

## Echolalia

Verbal imitation is necessary for speech and language development. Neurotypical children copy the sounds and words used around them and assign meaning to these individual units. Over time, the child develops the ability to use these words spontaneously and flexibly across a range of contexts. Many children on the autism spectrum learn and process language through a 'top-down' approach (also referred to as 'gestalt language acquisition'). This means that they recall and interpret 'chunks' of language. A single meaning is assigned to an entire phrase or sentence, rather than an individual word. For example, a child may use the phrase, "Put your bag away!" to refer to a bag. They have not processed or assigned meaning to the remaining words: "put," "your," and "away."

### ECHOLALIA

Echolalia is the precise repetition of sounds, words, phrases or multiple sentences. Echolalia is commonly observed in people on the autism spectrum and serves a variety of purposes. There are three main types of echolalia.

- **Immediate echolalia:** Immediate echolalia occurs when the individual repeats the phrase or sentence directly after the stimulus. For example, a child is asked, "Do you want some chocolate?" The child repeats the same question immediately after being asked.
- **Delayed echolalia:** Delayed echolalia occurs hours, days or even months after the stimulus. It is often described as 'scripting' and can be produced without communicative intent.
- **Mitigated echolalia:** This occurs when the child makes a slight change to the wording or intonation of the original phrase. For example, a child is asked, "Do you want a drink?" The child echoes back, "Do I want a drink?" As the child's receptive language improves, they develop the skills to substitute words and modify phrases. There is often an increase in mitigated echolalia over time.

### FUNCTIONS OF ECHOLALIA

- A child may use echolalia for interactional purposes such as to request, comment, protest, or share information.
- A child may echo a phrase or sentence when they are processing information or contemplating a response.
- A child may recite sentences from their favourite movie or TV show to self-regulate. In this case, the echolalia does not have a communicative/interactional purpose.

### RESPONDING TO ECHOLALIA

- Identify the purpose of the echolalia. Does the echolalia have a communicative function or is the child self-soothing? Consider the context and the time at which the word/phrase is being repeated.
- Simplify language output. Facilitate your child's comprehension of individual words by using gesture and visual supports. For example, if your child repeats the question, "Do you want ice-cream?" simplify the question by asking, "Want ice-cream?" Point to the physical object or show the child a picture of ice-cream to support their comprehension.
- Avoid repeating WH-questions such as "Who?" "What?" "Where?" "When?". Instead, give your child a choice e.g. "Do you want water or juice?" Once the child makes a choice, immediately follow through with the request.