

# Semantic Pragmatic Disorder

*(A paper prepared by Heathlands Language Unit staff for parents and teachers involved in the care of children with Semantic-Pragmatic Difficulties)*

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## **HISTORY**

Semantic-Pragmatic Disorder was originally defined in the literature on Language Disorder in 1983, by Rapin and Allen, although at that time it was classified as a syndrome. They referred to a group of children who presented with mild Autistic features and specific semantic pragmatic language problems.

In babyhood, parents often described them as model babies or by contrast babies who seemed to cry too much. Many of these children babbled little or very late and went on using 'jargon' speech much longer than other children of the same age. Their first words were late and learning language was a hard slog. Some had other speech disorders too. Problems were usually first identified between 18 months and 2 years when the child had few if any real words.

Many parents wondered if their children were deaf at first because they did not appear to respond to speech. Assessment found that most children had good hearing, although some did have otitis media and had grommets fitted to ensure maximum hearing.

The problem usually proved to be one of listening and processing the meaning of language instead. Many of the children ignored their names early on but would hear the telephone or the door bell and even respond to the rustle of a sweet paper. Early on in their lives, Semantic-Pragmatic Disordered children were found to have comprehension problems finding it difficult to follow instructions which were not part of the normal routine. Comprehension problems usually improved or responded well to speech therapy so that by the age of four years, many of the children appeared to be functioning superficially, very well.

By the time these children reached school, staff and parents were aware that there was something "different" about them, but they couldn't quite put their finger on it. Sometimes the children would appear to follow very little conversation, while at other times they could give a detailed explanation of an event. Later on in school they were often good at maths, science, and computers but had great difficulty in writing a coherent sentence or playing with other children. They were also unable to share and take turns. They could appear aggressive, selfish, bossy, over confident, shy or withdrawn. Many, therefore, were singled out as behaviour problems and subjected to behavioural regimes which did not always work and left the child confused about what he was supposed to be doing. As one 6 year old Semantic-Pragmatic Disordered child said to his mother, "I don't want to be naughty".

## **Current Thinking**

Today we have a better understanding of the Disorder. We know that Semantic-Pragmatic Disordered children have many more problems than just speaking and understanding words, so we call it a communication disorder rather than a language disorder. We think that the difficulty for children with

S.P.D. may be in the way they process information. Children with S.P.D. find it more difficult to extract the central meaning or the saliency of an event. They tend to focus on detail instead; for example the sort of child who finds the duck hidden in the picture but fails to grasp the situation or story in the picture or the child who points out the spot on your face before saying 'hello'.

Extracting information from around us is something we do all the time. We are always looking for similarities and differences so that we can understand and anticipate. Children who find it difficult to extract any kind of meaning will find it even more difficult to generalise and grasp the meaning of new situations. They will therefore cling on to keeping events the same and predictable. Maintaining sameness, by following routines slavishly, insisting on eating certain foods or wearing particular articles of clothing or developing obsessional interests are all characteristics of children with S.P.D. Because these children have difficulty extracting meaning both aurally and visually, the more stimulating the environment becomes the more difficult they find extracting information. Because people have minds which allow them to behave independently they are much less predictable and more difficult to understand than objects or machines. Children with S.P.D. are often more sociable with friends at home or in a formal 1:1 assessment situation than in a busy classroom. Carers may be puzzled by the apparent discrepancy.

### **Listening and Understanding Language**

Because children with S.P.D. find it difficult to focus their listening, they are easily distracted by noises outside the classroom or someone talking on the other side of the room. They may butt in on conversations which have nothing to do with them. They are often described by staff as inattentive or impulsive. They may find loud noise in the classroom distressing and may comment on this. Sometimes when children with S.P.D. are trying very hard to concentrate they may not hear speech at all and ignore general instructions in the classroom while they are trying to work. Many class teachers say they sometimes have to stand in front of their children with S.P.D. or touch them before they respond.

Although many children with S.P.D. do very well; sometimes way above their age level on formal language assessments, this does not mean that they do not have comprehension difficulties. What it does mean is that our methods of testing are not tapping the right areas, or the ones we are using are not standardised yet.

Their difficulties in understanding language are usually fairly subtle by the time they are 5. Children with S.P.D. can often respond to long instructions like, "put the blue pen under the big book", because the objects are there, because it is here and now in time, and because bright children with S.P.D. usually have very little difficulty in understanding visible concepts like size, shape and colour and can be well ahead of their peers. The other very important point is, this kind of language does not require knowledge about the person giving the instruction.

Children with S.P.D. would find comments and questions like "Where did you come from then?", "What are you doing later?" "That was very clever of you!", much more difficult. This language requires more than listening and understanding words. You need to understand what the speaker was thinking and intending. You need to understand non literal expressions and time concepts too.

S.P.D. children's understanding usually breaks down in a busy classroom when the teacher starts to chat, tell jokes, or makes a few sarcastic remarks. Children with S.P.D. often feel very uncomfortable at this point because they take everything literally. If other children become aware of this, they can learn to tease and take advantage.

Because children with S.P.D. have difficulty in understanding what other people are thinking when they are talking, they cannot understand when people are lying or deceiving them. Many parents of children with S.P.D. have reported to us that their children have had their lunches taken off them or parted with pocket money and returned home unable to give a clear account of what happened.

## **Talking**

As well as subtle comprehension problems children with S.P.D. have difficulties with talking too. These are not always picked up by parents or staff because so often they chat fluently. It is the particular way in which they use language which identifies them as a group. That is, they have specific Pragmatic Difficulties

Children with S.P.D. have a different style of learning language, they seem to learn more by memorising than knowing what the individual words really mean; so they cannot use language with the same range and flexibility as other children. Children with S.P.D. remember whole chunks of adult phrases and because they are not sure which bits are more important than others they learn everything accurately including the intonation and the accent of the speaker! Sometimes you can hear yourself talking. All in all they seem to say a lot more than they really understand. Some children with S.P.D. use a flat or 'sing-songy' voice when they are echoing other people's language.

Children with S.P.D. often remember to use this echoed language appropriately so they can sound very grown up which contrasts dramatically with their social immaturity. However, when you ask them to give you an account of an event or discuss a picture story which they have not rehearsed, you find them groping for original words and the whole account is very disjointed. One mum described how her son of 5 would tell everyone off in his class including the teacher using her words but could never explain what he had done at school or ask the teacher for help.

When you analyze the content of an S.P.D. child's speech, you find a disproportionate amount of echoed social phrases and very little about how people feel or think. S.P.D. children's delayed social development means that they do not make distinctions between people. Adults, children, teachers and parents are treated the same so when Adam said "don't talk to me like that" to a visitor, he was understandably thought to be very rude, when in fact he was simply repeating what had been said to him. S.P.D. children's inappropriate or immature use of language can be very embarrassing. They say things like, "why has that lady got such a big nose", or they give the family secret away to the very person you had intended it to be kept from. It is easy to see why adults find children with S.P.D. so exasperating at times.

Problems with talking really show up at a conversational level for children with S.P.D. First of all their delayed social development means that like younger children, they are much more interested in themselves than other people so they tend to choose topics about themselves, their family or their special interests. Because they have insufficient understanding of their conversational partner, they tend not to understand that she might not be interested in their latest obsession and because the S.P.D. child has no idea what is pertinent in his story and what is not, when he is able to describe past events, he tends to give an over detailed account and fails to read the signals of boredom in his listener. He may, on the other hand believe that his listening partner shares his thoughts exactly. He thus assumes common knowledge and fails to put his partner sufficiently in the picture and requests for information may bring one word answers only.

On top of these problems so far described, the S.P.D. child may misunderstand what his conversation partner intended so he may give rather bizarre answers or he may, if he is skilful enough, change the topic and gear it back to what he understands and keep talking just to shut his partner out. Conversation can take on very strange meanings, if you are not aware of the S.P.D. child's difficulty.

## **Understanding how others think**

Some S.P.D children become skilled at talking about pictures or sequences of pictures but you find them only able to give you the bare facts. Their inability to describe people's thoughts and intentions within the picture mean they cannot be creative or abstract in their account or they cannot infer or make sensible predictions. They cling to the observable features of the picture without dealing with the implied underlying meaning.

The S.P.D. child's difficulty in seeing the world through other people's eyes or understanding that other people think differently from himself, is often described as a child who does not have a 'theory of mind'

There has been a lot of research recently into when children develop a 'theory of mind'. Researchers have used false belief stories and deception tasks (which tests the child's ability to understand that people who do not share the same knowledge will behave differently) to determine when children develop this skill. Researchers think that four year olds have quite good understanding of minds but that children on the Autistic Continuum \* find this more difficult.

Most 'core' Autistic children never acquire a complex theory of mind where as S.P.D. do seem to but later than other skills at the same developmental stage. This lack of social 'nous' above all else makes life difficult for the S.P.D. child. They find it difficult to make friends with children of their own age and tend to gravitate towards younger or much older children unless of course there are other children with S.P.D. in the class - when they seem to be attracted to each other like magnets. We think that children with S.P.D. need to spend time together so they can feel on a par with each other and not constantly at the mercy of more sophisticated peers.

We think teachers should explain to other children, in simple terms, why it is the S.P.D. child cannot conform and to keep an eye on his vulnerability both inside and outside of the classroom.

### **Creative Play**

Researchers have also suggested that the difficulty children with S.P.D. have in playing creatively and in mentalising has a common cognitive origin. The ability to separate one's own thinking from that of another person may start at birth and develop through simple turntaking and shared attention games. Even breast feeding, humpty dumpty or peek-a-boo requires turntaking and mentalising.

At about 18 months, children take a leap forward in their mentalising, they are able to think even more abstractly and they can switch from abstract to concrete thinking very easily. For example, they can pretend a toy cup is a telephone, but they also understand that the toy cup is a cup.

Toddlers' teddies take on extra meanings when they become people who are taken to bed, fed and even used to fight children's battles for them. Three year olds know how to switch from pretend to reality and develop story lines with their friends when they say, "let's pretend you are .....".

Children with S.P.D., on the other hand, find this kind of abstract thinking much more difficult. This makes their play less creative so that a tower of bricks is always a tower of bricks until someone else tells him otherwise. Children with S.P.D. tend to flit from toy to toy or play repetitively. They show more interest in real activities like water, motor play, operating machines, tidying up and stacking toys. Many children with S.P.D. understand representation i.e. that a toy cup stands for a real cup and they will often perform the appropriate action on the toy. They are not however pretending. The child who is really pretending is taking on the role of someone else and using their persona to develop a story line.

Many bright children with S.P.D. try to solve the mystery of pretence by copying other people's pretence or copying parents' actions in the same detailed way they copy their speech. Some children with S.P.D. copy exactly from t.v. programmes exactly, and some people actually think children with S.P.D. are being creative when in fact they are simply copying in detail. We call this kind of play functional play. This inability to separate pretence from reality can pose problems for some children watching t.v. Although most children with S.P.D. prefer cartoon programmes, many, as they mature, enjoy films too. We would suggest that as far as possible you limit access to programmes which contain violence and that you explain what is real and what is not.

This inability to be creative is usually extended to drawing skills too. Many children with S.P.D. are late acquiring representational drawing skills. Many have to be taught how to draw a face and they can only repeat it in a particular way. Some children with S.P.D. will only copy draw and some will only draw

objects related to their obsessional interests. One child we knew would only draw pyramids, another drew horses. Very few, except the most able, can draw a picture story which is not the same each time.

### **Motor Difficulties**

Some children with S.P.D. have fine motor difficulties. They find handwriting very difficult. They often need specialised help in making the correct letter shapes.

Some children with S.P.D. have mild gross motor difficulties too, not always noticed early on except they are sometimes described as walking with an 'odd gait'. They are late riding bikes, find gym work difficult and take little interest in rule based games like football. Perceptual difficulties too can interfere with performance on practical skills, e.g. the sort of child who tells you how to prepare a 3 course meal but cannot put the beans on the toast.

### **Memory Skills**

Many bright children with S.P.D. have exceptional memory skills which compensate for their communication problems. Many have a detailed memory for past events which other members of the family have long forgotten. Most have a detailed memory for social phrases as mentioned. Many have a memory for routes and can direct parents long distances by car! Some have an excellent memory for reading, others remember tunes.

### **Academic Performance**

In the classroom, academic performance, tends to be patchy. First of all, the S.P.D. child's egocentricity means that he can only understand topic work from his own perspective. Refusing to do work may signal the work has no meaning for him and may suggest to the teacher and parents that they need to supplement classwork with more concrete shared experience. Children with S.P.D. often have excellent number concepts and teachers and parents are puzzled by the child's slowness in grasping how to do 'sums'. It seems they find the abstract symbols of adding + and subtracting - rather meaningless unless they are allowed to make their own. Later on, they often fail to understand the value of money or tell analogue time - unless of course either one happens to be an obsessional interest.

We think these difficulties can be remediated if addressed early on. Children with S.P.D. usually manage fairly well during infant classes and it is often not until junior level, when help has not been available that obstacles seem to be met. At Junior level, the major problems are handwriting and creative writing.

We would suggest that if handwriting is still unintelligible at nine years, there is little point in persisting with further handwriting practise and that it may be more sensible to encourage development of written skills through the use of word processors.

Creative writing, rather like pretend play, is something which may remain inflexible. Many children with S.P.D. find it easier to regurgitate their own experiences or retell stories. One child we know is so accomplished at memorising stories and interweaving them into new ones that he has actually won prizes for creative writing!

Some children with S.P.D. learn to read very early but not necessarily with understanding. We call this hyperlexia. Other children find reading and writing a hard slog and we call this dyslexia. As yet we cannot predict which children will fall into which group.

S.P.D. is therefore a complex disorder not yet fully understood. Except we now know that most of the problems experienced by these children have something to do with abstract thinking and mentalising; but just like any group of children, they are all different. They have their individual personality and their individual abilities, which means they have individual needs.

## **School Placements**

Some children have moderate learning difficulties on top of their S.P.D. problems and do best in special schools, but many children are brighter than average and can do very well in mainstream education; particularly if they have the support of a helper or spend time in a language unit or a language school. We think that as our understanding of the disorder improves then we shall be able to provide an educational environment which best meets their needs.

For bright children with S.P.D., we think that the most important question is, "What is it that makes the S.P.D. child unique?" He has a different style of learning which is equally valid but it does necessitate a special understanding and a different approach. If we are to maintain his self esteem and reduce his anxiety to levels that allow him to learn, then we should perhaps start from the premise of what can this child do, rather than what can't he do.

With a clear understanding of his skills and his needs, our expectations should become more realistic and our interventions less punitive. The S.P.D. child may not show embarrassment when he has violated a class social rule but he will feel a failure if he is saturated with labels of 'naughty', 'silly' and 'no common sense'. He simply needs to know what is acceptable and what is unacceptable.

Bright children with S.P.D. are usually very quick at picking up rules if they are spelt out and will stick to them much more slavishly than the rest of the class. The secret of good teaching is perhaps to anticipate when these rules may need revision. Children with S.P.D. often perform best in small, orderly 'old fashioned' styled classrooms.

## **Growing Up**

We haven't followed any of language unit children with S.P.D. into adulthood yet, but we do know that the children whose problems have been identified early and whose behaviour and communication problems have been recognised as part of the learning disorder tend to integrate best at least up to senior level. Some children have managed the transition to senior school well and one we expect to go to university. Other children however bright would simply be too vulnerable to cope socially at comprehensive school even though much of the academic work would be within their scope. We hope that in time some specialist facility may be offered locally at senior school for those who need it.

What we are sure of at this stage, is that children with S.P.D. do have problems recognising what is socially acceptable and unacceptable and that they should not be educated with children whose primary diagnosis is E.D.B (Emotional Disturbed Behaviour). We believe that S.P.D. children's behaviour problems escalate in the presence of conduct disorders.

We have also found that some children with S.P.D. who find it difficult to cope in a busy mainstream class are out performed by similar children in special school, particularly if there is high Speech Therapy input and if the school has a genuine interest in developing a service for children with Semantic Pragmatic Difficulties.

Echoed speech, comprehension problems and refusal to co-operate are all behaviours minimized in the appropriate setting.

Children with S.P.D. will probably benefit most from an adapted curriculum where teachers and speech therapists work alongside each other to provide an integrated academic and communication programme.

Children with S.P.D. often do well if they spend time with children who are equally or less socially sophisticated than themselves. They need social peers as well as intellectual ones. Children who will encourage or insist on interaction rather than children who ignore.

Children with S.P.D. need extra talking practice, not less. With help, children with S.P.D. will overcome most of their language comprehension problems but if their conversation is to be timely and appropriate they need to 'know' who their conversational partner is.

### \* Autistic Continuum

This phrase refers to all children who share the same specific cognitive deficit resulting in problems with sociability, language and pretence. At the severe end of the continuum, we have children labelled as Autistic, Core Autistic or Classically Autistic.

At the other end of the continuum, we have children with milder problems who may have diagnostic labels of Semantic-Pragmatic Disorder or Autistic Spectrum Disorders

### Autistic Spectrum Disorders

This recently adopted phrase refers to children who fall some way between normality and Autism but outside Core Autism. Labels like Atypical Autism, Aspergers Syndrome, or Semantic-Pragmatic disorder are often used and they all describe similar communication difficulties to a greater or lesser degree. All children on the Autistic Continuum including those with Core Autism have Semantic-Pragmatic difficulties with language and they should all be viewed in the context of Autism. That is they share the same triad of difficulties, with sociability, pretence and language.

Children with S.P.D. are the group who are sociably the most able but who have much more difficulty early on at least learning basic language skills. but whose difficulties we suspect in adulthood will blur into the realms of mild eccentricity.

Children with Aspergers Syndrome tend to have more problems with socialising than children with Semantic Pragmatic Disorder but are generally earlier fluent speakers. There seems to be a pay off between early comprehension skills and sociability. As children mature, it is often difficult to specify what label best fits. Many children improve dramatically and diagnostic labels can change.

### Labelling or not

There is an argument, at least in the early years, particularly for more able children, to use less specific diagnostic labels like Autism and simply to describe children who may well improve dramatically in the pre-school years as falling within the 'Autistic Continuum' or as having an Autistic Spectrum Disorder.

Specific labels, however, can be useful, at the school stage of development both for research and for planning resources. There is clearly an enormous difference between a child with severe learning difficulties and Autism and a child of superior intelligence with a Semantic-Pragmatic Disorder. When we are describing children on the Autistic Continuum, we must also be clear in our own minds about whether we are simply describing levels of sociability or whether we are also describing more generalised learning difficulty. The two do not necessarily go hand in hand.

As a rule of thumb, however, children with Semantic Pragmatic Disorders as a group have less generalised learning difficulties than Autistic Children.

### Origins of Semantic-Pragmatic Difficulty

We now think there is a family link between these Autistic Spectrum Disorders. We have sometimes found that having identified one child on the Autistic Continuum, another child in the family has been found to have milder communication problems too, particularly if they are male.

Parents ask why? Well as you have probably deduced, the evidence is now pointing to a disorder which is genetic in origin. Autistic Spectrum Disorders are sometimes associated with other genetic disorders like Fragile X Syndrome, Retts Syndrome and Tuberousclerosis.

We think the problem is much more complex than one parent passing on a problem. Just like two hearing parents can produce a profoundly deaf child, we think that two healthy parents can produce a child with a communication disorder.

Some parents of children with S.P.D. describe eccentric relatives or others with psychiatric illness, but this is by no means always the case. We still have much to learn about genes and inheritance. What we can say is, boys are much more likely to have communication problems than girls : something in the ratio of 6:1.

Some parents describe difficult birth history's and wonder if brain damage at birth could have been responsible. Well it is possible, but unlikely that a brain injury could be so specific. We think that in the majority of cases, the genetic make up of the child makes him more vulnerable at birth.

If the same partners are contemplating extending their families after discovering they have a child with Autism and Semantic-Pragmatic Difficulties, we would recommend they sought Genetic counselling first.

### **Prognosis**

Semantic-Pragmatic Disorder is not an illness like Diabetes. It is a developmental disorder which improves with age. Rates of progress are probably dependent on overall intelligence and the support of carers. At centres like Heathlands, carers hope to maximise on such improvement by providing support and guidance throughout childhood.

Until about 10 years ago, we were only able to recognise the most handicapped children with Autism. Children were either Autistic or they were not Autistic. this meant that many able children on the continuum with very mild and specific learning difficulties were excluded from a diagnosis and subsequent help. Many were dismissed as eccentric or language disordered or as having behaviour problems, leaving parents with much unresolved guilt.

Today we have extended the boundaries to include those children with only mild social difficulties, some of whom may be able to extend their special interest and abilities to out perform their peers in mainstream.

The gloomy picture of Autism and Mental Handicap once painted is not something that necessarily follows. If you are a parent and you have been given this article to read, you should feel reasonably optimistic.

### **TELL TALE SIGNS**

**(These are the features we have observed in many of our children but not all in one child!)**

#### **Early Developmental 0-2 years**

1. "Golden" baby
2. Difficult toddler with no sense of danger.
3. Thought he was deaf.
4. Late talking



5. Didn't babble much.
6. Didn't always look at you properly or enough when talking to you.
7. Late pointing to share knowledge.
8. Fussy eater
9. Not interested in baby games.
10. No boundaries.
11. A loner.
12. Didn't take teddy to bed.
13. Late recognising himself in a mirror or in a photograph.
14. Overclinging or wandered off too easily.
15. Inappropriate response to sensory stimuli (e.g. touching, pain, noise)

#### Nursery age development 2-4 years

1. Cannot play or negotiate with other children
2. Only interacts at a rough and tumble or chase level.
3. Echoes peoples conversations, stories and t.v. programmes.
4. Only watches cartoon t.v. or animal programmes
5. Prefers to 'read' his own story (usually Thomas the Tank Engine).
6. Difficulty cutting out.
7. Late drawing representationally. Prefers scribble if left.
8. Cannot share.
9. Has to be prompted to use social greetings like 'hello' and 'goodbye'.
10. Tantrums persisting.
11. Doesn't build much with lego or tends to build the same.
12. Good at jigsaws, colours, numbers, shapes.
13. Can't initiate pretend games with other children.
15. Rarely dresses up.
16. Pretend is only action on object and doesn't have a storyline.
17. Prefers 'helping' with real activities like operating machinery or washing up.

18. Better conversation at home than at school.
19. Never asks for help - too independent.
20. Obsessional interests like cars, dinosaurs and Michael Jackson!
21. Loves music and has a good memory for tunes
22. Very active - doesn't settle to play for long.
23. Wouldn't settle at playgroup and had to be removed.
24. Appears to have a receptive language disorder.

#### School Age development

1. Fluent speaker but only wants to talk about things important to him.
- 2 Doesn't take turns in conversation.
3. Doesn't exchange eye contact or facial expression appropriately.
4. Doesn't understand abstract concepts like: tomorrow, next week, guess, wish.
5. Can't follow topic work in the classroom.
6. Doesn't really follow the storyline of a book.
7. Can't tell you what he did at school without shared knowledge.
8. Doesn't ask the teacher for help.
9. Sounds like a grown up sometimes.
10. Appears rude or can say things that embarrass you.
11. Obsessional questioning. Answers don't satisfy him.
12. Literal understanding doesn't know when you are being sarcastic or joking.
13. Doesn't use much gesture like shrugging shoulders.
14. Can't get his ideas on paper.
15. Late reader or 'super' reader.
16. Excellent number concepts but difficulty with + or - or telling the time or value of money.
17. Poor handwriting
18. Under performing at school.
19. Does not see himself as a member of a group.
20. Seems much more childish for his age than his intelligence would suggest.

21. Approaches people inappropriately by kissing them or wrapping his arm around them or standing too close.
22. Naive and unable to see deception in others.
23. Follows his own interests rather than the class.
24. Follows rules slavishly, and expects everyone else too.
25. Distractible in the classroom.
26. Has no special friend but dominates some children or plays on his own.
27. Has to be told how to behave.
28. Good memory for places and events.
29. Doesn't like football or complex rule based games.
30. Cannot cope in crowds like assembly or parties.
31. Difficulty coping with school dinners (e.g. food fads, slow eater, surrounding noise, conversational expectations).

### **Summarising Difficulties**

#### **1. Social/Emotional Delay and Disorder**

Little empathy

Does not understand status.

Naive

Childish.

Egocentric.

Difficulty making friends of his own age.

Approaches children and adults inappropriately.

Doesn't understand other people's intentions.

Demands a lot of adult attention.

Feels bad about himself if he makes a mistake but doesn't feel embarrassment.

Doesn't recognise the difference between good and bad behaviour unless told.

#### **2. Language Disorder**

Quiet baby.

Difficulty establishing shared attention and joint reference.

Late talking and late pointing reverentially.

Early listening and comprehension problems.

May have other language problems like fluency or speech disorder.

Disproportional early vocabulary of nouns to verbs.

Later on few words to describe thoughts, feelings and intentions of others.

Uses time labels incorrectly. Words like 'yesterday' can mean any period back in time.

Single track attention in a busy room.

Easily distracted.

Sometimes appears deaf.

Doesn't initiate conversation appropriately.

Talks non stop about his own interests.

Not interested in or able to follow topics outside his own experience.

Doesn't use language sociably and tends not to bother about social greetings.

Uses a flatter or exaggerated intonation pattern.

Conversation can sound too grown up or rude.

Over uses social phrases or non-specific pronouns e.g. 'over there'.

Confuses he/she

Poor Auditory discrimination so he may misuse words e.g. 'cartoon' for 'carton'.

### Playskills

Prefers self chosen activity and resists adult direction.

Finds it difficult to develop to and fro games with adults e.g. throwing and catching a ball. Hide and Seek.

Prefers real activities to pretend.

Likes playing on his own repetitively.

Can't share pretence or develop story lines.

Only plays chase or rough and tumble with other children.

Can't share easily.

Difficulty in following rules of games like tag, hide and seek or football.

Good at lego and jigsaws.

Some anxiety about playing in the playground, particularly if there is no apparatus or objects to play with.

### Academic Skills

Only works when he wants to and appears to have no motivation for some work.

Good at number, science and computers.

Interprets topics from his own perspective.

Follows his own interests.

Refuses to conform.

Difficulties in playground. May result in anxious behaviour just before breaktimes with reappearance in classroom at playtimes.

Difficulties with:

handwriting, creative stories, reading comprehension, spelling and mathematical representation.

### Motor Skills

Fine Motor Difficulties make practical skills like scissors, drawing, handicraft difficult.

Gross Motor Difficulties makes riding bikes, swimming, dressing and rule based games like football difficult.

### Sensory Difficulties

1. Some children have a heightened awareness of loud noise. Others ignore loud noise and focus on peripheral sound.
2. Many have a heightened awareness of smell or taste and may refuse certain foods. Others have a diminished awareness of hunger and may only eat if told.
3. Some avoid touching certain materials particularly sticky or wet substances.
4. Some are late acquiring an interest in sensory exploration and continue to need this kind of play activity more than other children of the same age and ability.
5. Some children seem to have a diminished awareness of pain 'bravely' picking themselves up after serious accidents and only displaying signs of distress after observing the visible signs of hurt e.g. blood

### Sameness

This is not usually a major problem for children with S.P.D. Overplaying with toys or over drawing is usually a sign of anxiety and that something in the environment needs changing - like a Speech and Language Therapist talking too much!

### Overactivity

This is a feature shared by other children with learning difficulties and may serve to confuse the diagnosis.

Initially, however, children with Semantic-Pragmatic difficulties have very good concentration (sometimes too much) for self chosen activities like watching cartoon videos or playing with sand and water but become 'hyperactive' with more adult directed activity. Activity levels usually increase with complexity of tasks, complexity of environment, and expectations of failure. Overactivity levels usually decrease with age and confidence but are hardly ever reduced by increased physical activity. Some parents have found an association between food additives and levels of activity and while restricted diets do help, the problem is rarely solved this way.

### **Helping Children with S.P.D.**

#### **1. Social Development**

- a. Provide a certain amount of predictability to reduce anxiety
- b. Give a simple explanation to the other children in the class (in mainstream).
- c. Allow him to work in small groups or in a small class.
- d. Facilitate his interactions with other children. Do not allow him to opt out by holding your hand in the playground or dominating one child.
- e. Give clear rules of how to behave without negative judgements.  
  
- it is not healthy to be constantly told you are 'silly' or 'naughty'. When you do not know what it is you are doing wrong.
- f. If he can't cope outside, give him special tidying or sorting jobs e.g. library.
- g. If he hits out when thwarted, you may need to monitor him for a few days, if you want to stop this. While he may not be intentionally aggressive, he will not have sufficient empathy to know how hard to hit. His behaviour could be a danger to other children.
- h. Encourage sharing, first by identifying his needs, secondly, by reflecting the other child's needs and thirdly by insisting he shares.
- i. Make dinner time a pleasant experience. He may need an adult to sit with him.

#### **2. Language**

- a. Provide him with suitable conversation partners.
- b. Give the child time to reply.
- c. Acknowledge the child's communication even if it is inappropriately done and even if he cannot have his way.
- d. Aim to teach him more appropriate strategies
- e. Keep the class as orderly as possible with 'noise' to a minimum.
- f. Make sure he knows what to do and what to do next.
- g. If you want him to follow a general classroom instruction make sure you say his name.
- h. Invite parents into school on a weekly basis.

i. Talk slowly in simple sentences and do not bombard him with questions. When he asks a question make sure you are responding to his intentions rather than just the words otherwise you may be on the road to developing repetitive questioning in him.

j. If you want him to take a message home (however simple) write it down for him.

k. Use gesture or visual props when introducing new topics. Always work from shared practical experience first. This is a crucial element of teaching if knowledge is to be generalised and cannot be over emphasised.

l. Inform parents which topics are being covered so they can supplement with extra hands on experience too.

m. Home school diary to help conversation and writing skills.

n. If his language doesn't make sense don't respond to what he says. Think of what he means to tell you. (his intentions)

o. Reflect what you think the child means when he echoes adult language, e.g. "I think it is getting awfully late", might mean "Adam is worried,. Adam doesn't understand". Hopefully this kind of comment if it matches the child's thinking will help him use the right words next time and reduce questioning.

p. If the child is involved in confrontation with another child, it is often helpful to reflect what the other child is thinking too, e.g. "Adam wants the pen". "David says it's mine".

q. Because children with S.P.D. are so inflexible in thought, we suggest you tune into their thinking first. If you say what they are thinking first then the S.P.D. child is much more likely to listen. Then you can switch to what you want to say. Avoid dealing with situations by opening with a question:-

e.g. "What's happening Peter?"

is expressing your feelings and doesn't match what it is the child is thinking.

Matching your words to the child's thoughts is called mapping. We think that mapping allows the child to build up a vocabulary of useful words which should have maximum meaning. If words have meaning then they should be used much more flexibly.

r. Over use specific vocabulary which child finds difficult.

Pay particular attention to teaching opposites

e.g. he/she put/take upstairs/downstairs

s. Choose 2 or 3 words each week and ask parents to do the same. Choose vocabulary from programmes like living language particularly words of space, quantity, personal feelings and time.

t. Avoid sarcasm. Explain if you do.

u. Take care when you say "X is not good for you" (he may never eat it again!)

v. If you are doing 'news' work, encourage him to bring in visual props like pictures to help him talk about the 'there and then'.

## Playskills

- a. Encourage sensory exploration and 'Wendy House' play
- b. Help him vary his play, beyond set routines
- c. Help child interact in playground.
- d. Facilitate role play based on real life experience with props. e.g. reenact his birthday party or a trip to McDonalds using the empty cartons etc..
- e. Help creative drawing and building - again based on real life visits and photos and video recordings.
- f. Start group activities like storytime or action rhymes with an activity he can do to hold his interest immediately.
- g. Facilitate turntaking and anticipatory games through child centred play.
- h. Encourage simple rule based games like hide and seek.

### Academic Help

- a. Do not be deceived by his memory skills, make sure he 'understands'.
- b. Use his visual skills and sense of order to develop understanding.
- c. Extra help with correct letter formation.
- d. Help him write sentences based on what the child has just done - with props e.g. written sequence of a practical activity.
- e. If he has any obsessive or special interests, rather than ignoring them, it may be possible for him to develop them so he incorporates some useful knowledge.
- f. Spelling rules - taught systematically.
- g. Reading - help comprehension by reading the story to child first, and then discussing the text and asking him questions which require him to infer or predict but be prepared to give him the answers. Finally, ask the child to read the story to you.
- h. Allow him to read some books above his comprehension level if he is hyperlexic so he feels as good as the other children in the class.
- i. If he is finding reading difficult, make him his own reading book with photographs based on himself and his family.
- j. Exemption from topic work which may be too complex e.g. Religious or Historical projects. It may not be sensible for example to work on topics like the Romans if he does not understand what 'last week' means.

### Maths

- a. Help him translate mathematical problems like "If I have two sweets and you give me two more" into higher levels of representation e.g.  $2+2$  (make sure he understands the link).
- b. Explain symbols + If these are difficult for him let him make his own and change them gradually.



c. Systematic help with 'time' based on school routine. Make sure you have a clock with numbers (one hand at a time).

d. Value of money (real money)

Allow him pocket money as soon as he is old enough.

e. Make sure he understands the difference between words like :-

a few / a lot

more / more than

each / all / both

how many / count

15 / 50

f. If he is having problems with 'base 10' concepts. He may need to have special help with understanding concepts like eleven (one T. one) or twenty-three (two T. three) etc.

g. He may need extra help with estimating and measuring.

### Self Esteem

Find something he can do better than the rest of the group. If he can become the class artist or computer expert then he will gain the respect of his peers.

### Margo Sharp

### Chief Speech and Language Therapist

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