



# GESTALT LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

## How Most Autistic Individuals Develop Language

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As a parent, have you ever asked yourself the following questions:

- Why isn't traditional speech therapy working for my child?
- How can I help my child communicate with varied language?
- What can I do at home to help my child engage in meaningful communication?
- Where can I go to learn ways to help my child?

One rainy spring day in 2016, my client \*Lindy said, "Don't worry I'll help you find your mama," as we looked for a game to play. I knew that the line was from her favorite Dora episode. What I didn't know, however, was why she was saying it and what I should say in response.

At that point, I had been a practicing and licensed speech-language pathologist for 13 years. I had a Master's degree, and had worked and trained in acute care hospitals, rehabilitation and outpatient centers, early intervention, private practice, and public and private schools. Despite all this experience, I still had no idea how to work with children who communicated with delayed echolalia.

I had been taught to redirect or ignore it, and to tell the child, “No movie talk.” None of the techniques I had learned for supporting language development, however, were working. Many clients had amassed hundreds of single words but seemed to be stuck at the single-word level. Like Lindy, they communicated with scripts from media, movies, shows and YouTube. I felt frustrated and defeated. That’s when I went looking for resources and research.

I found a book written by speech-language pathologist Marge Blanc entitled, *Natural Language Acquisition on The Autism Spectrum: The Journey from Echolalia to Self-Generated Language*. I learned about it through a post in a speech-language Facebook group. I bought it and read it from cover to cover in one week. Marge Blanc wrote the book based on research conducted in the 1970s and 1980s by Dr. Barry Prizant and Dr. Ann Peters. She also drew on her 20 years of clinical longitudinal research in autistic individuals that communicated with delayed echolalia. I was shocked as I read this book: it was a revelation to me. Many parents and speech-language pathologists have the same reaction when they discover that delayed echolalia is the first stage in gestalt language development – another natural, normal way to develop language that starts out differently but ends in original, flexible language. Thanks to the research of Dr. Barry Prizant and others, we now know that most, if not all, autistic individuals develop language this way.

Most speech-language pathologists and professionals in related fields were only taught about analytic language development. Babies start out babbling, then say their first words, two-word combinations, short phrases and sentences, and then are having conversations while developing grammar by the pre-school years. Children who don’t develop language this way take another path and are called gestalt language processors (GLPs). These children start with delayed echolalia. This can be a single word, a script, or gestalt, from media, or a long unintelligible intonationally defined utterance. These are picked up and stored for later use, and are tied to an emotional experience. This is why Lindy said, “Don’t worry, I’ll help you find your mama.” Dora’s friends had lost their mom in Lindy’s favorite episode, and we couldn’t find our game. That script held meaning for Lindy that she applied to our current situation. It may have sounded out of context to me, but it clearly wasn’t once I investigated the source!

### GLD Stage 1

Gestalt language development starts with delayed echolalia. Kids who are GLPs are called “intonation babies.” They pick up on the intonation before they process words as units. While some well-meaning professionals will say they are “jargoning,” what they are actually doing is trying to communicate with a long gestalt that they are not yet prepared to say from a motor skills perspective. If you listen closely, you can hear the rich intonation, but there is often no distinction between the words. Other kids are quite intelligible, but listeners will still pick up on the intonation over the distinct words. Many GLPs are very musical, and some even have perfect pitch.

### GLD Stage 2

After the first stage of delayed echolalia, kids begin to mitigate or mix and match the chunks of language or they break apart and put together pieces of their script or gestalt. Lindy did this when she came into my clinic one day and said, “Don’t worry, I’ll help you find the ball.”

### GLD Stage 3


This is what I call the “magic stage.” This is when GLPs begin to process words as units, and “free” each word from a script. They begin to comprehend that a word can stand alone or be combined with another word. Lindy said “ball” alone at this stage.

### GLD Stage 4

Stage 4 involves beginning grammar and self-generated language. This is when we hear the true, novel and original language of GLPs. At this stage, Lindy said, “He find ball.” I knew those were her own words when I heard the beginning grammar. This was not something she had heard and stored for later use; it was created and communicated by her! In **Stages 5 and 6**, advanced and complex grammar continues to develop.

In her book, Marge Blanc coined the term “Natural Language Acquisition” (NLA) and defined both the framework and the six stages. She called it “natural language” because it is a natural process. Too often we pathologize or look at language differences like they are a disorder. In this case, our gestalt language processors are simply going through a natural language development process. Some kids will go through this process on their own. They arrive at self-generated language without caregivers noticing that they are developing language a bit differently than their peers who follow the analytic language process. Other kids need a little or a lot of support on their language development journey. This is where speech-language therapy that focuses on the NLA framework can help.

Therapy using the NLA framework is child-led and play-based. It allows for movement and special interest play. It focuses on language modeling in order to support children where they are at and guide them into the next stage of language development. If you are a parent of or work with a gestalt language processor, the following are some basic guidelines and takeaways.



Always acknowledge any communication, whether it is unintelligible language, a script or a single word. Smile, nod your head, repeat the whole gestalt or say "Ok" or "Yeah."

Do some "detective work." Find out where the gestalt came from and what meaning it carries for the child.

Model the language that you think the child wants to say. For Lindy, I said, "Let's find a game" after I acknowledged her gestalt, "Don't worry, I'll help you find your mama."

After reading Marge Blanc's book, I was ready to use this approach in working with Lindy and other clients. The only problem was I didn't know anyone else who was using it, and I had never seen it in action before. I decided to reach out to [Marge Blanc directly](#). This was the beginning of a beautiful mentorship and collaboration that have been ongoing over the past six years. Marge helped further my understanding of NLA. With her support, I was able to start my online course and business, [Meaningfulspeech.com](#). I now teach speech-language pathologists, professionals in related fields and parents how to support their own gestalt language processors on their individual language journeys.

I hope that this article has answered some of your questions, and that you will take the initiative to learn more about the fascinating way in which most of our autistic kids develop language.

\*Name changed to protect identity

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Alexandria created [MeaningfulSpeech.com](http://MeaningfulSpeech.com) in 2020 to educate SLPs, professionals and parents on gestalt language processing, echolalia, and the step-by-step approach to helping support a child from delayed echolalia to original language using the Natural Language Acquisition framework developed by Marge Blanc (2012). Meaningful Speech provides self-paced learning through educational modules, handouts and monthly webinars featuring experts in the field for both parents and professionals.

Alexandria is an international speaker and often presents on gestalt language processing, echolalia and NLA both virtually and in person. She is the owner and CEO of Social Butterfly Inc, a private speech-language practice in Illinois. In her free time she enjoys reading and going on adventures with her husband and two daughters.

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