What is Gestalt Language Processing?

Gestalt Language processing is a type of language development with predictable stages.

Children who are gestalt language processors begin by learning chunks of language or 'gestalts' rather than individual words which are then put together.

These gestalts are often learned from TV shows, songs or events. They can link to a whole experience which may be tied to big emotions and children might echo these back at a later time, sometimes out of context (delayed echolalia).

Gestalt language processors often pick up on rich intonation patterns (the musical up and down tones that form part of our talking) so sometimes it is the intonation which is repeated and it may sound like babble or strings of sounds that don't make sense to others.

It can also be the whole phrase, song or a word that is repeated (e.g happybirthdaytoyou)

Whilst these early gestalts should usually not be taken literally, children often use this echolalia to communicate a feeling or intention and it is our job to acknowledge and respond to this and to play 'detective' where we can to work out what they are communicating.

As children start to learn the rules of language and syntax, they begin to break these learned 'chunks' into smaller pieces and individual words which they then learn to recombine. With time and support children then learn to recombine words into longer utterances, with grammatical structures and use these creatively and spontaneously as part of communication.

The Natural Language Acquisition Guide (Marge Blanc) The Natural Language Acquisition Guide - Communication Development Center

Delayed Echolalia and Gestalt Language Processors (Alex Zachos) meaningfulspeech.com

Echolalia and its role in Gestalt Language Acquisition (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association)

Echolalia and Its Role in Gestalt Language Acquisition (asha.org)

What is Gestalt Language Processing?

Analytical Language Processor

Break down

Gestalt Language Processor

| Complex Grammar *'If I eat my tea can I have more milk?'* |
| Grammar *'Daddy likes milk'* |
| Simple sentence *'I want milk'* |
| Link words *'more milk'* |
| Single word *'milk'* |

Build up

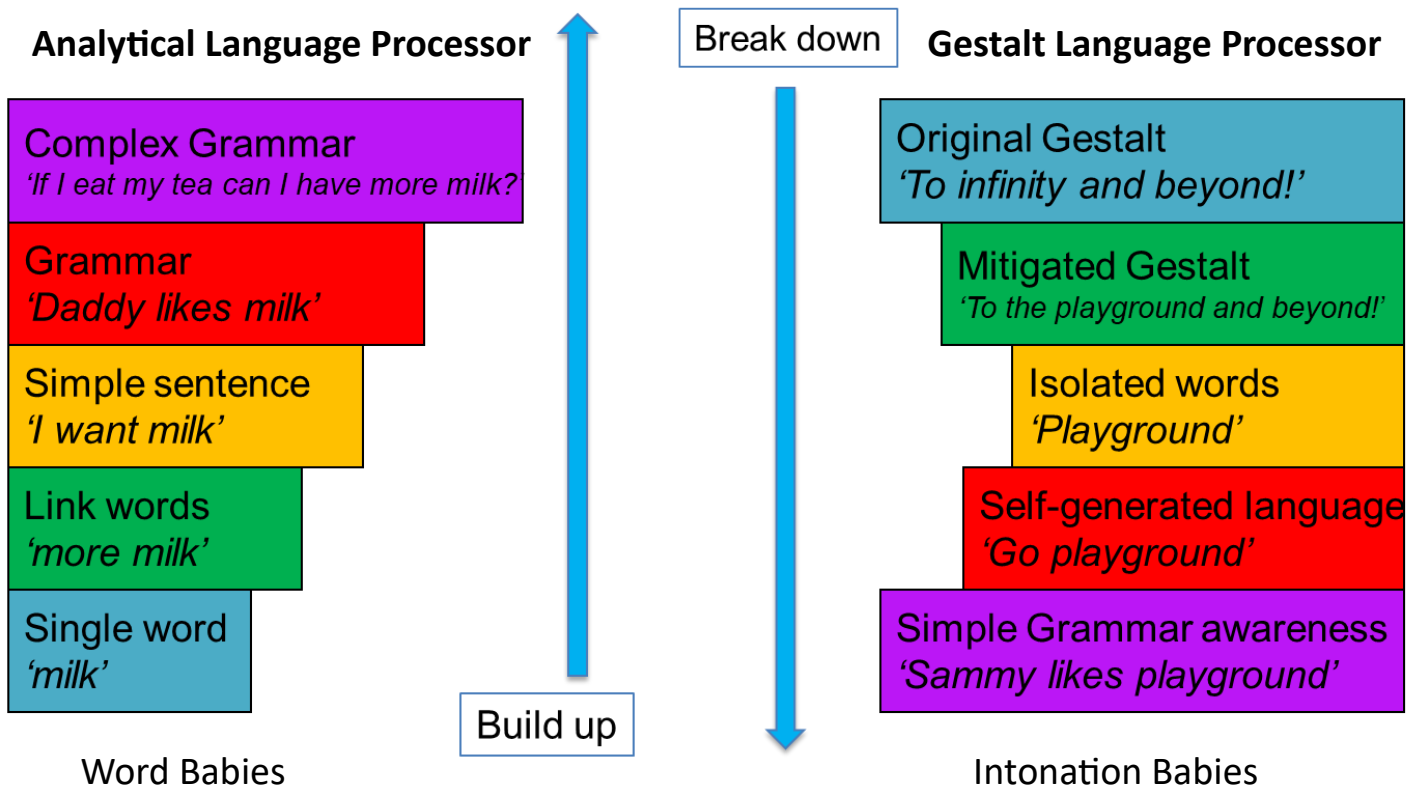| Original Gestalt *'To infinity and beyond!'* |
| Mitigated Gestalt *'To the playground and beyond!'* |
| Isolated words *'Playground'* |
| Self-generated language *'Go playground'* |
| Simple Grammar awareness *'Sammy likes playground'* |

Word Babies

Intonation Babies

Table adapted from: Barry Prizant, 1983

A lot of children are analytical language processors who learn words as units, starting with single words and building on these to create longer phrases and sentences.

However, children who are gestalt language processors start by processing language as whole chunks linked to a situation and then learn to break these down

Children who are analytical language processors are sometimes described as 'word babies' who are drawn to words as units of communication.

Children who are gestalt language processors are sometimes described as 'intonation babies' because they are drawn to the musical rhythms of language

Signs that your child could be a Gestalt Language Processor

They may sing songs but not use words to communicate

They use strings of unintelligible language with rich intonation

Keen interest in music or audio/ songs/ video clips which they replay

May use long scripts e.g. a whole book/ song

Language used in context may be fixed and limited to the same content

May be stuck at single words and not progressing

May not respond well to 'traditional' therapy approaches such as modelling single words / expanding

Stages of Gestalt Language Processing

Stage 1: gestalts in their original form echoing rich intonation — can sound like babble — echoing words or learned phrases/ songs often said out of context

Stage 2 mitigation of gestalts — beginning to 'mix and match' different gestalts e.g. "let's go" + "eat pizza"

Stage 3: isolation of single words and 2 word combinations - beginning to process words as units — starting to take individual words from scripts e.g. 'pizza' 'got dinosaur'

Stage 4: beginning grammar—self-generated language
- building up phrases by putting words together
- grammar still developing e.g. 'him like pizza'

Stage 5: more advanced grammar - self-generated sentences using more complex grammar e.g. 'he likes cheese and tomato pizza at school'

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How to Support Gestalt Language Processors

Be Led By the Child

Use play opportunities and include their hobbies/ interests to create natural opportunities for communication and language.

Spend time tuning into your child to understand their communication

Reduce Questions, instead use Natural Language to Comment during Play

E.g. "That's so tricky" "That's so noisy"

This creates natural opportunities for language and communication at your child's pace

Questions are not appropriate before stage 4

Acknowledge, Respect and Respond to their Language Learning Style

Recognise and embrace their gestalts as a means of communication.

Acknowledge and respond to them as such

Model Functional, Flexible and Easily Mitigable Gestalts

For children at earlier stages of Gestalt Language Processing this is preferable to simply naming and labelling

Stop Prompting Language

Interaction and communication needs to be natural, authentic and meaningful to the child. Prompting and 'taught' language can limit this and stop them from learning how to communicate spontaneously.

Be ok with Silence

It gives them time to process and initiate

Reduced sounds can help some children to regulate

It gives you opportunity to observe your child

Teamwork

Spend time building trust with your child acknowledging and interpreting their gestalts where you can

Teamwork between home and school/ nursery is important to help understand and interpret the meaning behind new gestalts

Supporting Gestalt Language Processors:

Stage 1

Acknowledge the Gestalts

Recognise these as communication and respond:

Smile/ nod your head/ take a turn

Child: 'you can count on us'

Adult: 'yeah, you can count on us!'

Be a Gestalt Detective

A lot of gestalts are used out of context and have a whole experience attached to them which the listener may not understand

E.g. "oh my goodness, you ok?"

could mean *I've hurt myself and need your help*

Don't take the words literally but acknowledge the gestalt and spend time observing and playing detective to work out what it might mean

Teamwork

If you are unsure about how to interpret the child's gestalts -work together with their family to see if they can shed light on where the gestalt has come from and what they might be communicating

What does the child want/ need to communicate?

Spend time getting to know and understand the child's communication and interests to work out what they might want to communicate and what gestalts they would need to achieve this.

Give your child more gestalts

Model functional, flexible and easily mitigable gestalts for your child such as "It's…", "lets…", "that's…" phrases **e.g. let's go to the park/ it's a bear!**

Model these exciting new gestalts in natural contexts such as during play

Make it Exciting and Memorable

Use rich intonation and make it natural and relevant to the situation when modelling these new scripts.

Supporting Gestalt Language Processors:
Stage 2

Help your Child to Mix and Match

At this stage your child may be starting to mix and match their gestalts -taking a bit from one and sticking it to another (e.g. Let's go ..+..eat pizza)

Model Small Changes

Model small changes to your child's gestalts within context

e.g. Child: 'to infinity and beyond'

Adult: 'to infinity and the playground'

Make these small changes meaningful whilst valuing the original gestalt

This honours this child's original attempt at communication and supports the meaning behind it. E.g. Child: "Yay, we did it!"

Adult: "We did it! We built it"

Keep it Child Led

Look for opportunities to play and communicate together around your child's interest

Follow your child's lead and find opportunities when they are using their gestalts naturally

Continue to tune into what it is that your child wants to communicate

Don't make too many changes to the gestalt

Be patient. It can take time to build up trust and confidence. Don't be tempted to rush through the stages or move on too quickly

Supporting Gestalt Language Processors:

Stage 3

Your child will be starting to process words as units:

breaking gestalts into single words and beginning to re-combine them.

You can support this by:

Helping your child to pull single words from their scripts

Listen for your child using single words during play

Model single words from their scripts within context to help add meaning (e.g. 'pizza')

Use single words with pointing, eye gaze to reference items

Model and play around with recombining words by adding a word to what your child has said

E.g. Child: Pizza

Adult: pizza...cheese

Big ...pizza

Model 2 word turns

Play around with 2 word combinations to reference objects, adjectives etc. **e.g. red...block, block...here, cheese...pizza.** Model during motivating play activities and through natural interactions during the day where it feels comfortable .

Don't worry about grammar

At this stage your child is beginning to generate more of their own language so grammar is not the focus

Avoid modelling grammar in stage 3

Supporting Gestalt Language Processors:

Stage 4

Your child will be starting to self-generate sentences using the words they built up at stage 3 and experimenting with grammar.

You can support this by:

At Stage 4 your child may be ready to work on questions!

Adding to what your child can already say by modelling different sentence combinations with words they are using

Modelling 2-3 word sentence combinations that your child is ready for

Speak to your speech and language therapist if you are not sure where to begin

Gradually introducing early grammatical features

Start with a couple of target areas e.g. verbs, plurals, verb endings, tenses and monitor progress. Ask your Speech and Language Therapist if you are unsure where to begin.

Gots pizza

Mummy go park

I'm going to school

I'm eating ice-cream and cake