

STRAIGHT TALK

About *Autism*

Barry M. Prizant, Ph.D., CCC-SLP
and Eve Mullen, M. Ed.

Thinking Developmentally

Part Two of a Two-Part Article

In part one, we defined what it is to think developmentally when supporting persons with ASD, emphasizing that it is far more than merely teaching to a developmental checklist. We will now consider the benefits of thinking developmentally; the dangers of not doing so; and the practical implications of this type of thinking.

The Benefits of Thinking Developmentally

Thinking developmentally can have a major impact on both teacher behavior and school climate. When teachers and other partners learn to ask questions such as, *how can I best support the child to help him/her grow developmentally*, or *what does this child need from me*, they become facilitative, since the answers to these questions require that they observe, listen, read intent, respect, and build trust with their students. With a facilitative approach, partners support growth, set limits, and teach students to ultimately become responsible for their own behavior. At the same time they avoid using confrontational or control strategies and rely instead on the use of positive support strategies that enable them to remain emotionally regulated. Clearly, a well-regulated adult partner is always better at supporting a child who is in a dysregulated state. Hence, developmental thinking empowers the adult to become a more supportive teacher even when he or she is attempting to support a child who is distressed or upset.

When adults are well regulated and are using developmentally appropriate and effective support strategies, the climate of the classroom, school, and home becomes more positive. This is because the focus is not simply on modifying or reducing challenging behavior, but also on enabling availability for engagement and learning. Developmental thinking helps to create an atmosphere where active engagement and participation are the most important goals, resulting in feelings of competence and positive emotional memories for the child. In this type of atmosphere, ongoing engagement and effort

are valued more than the correctness of a response or product of an activity.

The Dangers of Not Thinking Developmentally

It is unfortunate that many service providers for children with ASD do not receive training in child and human development, as the lack thereof may lead to ill-informed decisions regarding the selection of goals and objectives, as well as ill-conceived ways of responding to children's behavior. Without a developmental perspective, there is the danger of undershooting a child's abilities which can lead to boredom and acting-out behavior. Worse yet, there is also the danger of training skills that the child is not yet ready to learn, resulting in the performance of a meaningless—and often prompt-dependent—rote behavioral sequence that is documented as “progress.” Notwithstanding such documentation, it is not authentic progress, since that would involve the learning of spontaneous (not prompted) functional skills that support participation in everyday, meaningful activities (Prizant et al, 2006). Within such a framework, the reinforcement for the child is natural; that is, the approval and attention from partners, as well as the feelings of success and “social membership” from participating in daily activities.

In addition, a focus on skill-training alone, without a developmental perspective, does not take into account the importance of social communication, self-expression, emotional

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regulation, and trusting relationships, which together provide the foundation for helping a child to cultivate a sense of competence and confidence. If motivation and reinforcement are provided primarily through external and artificial contingencies such as food and tokens, the “you do—you get” system can easily turn into “you didn’t do, you don’t get,” which may put a teacher or parent in an adversarial role. In contrast, developmental thinking encourages the use of appropriate supports that can help the child to be successful, thus avoiding confrontations based on an all-or-nothing unilateral approach. Such thinking empowers practitioners and parents to be more optimistic, encouraging, and developmentally appropriate with their children.

Practical Implications of Developmental Thinking

Developmental thinking requires that partners not only change strategies as a child grows developmentally, but also adjust strategies day-to-day, and even moment-to-moment, depending upon the complexity of the activity and the child’s availability for engagement and learning. These practices acknowledge two very important things: 1) that learning is a brain-based activity; and, 2) that it is best facilitated by responsive caregiving and teaching. Furthermore, both of these factors provide the best opportunity for higher-level thinking and goal-directed behavior to prevail over impulsive and reactive behavior. To summarize then, the degree of support provided by partners must fill the gap between the challenges of a task or activity and a child’s ability to problem-solve and meet those challenges through higher-level thinking and action.

Jacob

We will now consider a specific scenario to illustrate some of the elements inherent in thinking developmentally, and how they impact programmatic decision-making. Jacob is an 11-year-old, fifth grade student whose program involves spending much of his day in a special education classroom with five other students

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with special needs. He also attends music, physical education, and lunch with his regular fifth grade class with support. Jacob is a very active, “high arousal,” verbal child with a history of progressing from primarily echolalic language at three years, to the use of more creative spontaneous language since eight years of age. He is able to read with some comprehension, and academically performs at about a first- or second-grade level in most subjects. In this vignette, we consider a challenge identified by Jacob’s team: a significant increase in Jacob’s production of delayed echolalia (i.e., scripting from videos and other utterances that often did not appear to be relevant to the current situation), as well as increased difficulties in attending to academics in the classroom. Staff felt that his scripting interfered with his ability to attend to activities, especially in busier settings and challenging academic activities.

With these concerns, the behavioral consultant on Jacob’s team developed a Behavior Intervention Plan to reduce Jacob’s scripting. The plan included the introduction of a laminated card when scripting occurred, which prompted him to read: *No talking out loud. I will pay attention.* If he complied, the adult praised him as follows: “Good reading. Now back to work!” He also received a sticker for every five minutes he did not “script,” which allowed him to earn 10 minutes of computer time after he amassed five stickers. Initially, when this intervention was introduced, Jacob read the card and he would stop scripting for a short period; however, after three days, staff noted an increase in Jacob’s anxiety and overall dysregulation when the card was presented. He then began to throw the card on the floor and protest by yelling and bolting when it was handed to him. Based on this intervention’s lack of success, and at his parent’s request, the team sought other suggestions to address the situation. A consultant with a developmental perspective was called in to observe, and meet with the team and his parents.

After gathering information and observing Jacob in different activities, it was determined that his use of scripting and delayed echolalia served a few functions: His non-interactive echolalia were attempts to self-regulate in the face of developmentally challenging, language-based, academic activities (which had increased in recent months). At other times, his interactive echolalia appeared to be attempts to take turns and answer questions even though he did not fully understand

what was being asked of him. This was especially apparent when the teaching involved directive language (i.e., many questions and directions to follow), in contrast to facilitative language (i.e., commenting and expanding on his focus of attention and verbal initiations). Additionally, it was noted that, 1) academics were often beyond Jacob’s developmental understanding; and, 2) there were too few opportunities to meet his need for movement to stay well-regulated, especially in the face of increased academic demands.

From a developmental perspective, it became clear that the increase in academic demands in oral language activities, the frequent use of a directive language style, and requirements that Jacob stay seated for longer periods were correlated with the increase in scripting, and the decrease in Jacob’s ability to remain actively engaged. That is, as he felt more challenged, he reverted to coping strategies that reflected earlier developmental stages. Also, it was recognized that although Jacob had made progress in language development, he had not yet fully moved through the developmental progression of using “inner language” to regulate and problem-solve. Interestingly, his parents did not see an increase in scripting to the same extent at home, but did indicate that he expressed more anxiety about going to school. They also noted that he was most conversational and relevant in his language use in activities involving movement, such as when he rode his bike or skied with his father.

A number of recommendations were offered, based on a developmental perspective. Modifications were introduced into Jacob’s program to make goals and strategies more developmentally appropriate based on his challenges and needs. First, academic activities were infused with greater use of visuals and manipulatives to replace teaching that occurred primarily through oral language. Second, staff were encouraged to decrease the proportion of directive language (questions and commands), but when doing so, visual supports were provided. Third, opportunities for movement were infused into academic activities. Finally, movement breaks were increased throughout the day. For the six weeks following the introduction of these modifications, a significant decrease in Jacob’s scripting was observed along with an increase in spontaneous, relevant language and active engagement in activities.

Concluding Comments

In our consulting and teaching experience, some of the most glaring differences of opinion about programmatic strategies, as well as goals and objectives, occur between professionals who think developmentally and those who do not. We often wonder: *How can one work with children and*

individuals with ASD with little or no background in child and human development? We do have concerns that some certifications, such as the BCBA and BACBA certifications, which are currently among the most promoted credentials for working with children and students with ASD, often do not require any coursework or training in child and human development.

By definition, ASD is a neurologically-based DEVELOPMENTAL disability. We believe that it is essential that educational and treatment efforts be based on a strong foundation that relies on decades of developmental research that has documented sequences as well as developmental processes and principles. Most of all, we believe that child and human development are life span processes, and provide the richest source of evidence for guiding educational and treatment efforts in a respectful and effective manner. 

References

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BIO



Dr. Barry Prizant has more than 40 years experience as a clinical scholar, researcher and international consultant to children and adults with ASD and their families. He is an Adjunct Professor, Brown University, and Director of Childhood Communication Services, a private practice. Barry is co-author of *The SCERTS Model: A comprehensive educational approach for children with ASD* (Prizant, Wetherby, Rubin, Laurent & Rydell, 2006) and the assessment instruments, CSBS, and CSBS-DP (Wetherby & Prizant, 1993, 2002). He has published more than 100 articles and chapters and has presented more than 700 seminars and keynote addresses in the US and internationally. Barry developed and co-facilitates an annual weekend retreat for parents of children with ASD, and is the recipient of the 2005 Princeton University-Eden Foundation Career Award for "improving the quality of life for individuals with autism." For further information, go to www.barryprizant.com, or contact Barry at Bprizant@gmail.com.



Eve Mullen, M.Ed.—Eve is a former special education teacher, and is currently the Program Administrator of the Preschool-Primary Learning Center autism program at Cooperative Educational Services, a position she has held for more than 20 years. Eve holds a Master's Degree from both NYU and Teacher's College, Columbia University. She has devoted 34 years to teaching students with autism, training teachers, and managing a program for children with ASD.