! If you can, say it to your child a second time...and, if he looks up, again! This may not be too hard, if what he says sounds like language. But even if it just seems like a sound contour, without any

words you can distinguish, repeat it back...try for the tone and the vowels, if can. Make it sound as much like your child as you can. And even though you probably don't understand what your child means, say it back to him anyway, the best you can!

It will probably seem like a "foreign language" to you for a while, so try to continue to say it to yourself as the day goes on. As it slowly becomes "your own", you can begin to talk like your child, with his sound sequences, tone, and language. You may have no idea what's important about it until you've mumbled it to yourself all morning...finally experiencing the "Aha!" of knowing what language it represents, where you've heard it before...and, maybe, what it might mean to your child!

Even if no "Aha" happens yet, you have begun to get used to the process, and it will be easier the next time!

And, best of all, by repeating his speech, you have acknowledged him in a tangible way! You honor him with your attentive listening, and empower him with the added volume of your voice and stature. Even if you have no clue as to what he said, he will adore you for taking him seriously! And, the effect is exponential.

Before long, just like the Bevin, he will be expecting that you will listen...and then the magic happens...he talks to you!

Step 2 in your process is getting used to your child's language. After you have been repeating your child for a day or so, write down several examples of what he has said each day. Write down where and when your child used the language, what was going on at the time...and try to remember the original "source," like a movie or book, if possible. If you can, think about the character who said the line in the movie or book, and what that person may have meant by it! This may well be what your child means!

Remember that it is your child's spontaneous language you are interested in...not language he was taught. So, get used to really listening when he is talking to himself, when he is using what sounds like "gibberish," and pay close attention to what sounds like "movie talk." This is where the process begins!

If your child is quite fluent and uses lots of gestalts, you will have to learn to tune into just the louder parts. You may hear your child speed through some parts and emphasize others. Your task, then, is to pay attention just to the loud parts, and to repeat them back as the important mitigations they almost are!

Continue with Step 2 until you have a good selection of examples. It should take you at least a week.

Step 3 is to review the charts in Part 3 of this series of articles on Natural Language Acquisition (September-October 2005 issue) and find some matches with what your child says. If your child is young (2-4 years old), you may find only one level, e.g. Stage 1 gestalts, too long for his young speech system to say well. Maybe it just sounds like "gibberish," or "jargon," or maybe "his own language." This is what we, in our clinic, call "intonational utterances," and includes the tone and rhythm of whole language gestalts, but

not the individual speech sounds.

Some children who are four years old have begun some mitigating, isolating the parts of the gestalts they can actually say clearly. Depending on a child's speech skill, it is possible to move on to Stage 2, 3, and even 4 with a little help. After all, little boys do this all the time, and some young ASD children are happily coming up with their own original sentences at Stage 4 or even higher. If your child's language does not sound "stilted" and forced, you have probably found your child's level.

If children aren't moving through the process readily, it may be because they are not quite finished with a stage. So, children who are a bit older (5-7 years old) can exhibit a complex combination of gestalts, mitigations, and some original sentences.

If your child is older still, the picture may be even more complex, as was Bevin's. When I first met Bevin, his language consisted primarily of long gestalts, delivered at lightning speed, with a smattering of mitigations, and some learned phrases such as "Help!" and "I need a break." I understood little of what Bevin said, but found he said some parts of his gestalts louder and more slowly than other parts. I could catch the loud parts, and repeated them back to him. I figured that the faster, unintelligible parts were just the "fast forward" to the next important part. Bevin was trying his best to mitigate the important parts, and all he needed was a little boost to move solidly from Stage 1 to Stage 2!

And I would have met a dead-end, like we usually do with children on the spectrum. Smart kids like Bevin can learn "I want *Land Before Time*," but, if their language development level is primarily at Stage 1 or Stage 2, this sentence becomes just another "gestalt" Bevin either learns as a whole or tries to mitigate by himself. Saying, "I want *Land Before Time*" or "I want..." becomes just a "skill." And when children learn any language as a skill, they have certain, limited level of success; when they move through a developmental progression, however, the sky is the limit!

Step 3 is complete when you decide where your child usually "lives" with language. It is not "best" language, or his most useful. It is his most common and natural. And, as in Bevin's case, if a child straddles two or more stages, chose the more foundational level. It may seem counterintuitive to "teach" the very thing we wish our child would stop doing, but, think of it hits way: we are not teaching him anything; he already knows it. We are simply acknowledging it so we can help him move on from it to the next stage.

Step 4, then, is working within the level you have determined is accurate for your child...in a way that will help him move from it to the next stage. So, if you are helping your child move from Stage 1 to Stage 2, you want to make sure that the gestalts he is using are mitigatable. For Bevin, an older child, they already were, and he was half-way to mitigation anyway! For Dylan, a younger child, they were not, so we introduced new gestalts that would be more easily mitigated (See Part 2, July-August 2005 issue).

And with Will, the 14-year-old from Part 1, we had little evidence that he knew how to move beyond Stage 1 with any confidence. He had many learned sentences, and a few mitigations of his own, but where his heart seemed to sing was when he was quoting Julie Andrew in the *Sound of Music*, or the sports announcer in his ice hockey videos. Because his mitigations

were limited, we wanted to show him that there was a process. We began with some of his own gestalts like, "Earth angel, earth angel...won't you be mine." Because Will routinely used the mitigated form, "earth angel" when he addressed someone he felt thankful for, we could show Will what he already knew how to do. After a year, Will had learned all there is to know about mitigation, and was moving on to Stage 3, self-generated phrases. It has been a slow process, much more arduous than Bevin's, but just as successful!

In closing, this author fully acknowledges the complexity of this topic, and the inadequacy of a four-column article on the subject. We would be happy to hear from you, and happy to address your questions in the book we hope to be writing in the next year! Your child's stories might find a home there, so please keep us posted!

In the meantime, your dear children will thank you for your efforts in attentive listening and acknowledging, and for being the "earth angels" you already are!

Marge Blanc founded the Communication Development Center, in Madison, WI 10 years ago.

Specializing in physically-supported speech and language services for children with ASD diagnoses, CDC has successfully helped scores of children as they moved through the stages of language acquisition. Contact Marge and her associates:

Communication Development Center

700 Rayovac Drive, Suite 200

Madison, WI 53711

lyonblanc@aol.com