

INTRODUCTION

The preschool years of child development are magical. Children emerge into walking, talking little people who surprise and delight us with the things they say and do. During these years, children grow physically, cognitively, linguistically, and socially. In fact, developmental changes occur faster during this period than at all others in the human life cycle. For the neurotypical child, these are years of metamorphosis. From ages 2 to 5 years, children begin to run and climb, think and learn, talk and converse, and interact with others around them.

By the time most children go to kindergarten, they talk in complex sentences and enjoy socializing with other children. They understand when their teacher speaks in strings of complex utterances. They crave novel information and absorb it readily. No longer do they require individual lessons, but they can learn via group instruction. They play with a variety of construction and imaginative toys and are cooperative with other children in play settings. They are ready to take on the new frontier of elementary school and all that it requires.

Some children, however, don't develop all of these skills during the preschool years. For them and their parents, these years can be challenging and concerning. When a child fails to meet motor, cognitive, language, or social milestones, it's a sign of a developmental disorder. We know that early detection and treatment of developmental deficits yields positive results, and this knowledge has produced institutional mechanisms for ensuring early identification and intervention. If you're reading this book, you may well be part of a team of professionals who address the developmental needs of preschool children.

In order to target communication concerns, speech-language pathologists (SLPs) consider numerous linguistic abilities. These include syntax, morphology, phonology, semantics, and pragmatics. There are clear milestones for skill emergence in each of these domains and numerous therapy techniques designed to address deficits. Of all the domains, it's fair to say that pragmatics remains the most elusive. Perhaps this is because pragmatic disorders occur less commonly than other language problems. Perhaps it's because pragmatic elements are relative and depend on the communicative context.

This can be illustrated quite simply. Consider the sentence, "It's really hot in here." The syntactic, morphological, phonological, and semantic elements of the utterance remain the same no matter when or where the speaker says this sentence. The pragmatics, however, can vary greatly. This social relevance of the utterance, including its perceived meaning, shifts based on a number of elements. These include who the speaker is talking to, who else is in the room, where the speaker delivers the message, and how the speaker delivers the message (facial expression, tone of voice, body language, proximity). As the pragmatic elements of the communicative exchange shift, so does the interpretation of the message. Because pragmatic elements are ever-changing, and there are so many possible pragmatic influences on a given message, addressing pragmatic deficits in individuals is extremely challenging.

Pragmatic language problems are the underpinnings of most social disorders. When children don't know what to say and when to say it, their communication can appear awkward, rude, and insensitive. This quickly translates into social isolation by peers and fewer opportunities to develop social skills. We witness the impact of social-pragmatic deficits very early in a child's development. While family members often accept a child's social differences as personality

traits, as soon as the child interacts with people outside of his immediate family circle, social problems can result. This often occurs in preschool when most children come face-to-face with an extended peer group for the first time

Traditionally, SLPs have addressed social-pragmatic deficits in school-age and adolescent clients. By mid-elementary to junior high school, the social fallout from pragmatic communication deficits has compounded into significant issues for the child and his peer. This is often when we are called to assess and treat social-pragmatic problems. In recent years, our focus has begun to shift to pragmatic problems of younger children. This is due in part to our focus on early intervention, but it's also secondary to the dramatic increase in the incidence of autism. Social-pragmatic disorder is part of all autism spectrum disorders. We now have an ever-growing number of preschoolers with pragmatic deficits, many of whom are in the autism spectrum. In addition to these clients, other preschoolers exhibit pragmatic problems, including those with severe hearing impairment, traumatic brain injury, psychiatric disturbances, or nonverbal learning disorder.

Preschool Social Language Therapy addresses the social-pragmatic issues of the preschool child; however, you may extend its use to older children or others who exhibit severe to profound pragmatic issues. The philosophy for the content of the book is that social deficits are the result of underlying communication issues and they have a pragmatic basis. As such, the book follows a hierarchy of pragmatic skill development. You will note the developmental linguistic framework and recognize the skills addressed in the book as ones we expect a child to develop within the preschool years.

Teaching social-pragmatic skills requires us to devise ways to teach skills that most children develop naturally. Sometimes the method of instruction may feel awkward or forced because we must break dynamic skills into a concrete teaching sequence in order to be successful. This requires perseverance, and I encourage you to be patient. These clients often don't understand the fundamental ways that communication occurs, and teaching them how to use verbal and nonverbal language as a social tool can take time. It can also be extremely rewarding. Teaching children to talk is satisfying, no doubt, but showing them how to use language to interact with others and meet social goals is amazing! When your young clients begin to use communication to their advantage, their language development and their social success accelerates. Few things are as gratifying as seeing this process unfold.

I wish you every success as you tackle social-pragmatic goals and hope you find *Preschool Social Language Therapy* useful as you address pragmatic deficits in preschoolers. It's important, perhaps critical, that we identify and remediate core elements of a social-pragmatic disorder early, before they grow into complex social impairments. By assessing and addressing core pragmatic skills, you'll help children build the social skills they need to be more successful in interpersonal interactions. This will affect not only their ability to make and keep friends, but it will also positively influence their sense of self and others' opinions of them and their abilities. It will promote success in school, at home, and later in the workplace. These skills lay the foundation for a more satisfying and successful life.

Tina