

HOW CAN AN AUTISTIC CHILD'S COMMUNICATION DEVELOP?

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Key words: autism, communication development, gesture, language development, singing

1) Wonder with exceptions

A child's language development still seems to be a miracle. Just being two years old most children start using words and sentences in a way that other people can understand them. By the time they go to school their language has become even more sophisticated. Few differences are left between their and the adults' way of talking, be that in sound, grammar, lexical or practical use. It is still a mystery how children manage to learn the language that surrounds them as quickly as they do (or even languages in some cases).

Some things can be said for sure though: the language development is based on biological foundations. Without any formal instructions children pick up one or even several natural languages within the first few years. Another thing is that language does not develop if language is not offered. Persons to whom the child relates to closely must be able to speak the language the child is to learn.

It does remain unclear which learning mechanisms trigger and enforce the development of language. The search for the one and only that explains everything would probably lead to an impasse. Mechanisms like imitation, corrections of oneself and others, generalizations, coordination of production and understanding, the forming and detection of rules - all of them being more or less important depending on the current level of language development - seem to have an influence.

Language development does not always take place in such a swift, smooth and admirable way as just described. Delays and disorders occur more frequently as the wonder of language development would let us assume. Details about incidence rates vary depending on the diagnostic criteria used to detect abnormal cases. Bishop (1992) and Grimm (1994) assume that at least every tenth child fulfills the criteria for the diagnosis of either a language development disorder or delay. Boys are more frequently affected than girls. It is important to say that *the* disturbed or *the* delayed speech development does not exist (Schöler, Fromm & Kany, 1998). Deviations of the normal variation spectrum are diverse. They can be global or specific, temporary or continuous, isolated or connected.

We will not further pursue the pathology of language development at this point. Instead we will introduce a single case. The language development of the girl we will describe has hardly shown any progress, which is not due to an isolated disorder but connected to a fundamental ontogenetic developmental disorder: early infantile autism. Samantha can produce sounds like „ai“, „ou“, „la“, „lee“, „hee“, „hoo“, „ze“, she can hum songs or parts of songs, but she cannot imitate or spontaneously produce words or sentences.

Before we will introduce Samantha any further, connections between autism and different speech and language development