

Echolalia

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Echolalia has been described as “repetitive verbal utterances” or echoing what another has said. Repeating phrases of others is considered to be a typical language development stage in young children; they begin to start with babbling and then copying sounds, words and phrases that they can eventually use in specific contexts. This is known as the “gestalt” style of language acquisition – which means whole language learning.

For example “Mummy” comes to mean “Mummy” because of the whole experience; that is, the smell of Mummy, the house Mummy lives in, the shape of Mummy, the sound of Mummy etc. Over time children begin to analyse the way language is used in other contexts and come to understand that “mummy” is a word that can represent other things besides the whole of their experience with their specific “mummy”.

However if the repeated verbal imitation is used frequently in speech and persists after the age of 36 months, it may be considered as echolalia. Echolalia has been observed in children with autism, Tourette syndrome, schizophrenia and other brain disorders. Studies have found that up to 75% of people with autism exhibit echolalia in some form. In the past echolalia has been described as inappropriate behaviour, however current research is defining it as a “developmental phenomenon” that occurs within the child’s individual cognitive and linguistic development. Many children become so efficient at echoing that they can use the same inflexion, voice and even mannerisms to copy “exactly” what another person has said. Despite being able to copy so well, they may not have a comprehension of what they are saying.

Research has identified that there are three types of echolalia:

- **Immediate echolalia:** when the word or phrase just spoken is immediately repeated or echoed
- **Delayed echolalia:** a phrase (or phrases) is repeated some time after it was initially heard. It involves long term memory and can consist of the recitation of entire stories or television scripts
- **Mitigated echolalia:** speech that is echoed with a change in intonation or wording. Recent research has suggested that children mitigated echolalia more as their understanding of language improves.

Sometimes it can seem like these echolalic phrases have no communicative function at all. Sometimes phrases can have a communicative function but the meaning may not be clear to others. It may be that the child is trying to gain or maintain an interaction, answer a question or make a request.

Some children can use echolalia for comfort or self regulation. They may repeat a word someone has just used, as they like the way it feels to say it; or they may repeat phrases

from familiar movies or television shows when they are stressed as they find the predictable and unchanging script comforting.

Observations and getting to know the child well would be extremely useful in determining how the child is using echolalia.

Some strategies as suggested by the Judevine Center for autism:

- Respond to the child in a literal way (e.g. when the child is asked “Do you want a sandwich” and they repeat this back to you say “Yes I’d like a vegemite sandwich.”).
- Use a starter sentence where the child can be encouraged to fill in the blank, “I would like _____” and show the child the vegemite sandwich, leave them enough time to respond and if they don’t, fill in the blank whilst showing them the sandwich.
- Ask a question and end with yes or no (e.g. “Would you like a vegemite sandwich yes or no?” If no is echoed then say “That’s ok I’ll have it myself”. The child may actually want the sandwich so look for signs and say “I think you may have changed your mind. If you want the sandwich say yes”. Prompt for a “yes” and reinforce for a correct response).

Remember that every child is different and so too is every child with autism. Echolalia can seem annoying and irritating much of the time but consider the language learning that is happening and the reason behind it. Is the child trying to communicate or maintain interaction? Echolalia cannot be cured but in most cases will eventually disappear. Use observations to plan activities that can involve modelling or other strategies that have already worked in the setting.

References

Autism Spectrum Australia (2016) **Echolalia (from the Positive Partnerships Project)**
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<https://www.speechandlanguagekids.com/echolalia-when-children-repeat-what-you-say/>

Heffner, G. (2008) **Echolalia – Repetitive Speech** <http://www.autism-help.org/communication-echolalia-autism.htm>

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