

Learning Language through Memorised Phrases

In this advice, we will use the term 'memorised phrases' to describe language that children have learned as a whole chunk – rather than phrases that they make themselves by combining single words*. These memorised phrases are also sometimes referred to as 'delayed echolalia', 'scripts' or 'gestalts'.

Sometimes children learn words as units, starting with single words and building these up to create longer phrases and sentences. However, other times children memorise language as whole phrases and then learn to break these down.

These memorised phrases 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.

Children who show a preference for using language this way often pick up on rich intonation patterns (the musical up and down tones that form part of our talking). 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 memorised phrases cannot always be taken literally, children often use them to communicate a feeling or intention and it is our job to acknowledge and respond to this and to play 'detective' to work out what they are communicating.

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

*Speech and Language UK: [When children use memorised phrases, and information on gestalt language processing](#) -
Speech and Language UK: [Changing young lives](#)



Different Ways of Learning Language

Build up



Break down



Some children move from using mainly memorised phrases into more flexible and self-generated language as they progress with their language development. Speech and Language Therapists can support children who are not progressing as expected with their language development.

How to recognise that your child uses memorised phrases

They may sing songs but not use words to communicate

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

Mimic words/ phrases using the same words, intonation and accent as the original speaker

May use memorised phrases out of context (e.g. "It's a real pirate" when looking at numbers)

Continue to use strings of babble with rich intonation beyond expected years

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

May be stuck at single words and not progressing

How to support children who use memorised phrases

Acknowledge, Respect and Respond to their Attempts to Communicate.

Recognise their use of memorised phrases as a means of communication

Be Responsive

Be ok with Silence

It gives them time to process and initiate.

Reduce sounds can help some children to regulate.

It gives you opportunities to observe your child

Model Language, Comment and Reduce Questions during Play

E.g. "This is so tricky" "That is so noisy"

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

Talk to your child using the words they would say if they could.

Model Language without Expecting or Demanding a Response

Avoid phrases such as "Say X", "use your words" and lead in phrases. "You want a...."

Respond to your child's cues by following through with meeting their wants / needs

Model Phrases that are Useful to Your Child in that Situation
e.g. "it's time to go outside"..."I'm hungry"

"let's wash our hands"....."I don't like it"

Be expressive with your voice and your face.

How to support children who use memorised phrases

Be a Language Detective

A lot of memorised phrases are used out of context and have a meaning 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 phrase and spend time observing and playing detective to work out what it might mean.

Acknowledge the memorised phrases

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!’

Teamwork

Spend time building trust with your child, acknowledge and interpreting their memorised phrases where you can.

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

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