

# Natural Language Acquisition

Join your child on the journey from echolalia to self-generated language!  
You can support your child's language development at any age!



Echolalia: it's not just about autism!  
NLA is not about learning functional phrases – or, 'verbal behavior.' It is real language development!

## Echolalia

Echolalia is the immediate or delayed repetition of language. Research by Barry Prizant and others documented the communicative functions underlying these utterances, and described the process of natural development from, 'delayed echolalia' to self-generated grammar.

## What is Natural Language Acquisition?

Natural Language Acquisition (NLA) expands on the work of Prizant et al., and is a systematic way of looking at natural language development from echolalia to self-generated grammar. Children who use echolalia are 'gestalt language processors,' meaning they process early language in 'whole' strings of sounds, or 'chunks', rather than processing single words. Gestalt language processors are not limited to children on the autism spectrum. In fact, many neurotypical children begin acquiring language as gestalts. NLA acknowledges the communicative intent underlying echolalia and helps the child break apart their gestalt scripts and recombine the pieces into new combinations, phrases, and sentences. NLA describes the stages of the child's language development, presents assessment strategies, and offers appropriately matched supports at each level.

## A Brief Outline of the NLA Process

- ✚ Inventory your child's spontaneous expressive language and try to determine the communicative intent underlying these utterances. Take note of your child's accompanying non-verbal forms of communication (gestures, facial expressions, gaze, etc.) and the situation itself, to help understand the ideas expressed.
- ✚ Pay attention to the sources of language available to your child (siblings, electronic media, books, classroom, etc.) – and, most importantly, identify ways you can supplement these inputs with your own gestalt language models.
- ✚ Avoid questions or prompts. Instead, create opportunities for your child to comment spontaneously. Provide an environment where your child's physical and sensory needs are met so they can comfortably explore their surroundings, the sounds and language that accompany them, and the communicative opportunities.
- ✚ Recognize the signs of language development and match that progress with your own language input.

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## Stages of Natural Language Acquisition

Stage	Examples	
<b>Stage 1: Echolalia</b> Strings of language repeated verbatim from other sources. These utterances range in their nature and may include intonational contours, songs, sentences, or long scripts.	"Let's get out of here!" "Want some more?"	These utterances are communicative in nature, but should not be taken literally. Provide language models with developmentally appropriate grammar that can be easily mitigated. Consider which language forms may be immediately useful and emphasize those (e.g. "Let's...", "It's a...", "I'm...".)
<b>Stage 2: Mitigated Echolalia</b> Strings from Stage 1 are first broken down into smaller chunks, then recombined into other utterances	"Let's get" + "Out of here!" "Want" + "Some more?" ----- "Let's get" + "Some more?" "Want" + "Out of here!"	At this stage, your child is figuring out how to 'mix and match' language, so provide models that lend themselves to this process. Continue to provide developmentally appropriate language models that can be mitigated and recombined.
<b>Stage 3: Isolation &amp; Recombination of Single Words</b> Echolalia is further mitigated and into single words that are used to generate two-word phrases	"Get... more!" "Want... out?"	While these two-word combinations may seem less sophisticated than the utterances at Stage 2, they are actually the emergence of self-generated language, so help your child understand that this is progress. Model ways – and create situations – for you and your child to play with them together.
<b>Stage 4: Self-Generated Grammar</b> Original sentences are simple at first, but increase in complexity	"I get." "Get more no." "I wanna get some more." "I gotted none but he did."	Incorrect grammar is an indication of self-generation! Your child is experimenting with grammar and increasingly complex sentences. Provide a wide variety of models to support this journey!

### Suggestions for Further Study:

- ❑ First, check out the article, *Echolalia on the Spectrum: The Natural Path to Self-Generated Language*:  
<http://communicationdevelopmentcenter.com/articles/echolaliaonthespectrum.pdf>
- ❑ Next, read the article, *Finding the Words... To Tell the "Whole" Story*:  
<http://communicationdevelopmentcenter.com/articles/nla.pdf>
- ❑ Read *Natural Language Acquisition on The Autism Spectrum: The Journey from Echolalia to Self-Generated Language* by Marge Blanc
- ❑ Join the "Natural Language Acquisition Study Group" on Facebook:  
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/NLAStudyGroup/>
- ❑ Take the Natural Language Acquisition courses through Northern Speech Services:  
<https://www.northernspeech.com/apraxia-cas/natural-language-acquisition-in-autism-echolalia-to-self-generated-language-level-1/>