

Introduction

Speech-language pathologists and special education teachers are responsible for teaching many specific skills to children with language disorders. One of the most important language skills young communicators must learn is to answer and ask questions. This can be a challenge for many children, but it's particularly difficult for children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Adults frequently ask questions to learn what happened in the child's day, what the child wants to do in the future, and what the child likes to do. The questions contain unfamiliar verbs, and the child must comprehend each verb as well as the question form in order to respond. This can be an overwhelming task for a child with language disorders. He may find it easier not to respond at all, giving the impression that he isn't attending to the speaker. For children with ASD, this lack of response is often considered a social communication problem when, in fact, it is a result of a language deficit.

Children with disorders of language, motor sequencing, and phonology often demonstrate grammatical errors in their expressive language. They may drop final consonants containing important grammatical content for a variety of reasons. A child with motor sequencing problems may omit final sounds to simplify speech production. A child demonstrating phonological process errors might eliminate final consonant sounds in words because of a deficit in his understanding and organization of the speech sound system. A child with an expressive language disorder might neglect grammatical forms when so much attention is focused on the difficult tasks of word choice and sentence structure. All of these difficulties result in the incorrect use or omission of past, present, and future tense verb forms.

This photo project began as a means to meet the needs of my patients. Although some of the children with ASD that I work with can answer simple *wh-* questions, they are unable to respond to *what happened* questions. If the child does understand how to answer the question, he often omits the regular past tense verb in his response, making it difficult to understand. These children also have difficulty making a plan, expressing it verbally, and carrying it out. Similarly, the children that can generate a plan often omit the future tense in their explanation, resulting in a confusing response.

Children with ASD are better able to attend to simple photos of real children without distracting background and competing stimuli. It is also easier for them to learn a new skill when it is isolated and is the sole target of an activity. *Autism & PDD Photo Cards—Verb Tense Questions* combines simple, meaningful photos with simply written language prompts, a structured cueing hierarchy, and opportunity for repetition.

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While these photos are a tool used to successfully teach question answering with verb tenses, they are only a single strategy. The process of learning to attend to, answer, and ask questions that are meaningful and relevant to the situation is long and involved. *Autism & PDD Photo Cards—Verb Tense Questions* is one useful strategy for beginning the process.

Functional Outcomes

Autism & PDD Photo Cards—Verb Tense Questions provides structured opportunities to isolate and highlight past, present, and future tense verbs. At first the child will learn to use phrases containing the verb form (frog jumped). Soon after the child will begin to generate full sentences in a structured format with the targeted verb form (She will pick the flower). Through immediate implementation of less structured generalization activities, the child will start using the targeted verb forms to describe his own actions and the actions of other people.

In the next phase of development, the child will start using the targeted verb forms to predict and retell simple stories (The dog will look in the basket). From there the child will be able to explain both recent and past activities (I tied my shoes). Finally the child will be able to tell a series of past events and answer the question, “What did you do at school today?” (I sat in a circle, listened to a story, colored a picture, ate a snack, and played outside.)

Measure improvement in stages. Chart percent correct of the targeted verb forms in the following productions to measure progress:

- subject-verb combinations in structured tasks
- subject-verb combinations in unstructured play actions
- subject-verb-object combinations in structured tasks
- subject-verb-object combinations in unstructured play actions
- use of targeted verb forms to predict or retell a series of events after given a model
- use of targeted verb forms to predict or explain a series of events with no model

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