

How a Language Delay can be Perceived as a Behavior Problem

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When Joey first came to RiteCare Language Clinic, his therapist was apprehensive because of his behavioral outbursts. He would attempt to “control” the therapy session by grabbing therapy items and making extraneous noises. He appeared to be nervous, easily angered, and did not smile or laugh as much as the other children. All of these traits were a direct result of not being able to communicate effectively. Speech and language tests revealed that he was functioning below his peers. For example, he was able to label items like “apple”, but he was unable to verbalize what a person would do with an apple. He could not follow directions and his grammar was very immature for his age.

Many children with language delays experience difficulties remembering information, hearing over background noise, hearing subtle differences in sounds and words, and following directions. Language delays may also cause a child to appear disorganized and distractible. The child may not be able to see the “whole picture” and show difficulty reading other peoples feelings causing a struggle to maintain friendships. For example, a nine year old child who can only understand 2-3 pieces of information will whine or throw a temper tantrum like a 4 or 5 year old when stressed, overwhelmed, or not getting their way. A child may not appear to be listening because they cannot follow multi-step directions. They may even show some aggression when they are not understood or cannot express their feelings. Making decisions, taking appropriate actions, and achieving academically require the ability to make sense of the environment around you. Those children who struggle with the ability to process information adequately are at risk for not making good choices and not achieving academically. They may feel “out of control” in their surroundings. As a result, they may choose coping strategies that are inappropriate, resulting in a “behavior problem”.

Realizing Joey’s specific needs, his therapist provided therapy in a systematic and predictable manner so that Joey could understand what was expected of him. First, the therapist needed to come up with a few basic rules that were simple and easy to understand. Those rules needed to have clear consequences that were practiced consistently and understood by Joey. Next, a visual schedule was made to show Joey what would be expected for the therapy session. This made therapy very predictable for Joey, which decreased his anxiety level. Because children tend to act upon what they heard last, positive reinforcement was given often when Joey completed a desired task. Positive statements were easier for Joey to understand. For example, if Joey were dancing around the room instead of sitting at the table, the therapist would say “thank you for sitting in your chair” or “you do such a great job sitting” and what seemed like a miracle; Joey would sit down without protest. In fact, he would sit down quickly with a smile on his face as if to say “I’m so proud of myself”. Specific choices (designed by the therapist) were offered to Joey throughout the session so that he could feel like he had some control over what he wanted to do during the session. Soon Joey turned from angry to happy and looked forward to coming to his speech and language sessions and his therapist apprehension turned into anticipation awaiting Joey’s arrival at the clinic.

Because of the Scottish Rite’s commitment to excellence in service delivery and understanding the need for children to have good communication skills, Joey has made a lot of gains throughout this past year. His ability to describe how he feels and talking about past events have become easier for him. He is willing to share so much more information without the hesitation and frustration he showed when he first came to the Clinic. With the right accommodations and encouragement, Joey is now just like any other happy boy his age.