



Parents' Corner

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[Robin Hurd](#)

Defining our terms: Language Development

A term that we hear a lot as we find out about children and AAC is “language development”. This, that or the other AAC system or piece of educational software is supposed to help foster language development in children. But what exactly is language development and how can we tell if any of these claims are true?

The American Speech and Hearing Association (ASHA) defines language as “a code made up of rules that include what words mean, how to make words, how to put them together, and what word combinations are best in what situations. Speech is the oral form of language.”

When we are talking about language development, we are talking about learning what words mean and how to put them together, as well as how to make new words form a root word (example: friendly from friend). Language development is not learning to make your mouth or in our children’s case, the AAC system, say things. Language development is understanding how words work. Those words can be written, spoken, accessed by an AAC system, but our understanding of language affects them all.

Young children who are learning to speak are learning more than how to make their mouths produce the sounds of words. They are learning what those words mean and how to

put those words together to tell other people what they want to say.

In the beginning, children may not have the same definition of words as adults. When my oldest son was two, “juice-juice” meant any kind of drink and a “daddy” was any man. As he developed language skills, he learned that there are many words for drinks and that “daddy” is a special name for his father and “man” is a name for other men.

When young children first begin to put words together, we see this same type of progression from child-like speech to adult ways of saying things. A child may begin telling you she wants to go by saying, “bye-bye car”. As she learns more about language, she will progress to “want go car”, “I want to go in the car”, and finally, “I want to go to grandma’s house in the car.” What helps children progress through these stages of language development is hearing others use words and practicing using words themselves.

When children rely on AAC instead of speech for communication, they need to progress through these same stages of learning how words work. The AAC system is just a different way of saying the words, and most of our children are learning language at a different age than a typical child.

Much of the training adults receive on an AAC system that their child or student uses consists of training the adults how to find words on the device or how to program the device. This can give the impression that the child’s biggest challenge when using AAC is to find out where the words are located. For children, however, the biggest challenge is that they need to learn how words work so they can tell other what’s going on inside their heads.

Understanding about language development helps us to help our children because we can focus on walking them through the steps normally speaking children take to become good communicators, instead of focusing only on the memory work of finding single words on the AAC system.

Understanding language development also helps us to understand that our children’s AAC systems must allow the children to practice putting words together to communicate with us. An AAC system is just a piece of technology to help a child who can’t use speech to do the same things as his friend who can speak. One of those very important things is to learn language, or how to put words together.

If a child is using an AAC system that is full of pre-programmed sentences, he or she is not getting the practice with words that is needed to learn language. This affects not only the ability to communicate out loud, but also the ability to write and to read with understanding. For example, a child may be able to read the individual words, “Can you see me” and yet not be able to understand that this is a question, because she doesn’t have the language skills to know that the order of the words makes a difference.

When looking at an AAC system or a piece of software or educational program, the way to

know if it is going to help children develop language skills is to see if it provides chances to practice putting together words and building words with a root word. If your child is not able to combine words to say his own thoughts and is not able to use different forms of a root word (friend and friendly, tall- taller- tallest, play and played), then the piece of technology in question isn't really supporting language development.

Children who use AAC will also want to have some pre-programmed ways of talking with others, such as "hi, how are you?" "I'm Fine", to allow quick interactions with others. However, these pre-stored messages alone don't give a child the practice working with words that is needed for language development to happen.

As always, your comments and questions help keep this column interesting! E-mail me at parents@aacinsitute.org.

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