Non-Speaking and Minimally Speaking Children

And Gestalt Language Processing

Gestalt Language Processing (GLP) is a type of language development starting with the child learning and processing language in whole chunks. Later they then break these chunks of language into single words (stage 3) before making new 2 word combinations, then longer self-generated sentences containing grammar (stages 4-6). It is a natural and normal way for lots of children to develop language.

The first stage of Gestalt Language Development is using delayed echolalia (gestalts)- repeating chunks of language they have previously heard . These gestalts (chunks of language) may be single words, short phrases, long sentences or whole songs/scripts e.g. "Chase is on the case" (from Paw Patrol) might be used by a child who wants to go somewhere.

It is very likely the child does not understand the meaning of these gestalts or can process these 'chunks' as single words at this time in their language development. The whole chunk of language usually represents one meaning to the child associated with what they felt, saw or experienced when hearing it

However, a child does not have to use delayed echolalia to still be a GLP

Just because a child is not using spoken language, this doesn't mean that they are 'without' language, or do not have gestalts of their own. Language is first generated in our mind before we produce the speech sounds to speak our thoughts with our spoken language.

Other indicators a child may be a GLP:

- They may use 'jargon' (strings of unintelligible language) which is rich in intonation (the rise and fall of language when we talk)

- They may be able to label items using single words but are unable to combine these to make 2+ word phrases (indicating these are likely to be single word gestalts)

- They may use single words in isolated contexts only e.g. they can name 'dog' in a particular book, but not in other books, when they see a dog outside, on TV etc

- They may be able to name colours, numbers, shapes, alphabet etc but not be using any / or very little, functional language to communicate at any other time

- They may re-enact scenes from media (songs, music, TV shows, videos) during their playing

- They may not be 'speaking' yet but can sing songs– songs are often first gestalts for some GLPs

Other indicators a child may be a GLP:

- They may have autism or are awaiting an autism assessment. MOST autistic individuals use delayed echolalia / gestalts to communicate.

- They may have 'Echopraxia'- they communicate gestalts through movement rather than speech e.g. making the same sad face as a character in a show or acting out a full clip they have watched

- They may replay the same media clips again and again

- They may process events as a 'whole' rather than a sequence of smaller events e.g. have to do the same things in the same order and become distressed if something changes

These children are likely in the very early stages of 'stage 1' of Gestalt Language Development

How should adults support these minimally speaking/non-speaking children?:

⇒ As with ALL individuals in stage 1, adults need to **introduce** new interesting gestalts and **increase** the amount and variety of gestalts they are exposed to.

⇒ **Acknowledge** any 'gestalts' they may use (even if unintelligible) by saying "yeh", "ok"- let them know they have been heard and accept this communication

⇒ Gestalts should be **individualised and meaningful** to the child—consider what the child may want to tell us / base the gestalts on their interests– make them fun, exciting and useful!

⇒ Gestalts should be **modelled across different environments**

⇒ Gestalts should be modelled for **a range of different communicative functions** e.g.

  ⇒ Comments: "That's good", "I like it", "We did it"
  ⇒ Requests: "I need it", "It's my turn", "Look at that"
  ⇒ Asking questions: "Can we go?", "What is that?", "Who is that?"
  ⇒ Protesting: "Don't do that", "I don't want to", "Stop it"
  ⇒ Self-Advocacy: "I need to stop", "I need to go", "I can do it"

⇒ Do not try and expand on any single word gestalts– GLPs cannot expand or build upon these single word gestalts (This skill does not happen until they are in stage 3 and breaking down chunks into single words)- Just acknowledge these single word gestalts and move on.

  Model NEW 2-3+ word gestalts for them to hear.

How should adults support these minimally speaking/non-speaking children?

⇒ Model the gestalts using lots of **rich intonation** (this is what GLPs tune into!)

⇒ Keep gestalt models the **same** - don't mix/match them as the child is not at this stage yet

⇒ Model **without expectation**– children need to hear these gestalts used repeatedly before they may tune into them and begin using them

⇒ It's **NOT** about:

    ⇒ Prompting e.g. "It's a ….. "(and wait for a response)

    ⇒ Asking questions

    ⇒ Building vocabulary / labelling / teaching single words

    ⇒ Teaching them how to play– **all play is accepted!** Play is often tied to their language stage and is often rigid and repetitive when children are in stage 1.of GLP This play often naturally changes as their language stage develops.

⇒ It **IS** about:

    ⇒ **Building a connection**

    ⇒ **Building trust**– before they will accept our language models

    ⇒ **Following the child's lead** in their play

    ⇒ **More silence** - to hear the child's spontaneous language, to give opportunities for the child to use their language and this also allows for more processing time

    ⇒ **Eliminating questions** - children at stage 1 of their gestalt language development do not understand questions. GLPs are not ready for questions until stage 4+

⇒ Consider using **AAC** (Augmentative and Alternative Communication, e.g. signs/symbols) to support their language learning

⇒ Model the gestalts from **their perspective** e.g. "**I'm** tired"

⇒ When not modelling the gestalts, use **natural language** the rest of the time as you would with any other child– focus on **narrating, commenting, descriptions/sharing perspectives** – these do not require a response)…. Just speak naturally!

⇒ **ALWAYS presume competence** until they are self-generating language!
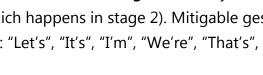
Stage 1 Gestalts:

Modelled gestalts need to be **mitigable** - easily broken down to be combined with other chunks of language (which happens in stage 2). Mitigable gestalts often start with the words: "Let's", "It's", "I'm", "We're", "That's", "It's time for"…

Types of Gestalts to model for Stage 1 GLPs:

- Let's go
- Let's go to the + (place of interest)
- I need the toilet
- I'm hungry/thirsty
- Let's eat + (favourite food)
- I need help
- Let's open it
- All done!

- I did it!
- Let's watch + (favourite TV show)
- Let's jump / spin / sing / play
- This is fun!!
- It's stuck
- It's time to + (brush teeth / take a bath)
- Let's go + (faster / higher / slower)

- I like it / don't like it
- It's yummy / yucky
- What's next?
- Turn it on / off
- It's too loud
- Stop doing that
- I don't feel very well
- I'm sad / hurt / happy / angry
- Time to go
- It's a …..(name object)

Once the child has learned and is using a wide range of gestalts (approx. 50+), they can then move onto stage 2– breaking these gestalts down and mix and matching these gestalts.

References:

Bohospeechie: :https://www.instagram.com/bohospeechie?igsh=d2R4bWg5ZjU0YWcy

Meaningfulspeech: Alexandria Zachos | Echolalia and Child Led Therapy (@meaningfulspeech) • Instagram photos and videos