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The Importance of Pragmatic Communication

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Pragmatics, also known as social language, refers to an individual's ability to use language for a variety of functions (i.e. to request, label, gain attention, greet/part, comment, ask for help, etc), vary language based on audience or setting, and follow rules for conversation. Pragmatics includes the understanding and appropriate use of eye contact, facial expressions, and body language. Children and adolescents may be able to form lengthy sentences and articulate sounds clearly, but if they do not understand and/or have not mastered the rules for communication, there may be a language delay in the area of pragmatics.

When having a conversation with someone, we initiate with a greeting, introduce a topic, and take turns commenting. Within that conversation, each person needs to be able to read the other person's tone, facial expressions, eye contact, and nonverbal cues to determine if their partner is still interested, when it is appropriate to interject or add a comment, and when it is time to end the conversation or change the topic. Individuals that have difficulty with use of social language may provide too much information on a topic, use inappropriate phrases/sentences within conversation, change the topic suddenly and/or frequently, and retell a story or recent event that is hard to follow. There may also be little variety in the use of language, which can make their language appear scripted or rote.

It is common for children to demonstrate some of these issues occasionally; however, a pragmatic disorder may be present if these difficulties arise across multiple settings/situations and appear inappropriate given the child's chronological age. Pragmatic problems may be seen in the context of a diagnosed condition (often for individuals with autism spectrum disorders) and can coexist with other language problems (i.e. receptive/expressive delay).

There are many ways to target pragmatic skills at home and throughout daily activities. For example:

- Provide models of appropriate statements, phrases, and questions to use during daily activities and encourage your child to practice. You can start in settings where the child is most comfortable and then gradually introduce new situations. Role-play with siblings, familiar peers, and other adult family members to practice talking with different audiences. A child who has difficulty with use of language can practice requesting, gaining attention, and asking for help. For example, practice appropriate phrases, sentences, or questions your child could use if they needed help finding a book in the library and then the next time you go to the library, encourage your child to ask the librarian for help.
- Review familiar emotions with your child (i.e. happy, sad, mad, frustrated, angry, bored, scared, surprised, excited) and talk about ways to convey these emotions using words, body language, or facial expressions. For example, "when I'm mad I cross my arms" or "when I'm excited I jump up and down."
- Use pictures or keywords to help your child retell a familiar story or recent event. Retelling a story or recent event can be overwhelming, especially if there is a lot of emotion attached to the story (i.e. excitement, anger, sadness, etc). Using a picture(s) or keywords can help the child to stay on topic and stay organized within the conversation.
- Come up with a list of topics with your child and write them onto note cards. Place these in a hat or bag and take turns pulling a topic from the bag. Practice appropriate introductions to the topic and statements/questions to keep the conversation going. For example, if you could live anywhere in the world where would it be?

- Play family games that target social language skills, for example, charades. In charades, you must find a way to communicate a message to others without talking. This is great practice for using and understanding nonverbal language. You can come up with familiar emotions, actions, or things as a family and put these ideas into a hat and have each person take a turn choosing from the bag and acting out their word.

In addition to targeting pragmatic skills at home, these skills can also be addressed through individual and/or group speech therapy sessions depending on the child's strengths and weaknesses. Providing opportunities for your child to engage in many different settings and situations throughout the day where they will need to practice these skills will help them to generalize the skills they learn from individual and/or group sessions to the natural environment.

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