



Gestalt Language Processing

Language Development:

Language development is the process through which children learn to understand and use words to communicate. It helps them express their needs, build connections with others and make sense of the world around them. Every child develops language at their own pace. The best way to support this growth is through everyday interactions and play.

Children can develop language in two different ways: Gestalt Language Development (GLD) or Analytical Language Development (ALD). Both are natural, valid and equally important paths for learning language.

Gestalt Language Processors:

These children initially learn language in chunks (gestalts) or whole phrases, often carrying the same emotion and intonation they originally heard them. Their communication is largely echolalic (see the 'Echolalia' tip sheet for more information). Over time, they start to break these phrases into smaller parts and gradually use individual words independently.

What is a Gestalt?

A gestalt is a chunk of language that a child learns and remembers as a complete unit, rather than word by word. Children often retain the sound, rhythm and emotional tone of the phrase, even if they don't fully understand every word yet. These phrases usually come from meaningful experiences - things that are exciting, fun or emotional, making them easier to remember.

A gestalt can be short, such as a single word, or longer, like a full sentence, a line from a favorite book, or a phrase from a TV show or song.

Analytical Language Processors:

These children learn language as single words first and gradually build them into phrases and sentences.

ALP VS GLP

Analytical Language Processing (ALP):

Beginning of Language Development:

A child begins to learn single words to serve a variety of communicative functions, such as labelling, requesting, or protesting.

Examples:
"Milk" = I want milk
"Up" = Pick me up



A child begins joining words together to form short phrases.

Example:
"More apple"
"finished game"



A child is independently forming complete sentences, with grammar continuing to develop.

Examples:
"I want the ball"
"Daddy is at work"



A child begins to apply basic grammar rules to the phrases they use.

Examples:
Saying "I want juice"
Saying "Mummy go work"



Use of Spontaneous, Complete Sentences:

A child can use conversational language with correct grammar and sentence structure, making themselves easily understood by others.

Example:
"If it rains tomorrow we can stay inside and watch a movie."



ALP VS GLP

Gestalt Language Processing (GLP):

Beginning of Language Development:

A child may use whole phrases they have heard from books, songs, TV or other sources, even if they don't fully understand every word in the phrase.

Example: Saying "Do you want a snack?" to mean I am hungry

A child starts mixing and shortening learned phrases.

"Let's go to the park!" → "Go park!"
"Time to go home." → "Go home now!"

A child is beginning to independently form short phrases and sentences, with early grammar starting to emerge.

Examples:
Saying "I want juice"
Saying "Mummy go work"

A child begins to move beyond learned phrases, starting to use individual words or simple two-word combinations.

Example: "want juice" or "go outside"

Use of Spontaneous, Complete Sentences:

A child is now independently forming complete sentences, using increasingly complex grammar.

Examples:
"I want the ball"
"Daddy is at work"



Signs Your Child May Be A Gestalt Language Processor:

Speaking Children:

Limited Progress with Traditional Approaches.

Your child has made some progress in therapy, though it has been slower than expected, even with consistent practice at home.

Traditional therapy often focuses on teaching single words and gradually combining these single words into short phrases (e.g. “car” → “big car”). Children who are Gestalt Language Processors, however, often learn language in larger “chunks” or whole phrases. This means that conventional methods may not always be the most effective for their learning style.

Learned/Taught Phrases Have Not Generalised or Evolved.

Your child frequently repeats phrases exactly as heard and may struggle to modify or adapt them. They store and use these phrases as whole “chunks” of language, rather than breaking them into individual words.

Single Words Remain Isolated.

Your child can produce single words whether learned individually or as part of a larger “chunk”, but may have difficulty using these words to express needs or to combine them into short phrases.

Communicates Appropriately but Repeats Phrases Across Contexts.

Your child can use language, but their communication is limited and often repetitive.

Extended Sequences of Unclear or Unintelligible Speech.

Your child may produce long, speech-like sequences of sounds that are often difficult to understand. These sounds typically include rhythm, pauses, and emotional expression.

Extensive Scripts.

Your child repeats long phrases they have heard from TV shows, books, adults or past experiences. These “scripts” serve as meaningful communication for them, rather than being mere imitation.

Signs Your Child May Be A Gestalt Language Processor:

Non-Speaking Children:

Can Sing Songs but Produces Minimal Words.

Your child may be able to sing entire songs or jingles but still finds it difficult to use single words to communicate.

Uses Very Limited Verbal Speech.

The few words your child uses are often taught or learned as labels, indicating they may be acquiring language in chunks rather than building language word by word.

Speech is Difficult to Understand, but has Rich Intonation.

Even when the words are unclear, your child's tone and rhythm often resemble natural conversation. Their emotions can usually be perceived, even if the speech itself is not understandable.

Makes Limited Progress with AAC and Often Uses Single Symbols Only.

Your child may repeatedly press the same button, use only single symbols or avoid combining symbols into phrases. This mirrors their spoken language, where single words often remain "stuck" and are used as whole units rather than combined.

Repetitive or Overgeneralised Motor Patterns When Using AAC.

Some children may master the physical movements of pressing buttons without fully understanding the meaning of the symbols. They often use the symbols rigidly, rather than flexibly across different situations.

Studies and Replays Media Clips for Creative Communication.

Many GLP children enjoy repeatedly watching the same clips, memorising scenes and using drawings or maps to express their ideas. These are all meaningful forms of communication for them.



Gestalt Language Processing

Tips for Supporting The Language Development of a Gestalt Language Processor:

- Play and Interest Led Interactions: Allow your child to take the lead in play and conversation. Following their interests rather than directing them helps support their motivation to communicate.
- Limit Questioning: Asking many questions can create pressure for your child to speak, making it harder for them to use language naturally. For children in the early stages of gestalt language development, questions may feel too complex, so it's more effective to focus on observing, commenting, and responding.
- Using Sensory Supports: Provide supports or items that help your child stay regulated and engaged, such as fidget toys, movement breaks, or quiet spaces. Language development and sensory regulation are closely connected.
- Allow for Silence: Allow your child time and space to respond. They often use more language when not constantly prompted or questioned.
- Acknowledge Spontaneous Communication Attempts: Recognise and respond to your child's communication attempts. Show understanding by repeating what they say, nodding, smiling or using simple affirmations like "yeah" or "okay." Correction or expansion isn't always necessary.
- Encourage Observations, Comments and Declarative Language: Model everyday language by describing what's happening around your child instead of asking questions. Talk about actions, share observations and narrate daily activities. This helps your child hear and learn natural, meaningful language in context.
- Observe and Explore Language: Pay attention to and interpret the meaning behind the phrases your child uses. Observe their interests, notice the shows they enjoy and recognise the experiences or emotions connected to their gestalts.
- Honour Your Child's Way of Communicating: Recognise that using whole phrases (gestalts) is a valid and meaningful way for your child to communicate.