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MESSAGE THERAPY

INTRODUCTION

Message therapy is a language approach to stuttering treatment with children developed by William S. Yovetich, a professor in the program of Communicative Disorders, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada. We encourage you to investigate this particular technique in detail with the original article, which was published in the Journal of Fluency Disorders in 1984. This therapy technique is one which helps the child focus on the content of message of communication as opposed to the manner or way we speak. Traditional strategies such as easy onsets, airflow or light touches are difficult ones for this age child to conceptualize into their communication system. The focus or emphasis of message therapy becomes one of developing appropriate messages and delivering them in an easy manner. To facilitate this development, each child's language system is evaluated in relationship to the fluency problem. Deficits in language abilities can be identified and remediated in this therapy approach as the child is taught the concept of "message delivery".

In the beginning of "message therapy", the child focuses on delivering messages in an easy manner. Language interactions that promote fluency for the child are designed by the clinician. These language interactions begin at a level, which is communicatively comfortable for the child. The clinician then begins to expand or develop the language interactions in the therapy plan. As the level of language complexity increases, some children become more disfluent. However, the child is taught to identify the importance of good communication and good messages. They are encouraged to evaluate their messages according to listener's understanding and to make adjustments if needed. The pragmatics of language development which we have determined to be so important in our therapeutic approach with many children, become especially critical for the disfluent child. The child learns to evaluate a message and to make adjustments first in the content and subsequently in the manner in which it is delivered. Once the child learns what an easy or fluent message is, then the task becomes one of delivering messages in that manner. The child begins to learn that he/she has a choice about the kind of message utilized in a communication interaction. The focus of treatment becomes expanding and developing the language complexity using longer and more complex messages. In addition, the child learns to deliver his/her messages in an easy way. Objectives of this therapy approach can be divided into cognitive and motor parameters. Cognitively, as indicated by Yovetich, the child learns to understand and recognize the many aspects of communication. In the motor area, he/she is conditioned to deliver his/her communication messages in an easy manner. The child becomes aware of communication interactions 1) as a sender of messages, 2) an observer of the way messages are received and 3) as a listener.

Several goals have been outlined by Yovetich in this communication approach to pre-school dysfluency.

Goal 1. Introduction to Communication (Yovetich)

In this phase of the therapy, the child is learning about two aspects of "communication". The first one involves knowledge of Communication of Speech Acts including the following:

- requesting information
- accepting information or rejecting information
- relaying information/commenting
- turn-taking in conversation]

- elaborating
- questioning or requesting
- reviewing information/self-checking
- disagreeing/protesting
- questioning/clarification
- joking/humor

In this phase, communication interactions are presented to the child. A message is taught as a unit of communication within each of these various speech acts. At this point in the therapy, the child is encouraged to respond or interact, but not to change a message. The child is encouraged to identify the message unit. The child learns about his role as both a speaker and a listener in the communication interaction. The therapy presents the second aspect of this goal which involves different Ways to Communicate. This would include non-verbal communication (gestures, body language) and verbal communication. A variety of messages are sent in different ways to the child. The flexibility or range of communication interactions is an important and necessary part of the introduction of message therapy. The child is encouraged to use the word "message" and hears it several times throughout these initial therapy sessions. This format can be presented effectively through the use of puppetry or figures in a role-playing situation.

GOAL 2. Sending Good and Easy Messages

Following the introduction of messages in Goal 1, the child receives a strong amount of reinforcement for sending good messages. He is reinforced for completing a communication interaction in an appropriate way. Again, it is important for the therapist to select language interactions which are ability appropriate or "easy" for the child at this point. As we enter the concepts involved in Goal 2, we begin to establish an easy versus hard message concept. The child begins to be reinforced for not only sending a good message but for delivering it in an easy way. The easy way of course is one which is fluent. At no time throughout this goal is a child instructed to breathe easily or use strategies which facilitate fluency other than delivering their message in an easy way. When a disfluent moment is observed, it is simply labeled as being a "hard" message. The child begins to learn that there are differences in the way messages can be delivered. These differences involve fluent versus disfluent speech. He also begins to learn that he has a choice about the way he delivers his message. If he chooses to send it in a disfluent or hard way, he still is reinforced for having sent a good message. However, he is encouraged to practice easy message delivery. Again, it is important for the therapist to utilize materials which contain easy language for the child so that his success rate with easy messages is very high.

An important concept of this goal includes designing a structured pattern of responses for the child to utilize. It is also important to select an easy language load and to generate a script with specific topics and rules for the child to respond.

GOAL 3. Evaluation of the Communication Interaction

In this goal, subtle changes in the focus of the child's responses begin to take place. There is a new kind of reinforcement procedure utilized by the therapist. The child is reinforced for changing or altering his message. In earlier levels, easy messages are scripted or patterned. In this level, the child learns that he can control and alter the content of his message. Hard messages are identified and requests for change are presented by the therapist. In this goal, the child begins to check his environment and interpret listener's cues accurately by making adjustments or in the messages presented. The child is asked to manage the content of his message while the clinician shapes the manner of response. This is done by gradual increases in language complexity. The child's responses become less emotional and more analytical. If the child delivers a hard message, his content is reinforced but he is asked to deliver it in a different manner. This process helps the child begin to internalize the self-correction process so necessary for successful carryover in the treatment of fluency disorders.

GOAL 4. Formulation, Organization and Expression of a Variety of Communication Messages.

This goal emphasizes the convergence of fluency and language skills. Here is where the utilization of increasing language complexity becomes a vital framework for helping the child mature and develop fluent discourse. Fluency and language skills are developed through the use of an interactive-type of therapy which targets pragmatic, syntactic, semantic, and phonological objectives with the message unit still being the focus of the therapy. By utilizing a framework which increases language complexity, we begin to build a hierarchy of skills. At this level, the child focuses on 1) receiving information or messages, 2) internalizing and organizing information and 3) verbally relating this experience in an appropriate message. The child who has disfluent speech must learn to expand and develop fluent responses.

It is important to understand that these goals are not mutually exclusive and that they do not necessarily follow this sequential order. The "message therapy" approach to stuttering remediation with children provides a variety of choices to the clinician. Individualized programs based on the deficits observed in each child can be targeted. Message therapy allows the clinician to help a child who has language and/or phonological problems to practice fluent speech in a structured and positive manner.

GOALS OF MESSAGE THERAPY

A Message Can Be Defined As One Complete Unit of Thought

1. The various aspects of good communication, with emphasis on the content rather than on the actual motor responses.
2. The evaluation of his own message with respect to clarity of thought and content.
3. The characteristics of an "easily sent" message.
4. Effective organization, formulation and expression of thought.

Yovetich, William S. (1984). Message Therapy: Language Approach to Stuttering Therapy with Children, *Journal of Fluency Disorders*, 9, 11-20

Instructional Objectives of Message Therapy

I. INTRODUCTION COMMUNICATION

The child will be able to demonstrate, either verbally or in motor skills, knowledge about the "essence of communication."

A. COGNITIVELY

The older child will be able to:

Relate information about the different types of communication (verbal and nonverbal).

Understand that he can relate a variety of messages in different ways that do not affect the content of his message.

B. MOTORICALLY

The child will demonstrate the ability to send good messages by the act of freely conversing with the clinician.

The child will, on request of the clinician, rephrase a previously sent message.

The child will send messages in a number of situations, with various speakers in both speech and non-speech ways.

II. SEND AN "EASY MESSAGE"

A. COGNITIVELY

The child is able to relate examples of easy messages.

B. MOTORICALLY

The child, using message therapy as a carryover procedure, will spontaneously demonstrate changes in struggle behavior from a hard to easy form, which are accepted as part of "easy message."

III. CHANGING EVALUATIVE BEHAVIOR

A. COGNITIVELY

The older child will be able to discuss listener feedback in reference to his own speech by stating that people talk in different ways. Sometimes people speak in a bumpy or in an easy way.

FORMULATION, ORGANIZATION, AND EXPRESSION

A. COGNITIVELY

The older child will be able to discuss the concepts and their merits in the formulation and organization of messages to be sent.

B. MOTORICALLY

The children will demonstrate easily sent messages that are indicative of organization of the overall message, presented in a sequence, one message at a time, in correct order, with pauses occurring at correct semantic junctions and disfluencies consisting of those classified, by the clinician, as acceptable.

Although the goals appear sequential, the therapist should feel free to interchange and interrelate them in therapy. With school-aged children, topics and ideas from traditional therapy can be superimposed on message therapy.

Adapted from : Yovetich, William S. (1984). Message Therapy: Language Approach to Stuttering Therapy with Children, *Journal of Fluency Disorders*, 9, 11-20.

LEVELS OF ABSTRACTION FOR PRESCHOOL DISCOURSE

Level 1: Matching Perception

At this level, the simplest level, the child must be able to apply language to what he/she sees in the everyday world identifying, naming or imitating.

Questions/Statements

What is this?
What did you use?
Show me the circle.

MATCHING PERCEPTION

The following clusters of items tap the demands in this group:

- A. Scanning for a matching object (Find one like this.)
- B. Identifying an object by sound (Show me what you heard.)
- C. Identifying an object by touch (Show me what you touched.)
- D. Naming an object heard (What did you hear?)
- E. Naming an object touched (What did you touch?)
- F. Naming an seen (What is this?)
- G. Imitating a simple sentence (Say this...)
- H. Remembering pictured objects (What did you see?)
- I. Remembering incidental information (What did you see?)

Level 2: Selective Analysis of Perception

At this level, the child must focus more selectively on specific aspects of material and integrate separate components in a unified whole, describing, completing a sentence, giving an example, or selecting an object by two characteristics.

Questions/Statements

What is happening?
Find something like this..
Finish the sentence.

SELECTIVE ANALYSIS OF PERCEPTION

The demands in this group are tapped by the following clusters of items:

- A. Scanning for an object defined by its function (Find one that can...)
- B. Describing a scene (What is happening?)
- C. Recalling items named in a statement (What things...?)
- D. Recalling information from a statement (Who? What? Where?)
- E. Completing a sentence (Finish this...)
- F. Concepts: Naming characteristics and functions of objects (Tell me its...)
- G. Concepts: Attending to two characteristics (Find the one that is... and...)
- H. Concepts: Identifying differences (How are these different?)
- I. Concepts: Citing an example within a category (Name something that is...)

From Blank, M., Rose, S.A., and Berlin, L.J.
The Language of Learning. New York: Grune & Stratton,
1978. These are ordered in increasing levels of
difficulty.

Level 3: Reordering Perception

Questions/Statements

The child must restructure or reorder perceptions according to constraints imposed through language (excluding assuming role of another, or following directions in correct sequences).

Find the things that are not...
What will happen next?
What would she say?

REORDERING PERCEPTION

The demands in this group are tapped by the following clusters of items.

- A. Scanning for an object by integrating verbal with visual information (find one to use with this.)
- B. Describing events subsequent to a scene (What will happen next?)
- C. Assuming the role of another person (What could...say?)
- D. Following a set of directions (Do this..then this...)
- E. Arranging pictures in a sequence (Make this into...)
- F. Formulating a set of directions (Tell me how...)
- G. Formulating a generalization about a set of events (What happened to all of these?)
- H. Formulating a statement to unify a sequence of pictures (Tell the story.)
- I. Concepts: Identifying similarities (How are these the same?)
- J. Concepts: Selecting an object by exclusion (What else...?)
- K. Concepts: Selecting a set of objects by exclusion (Find the things that are not...)
- L. Concepts: Selecting an example by excluding a specific object (Name something that can...but is not a ...)
- M. Concepts: Citing an example by excluding a class of objects (Name something that is not a ...)
- N. Concepts: Defining words (What is a ...?)
- O. Unusual imitations (Say this...)

Level 4: Reasoning About Perception

Questions/Statements

The formulations at this level, the most complex level, require the child to go beyond immediate perceptions and talk about logical relationships between objects and events (predicting, explaining, or finding a logical solution.)

What will happen if...?
Why should we use that?
What could you do?

REASONING ABOUT PERCEPTION

The demands in this group are tapped by the following clusters of items:

- A. Predicting: Changes in position (Where will...?)
- B. Predicting: Changes in structure (What will happen if...?)
- C. Justifying a prediction (Why will...?)
- D. Justifying a decision: Essential characteristics (Why wouldn't it?)
- E. Justifying a decision: Non-essential characteristics (Why would it?)
- F. Identifying the causes of an event (What made it happen?)
- G. Formulating a solution (What could you do?)
- H. Formulating a solution from another's perspective (What could he/she do?)
- I. Selecting the means to a goal (What could we use?)
- J. Explaining the means to a goal (Why should we use that?)
- K. Explaining the construction of objects (Why is...made of that?)
- L. Explaining an inference drawn from the observation (How can we tell?)

From Blank, M., Rose, S.A., and Berlin L.J.
The Language of Learning. New York: Grune & Stratt

Ordered by increasing complexity.