

Evidence-based Practice Brief

A Teacher's Guide to Facilitating Communication in Children Who Use Echolalia



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Echolalia refers to the immediate or delayed repetition of previously heard utterances from songs, TV shows, movies or communication partners and is a common characteristic of children and youth with autism spectrum disorder (Cohn et al., 2022). In the past, researchers estimated echolalia occurred in up to 85% of all individuals with ASD who develop speech (Rydell & Prizant, 1995). However, more recently, Roberts (2014) asserted this estimate more likely includes nearly all children with ASD, thereby concluding that echolalia can be considered a defining characteristic of ASD. Research also suggests that echolalia can occur during interactions with various communication partners and across different contexts during the school day (Charlop, 1986). Despite the valuable role teachers and paraprofessionals play in creating meaningful communication experiences and expanding students' verbal skills, they often receive inadequate training in responding to echolalia (Stiegler, 2015). It is therefore important that school professionals, who interact with these children for substantial parts of the day, possess the knowledge and resources to support learners who use echolalia and better understand their role and influence as communication partners (Cohn et al., 2022).

Research supports the idea that echolalia is valuable as a communicative tool and serves a communicative function for the user (Marom et al., 2018). Echolalia is typically described along four categories: pure immediate, pure delayed, mitigated immediate and mitigated delayed (Gladfelter & VanZuiden, 2020). When children repeat words immediately after they hear them, it is referred to

as immediate echolalia. Delayed echolalia occurs when individuals repeat words later. A pure echoed utterance is an exact repetition, while a mitigated utterance indicates modifications from the original utterance (e.g., "Let's go outside" to "let's go over there"). In this context, 'mitigated' refers to the modification or alteration of the echoed expression. Mitigated echolalia represents a developmental stage in children with ASD where they transition from mere repetition of words to adapting language for communication. This stage involves understanding and modifying echoed phrases to convey needs or thoughts more effectively, signifying improved language comprehension and functional use (Neely et al., 2016).

Because of the time delay, delayed echolalia may seem quite unusual because these utterances are used out of context. For example, a child might enjoy a song his teacher sang at circle time, and then later ask to sing it at home by stating, "Circle time!" instead of saying the name of the song. Recognizing the purpose behind echolalia and its potential communicative function can help teachers better respond to and engage with children who exhibit this linguistic behavior. Herein we describe tips for helping children who use echolalia to support their communicative interactions with peers and others.

Understand Children with ASD Learn Language Differently

Next, Children with ASD often have a different language learning path than typically developing children (Prizant, 1983; Stiegler, 2015). Initially, they often use longer chunks of language without understanding the individual words. These chunks are grammatically complex and lack comprehension of word meanings. For example, a child with ASD may consistently say a phrase like "It's time for your dinner" to signal dinnertime without understanding each individual word. However, researchers studying echolalia in children with ASD have observed a progression (Prizant, 1983; Blanc, 2012). Initially, children echo chunks of language without comprehension. As they develop, they modify

these echoes, leading to shorter sentences and increased language flexibility. While echolalia may still occur in certain situations, the child's understanding improves, allowing for the appropriate use of words and phrases. For more details on the language development of many children with ASD, and the role of echolalia in it, see <https://www.asha.org/practice-portal/clinical-topics/autism/echolalia-and-its-role-in-gestalt-language-acquisition/>

Understand Communicative Functions Associated with Echolalia

Echolalia can serve multiple purposes for children. At times, they might use it to self-soothe or for self-regulation when feeling upset or to practice and rehearse certain phrases (Sterponi & Shankey, 2014). In such cases, echolalia may not necessarily be aimed at conveying a message to someone else. However, it is essential for teachers to understand that echolalia often serves as a form of communication. A growing body of research has demonstrated multiple communicative functions associated with echolalia. These functions include turn-taking, labeling, providing information, gaining attention, requesting, affirming, directing others' actions, and protesting, among others (Marom et al., 2018; Prizant & Rydell, 1984; Stiegler, 2015). For a systematic review on communicative functions of echolalia, see Cohn et al., 2022.

Understand the Importance of Responding to Echolalia

Rather than dismissing echolalic utterances as intrusive, meaningless repetition, it is important to recognize that they can carry communicative intent and provide valuable insights into the child's thoughts and needs (Sterponi & Shankey, 2014). It is also important for teachers to recognize that many echolalic utterances are expressed with the expectation of a response from a conversation partner (Cohn et al., 2022). Teachers are therefore encouraged to provide conversational responses to echoed utterances to enable dialogue and enhance comprehension, taking note of the context, as elements from the environment and people present often appear in the echoed utterances and can provide clues as to intent (Prizant & Rydell, 1984).

From a practical standpoint, teachers should acknowledge communication attempts by responding with a smile, nod, or repetition so the child understands they've been heard. If possible, teachers should refrain from providing "replacement language" and instead embrace communication attempts, using teachable moments to model their own language clearly (Marom et al., 2018). Moreover, high-constraint, or restricted language, such

as commands and specific questions, may contribute to immediate echolalia (Gladfelter & Van Zuiden, 2020). Restricted language is limited in flexibility and often involves specific, controlled responses, such as answering closed-ended questions or following strict instructions. To reduce frequency of immediate echolalic responses, educators can adopt a more open-ended questioning style and break down lengthy instructions into shorter segments. To monitor echolalia, classroom educators should regularly record snippets of echoed utterances at frequent intervals (Cohn et al., 2022). This practice allows for analysis and discussion of the ascribed meanings with other professionals and parents. Finally, teachers can make efforts to untangle and interpret echoed utterances to better support the communicative attempts of students. Understanding the true meaning behind echolalia enables teachers to target ways to encourage self-generated language by modeling their own speech accordingly (Cohn et al., 2022). For an organized description of actionable strategies for educators, see Table 1.

Conclusion

Effective communication is essential for individuals with ASD who exhibit echolalia. To ensure consistent identification, analysis, and response to communicative attempts presented through echolalia, it is crucial for teachers, paraprofessionals, psychologists, and SLPs to develop a shared understanding. By fostering collaboration and knowledge exchange among these professionals, we can optimize support for individuals with echolalic communication patterns.

References

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Table 1: Effective Teacher Responses to Echolalia

Teacher Strategy	Description
Respond!	· Acknowledge echolalia as a communication attempt by responding in some way.
Don't take it too seriously	· Understand that echolalia may not always carry the same meaning as the original phrase.
Avoid "replacement language"	· Embrace the child's attempts at communication and model language during teaching moments.
Be a detective	· Try to understand the meaning behind echoed utterances to provide appropriate responses.
Record echoed utterances	· Capture and analyze echoed speech snippets to track progress and discuss meanings.
Unravel and decipher	· Work to decode echoed utterances to support the communicative efforts of the child.

Note: Adapted from Blanc (2012) and Steigler (2015)

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