Gestalt Language Processing: What's the Buzz?

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Gestalt language processing (GLP) has recently become a trending topic in the world of speech-language pathology. What is GLP? What do we know about it and where did it come from? What does the evidence tell us about GLP and is it an evidence-based model? During this session, the presenters will answer these questions and more, sharing what we know, what we don't know, and how to ensure we prioritize each individual child and their unique needs when providing early intervention services.

Terminology

Analytic language processing (ALP): language development and learning through which a child first learns and uses small units of language, (e.g., single words), and then combines those words into phrases, sentences, and conversations over time. Analytic language processing is a bottom-up approach to language development.

Gestalt language processing (GLP): a form of language development and learning through which a child initially uses gestalts and then learns to break down these (often scripted or echoed) chunks of language to form original phrases. Gestalt language processing is considered a top-down approach to language development.

Natural language acquisition (NLA): a detailed description of gestalt language development, supported by the clinical research of Marge Blanc and colleagues (M. Blanc, 2012). NLA evolved as a way to quantify and detail the process: all the way from Stage 1 (use of language gestalts) to Stage 6 (use of complex grammar). NLA describes the logical, natural, developmental process of gestalt language development, and provides a road-map for supporting children in natural, conversational, developmentally-appropriate ways.

Gestalt: a chunk of language that is heard, stored, and then used in its entirety before having the knowledge or awareness of its internal structure.

Intonation: how the voice rises and falls in speech.

Prosody: the intonation, rhythm, or "music" of language. Prosody can convey structural information that, at times, affects the meaning we take from a sentence.

Strategies

Connection and collaboration

We can connect with families and children by building positive relationships, providing practical strategies, and encouraging collaboration. An important component of individualizing services for young children includes the ability to align services with each family's culture and unique situation, preferences, resources, and priorities.

Strengths and interests

We can offer practical strategies and resources that are tailored to the family's strengths and priorities, as well as the child's strengths and communication needs. For example, we can model clear communication, respond to the child's use of sounds, words, or even gestalts, and always celebrate even the smallest of milestones.

Communication attempts

We need to be good and effective communication partners ourselves by acknowledging and coaching families to acknowledge all communication attempts. Young children communicate with adults and each other through a combination of verbal and non-verbal cues, including gestures, facial expressions, body language, sounds, simple words, pointing, imitation, vocalizations, and play-based interactions. Whether they appear to be combining novel utterances or echoing phrases from a favorite movie, we can build upon all attempts to communicate.

With that said, if we are engaging with a child who appears to be relying on gestalts to communicate, we need to investigate the meaning behind the gestalt. We do not want to take their script literally but should instead recognize and look at other sources for context and intention.

Self-regulation and sensory strategies

Self-regulation is the ability to understand and manage our own behavior and reactions. In young children, the development of self-regulation supports their learning, behaviors, and ability to get along with others. Self-regulation begins to develop rapidly in the toddler and preschooler years. Self-regulation and sensory strategies can help young children learn to manage their emotions and behaviors in different situations and it is often up to us to consider and embed these strategies into our work with families.

References and Resources

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