



3 Things You Should Know About Echolalia

By Lauren Lowry
Hanen Certified SLP and Clinical Staff Writer

Many children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) use **echolalia**, which means they repeat others' words or sentences. They might repeat the words of familiar people (parents, teachers), or they might repeat sentences from their favourite video.

When children repeat words right after they hear them, it's known as **immediate echolalia**. When they repeat words at a later time, it's known as delayed echolalia. As a result of the time delay, **delayed echolalia** may seem very unusual because these sentences are used out of context. For example, a child might enjoy a song his teacher sang at circle time, and then later ask to sing it at home by saying "It's circle time" instead of saying the name of the song.

While it might be difficult to figure out what a child is trying to say when he or she uses echolalia, learning a little bit about this type of speech can help you figure out the meaning behind his or her message. Here are three things you need to know about echolalia.

1. Children with ASD use echolalia because they learn language differently

Typically developing children tend to begin learning language by first understanding and using single words, and then they gradually string them together to make phrases and sentences.

Children with ASD often follow a different route. Their first attempts at language may be longer "chunks" of language (phrases or sentences), which they are not able to break down into smaller parts. These chunks are more grammatically complicated than they could put together themselves, and they don't understand what the individual words mean.

For example, a child might say "It's time for your bath" every time he hears his father filling up the bathtub. He knows those words have something to do with bath time, but he doesn't know what "it's," "time," "for," "your," and/or "bath"

mean individually, and he can't use these words in other sentences. Because he doesn't understand all of the words, he uses the pronoun incorrectly (using "your bath" instead of "my bath").

We can help children who use echolalia by helping them learn to break down longer chunks of language and understand what the individual words mean so they can use them more flexibly.

2. Echolalia often has a purpose or message

There may be times when children use echolalia to soothe themselves when they're upset or to rehearse something, and in those cases echolalia may not be intended to send a message to someone. But there are also many reasons why children use echolalia for a communicative purpose, such as [1,2]:

There are many reasons children might use echolalia for a communicative purpose.

- **To ask for things** (e.g. a child might say "Do you want a cookie?" to ask for a cookie, as he's heard others offer cookies this way before)
- **To start an interaction or keep it going** (e.g. a child might initiate a game of Hide and Seek by saying a line from the game, like "Ready or not, here I come!")
- **To draw someone's attention to something** (e.g. a child might draw attention to something he's noticed by using a line he's heard before to draw attention to something else, like "It's a bird, it's a plane, it's Superman!")
- **To protest something** (e.g. if a child imitates "You don't want to wear those pants?" as his parent is getting out his clothes, he might really mean "I don't want to wear those pants")
- **To answer yes** (e.g. if a child imitates "Do you want some yogurt?" right after he's been asked that question, he may actually want some yogurt and really mean "yes")

Figuring out the meaning behind echolalia can be tricky! Looking at the context is very important, and thinking about the time the child originally heard it can help too. With a little detective work, it's possible to figure out what he's trying to tell you.

3. Echolalia is a stepping stone to flexible language

Researchers who study echolalia have noticed patterns in the way it progresses in children with ASD [1]:

- Initially, children echo "chunks" of language without understanding what they mean
- Then, children start to modify these chunks of language. They mix and recombine words and phrases they have used (this is called "mitigated echolalia").
- As they start to understand more language, some children use shorter sentences or just use one or two words to express themselves.
- Gradually, language becomes more spontaneous and flexible. Echolalia might be used occasionally, especially when a child is tired, confused or frustrated. But more words and phrases are used appropriately and flexibly once the child's understanding increases.

Echolalia can be confusing. But by understanding why children use it and how it serves as a bridge to more flexible language, you will be better equipped to help a child who uses echolalia.

Stay tuned for our next article with tips for helping children who use echolalia to communicate.

References

Prizant, B. (1983). Language Acquisition and communicative behavior in autism: Toward an understanding of the “Whole” of it. *Journal of Speech and Hearing Disorders*, 48, 296-307.

Stiegler, L. N. (2015). Examining the echolalia literature: Where do speech-language pathologists stand? *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 24, 750-762.

About The Hanen Centre

Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.

For more information, please visit www.hanen.org.

The Hanen Centre is a Registered Charitable Organization (#11895 2357 RR0001)