

EXECUTIVE FUNCTION allows us to sort through the barrage of information we encounter every day, from paying attention to the right voice in a classroom to organizing responses during a rapidly paced discussion. Children who are delayed in these skills miss what's being asked of them and have a hard time expressing themselves. From the living room to the classroom, you can make both your life and your child's life easier by actively considering how ADHD affects communication. To enhance your ability to communicate in ways that will work well for your child, let's take a look at exactly how ADHD affects communication.

Speech fluency

Research shows that children with ADHD are at risk for articulation disorders, which affect the ability to produce specific sounds when speaking. Studies even found that these speech difficulties may be correlated with risk for ADHD. Beyond that, children with ADHD commonly have differences in fluency and vocal quality when speaking. Compared to peers with learning disabilities alone, children with ADHD showed increased volume and variability in pitch when talking, along with patterns such as an increased number of vocal pauses.

Children with ADHD tend to produce more vocal repetition or word fillers as they try to organize their thoughts, somewhat similar to a stammer. This may sound something like, "It's a story about... um... a story... um... um... fliesakite... um..." This pattern may lead to frustration and make others impatient—especially if they don't have the broader, more mature perspective of an adult. Communication may be stymied, leading to the conversation or jump in and try to... ents.

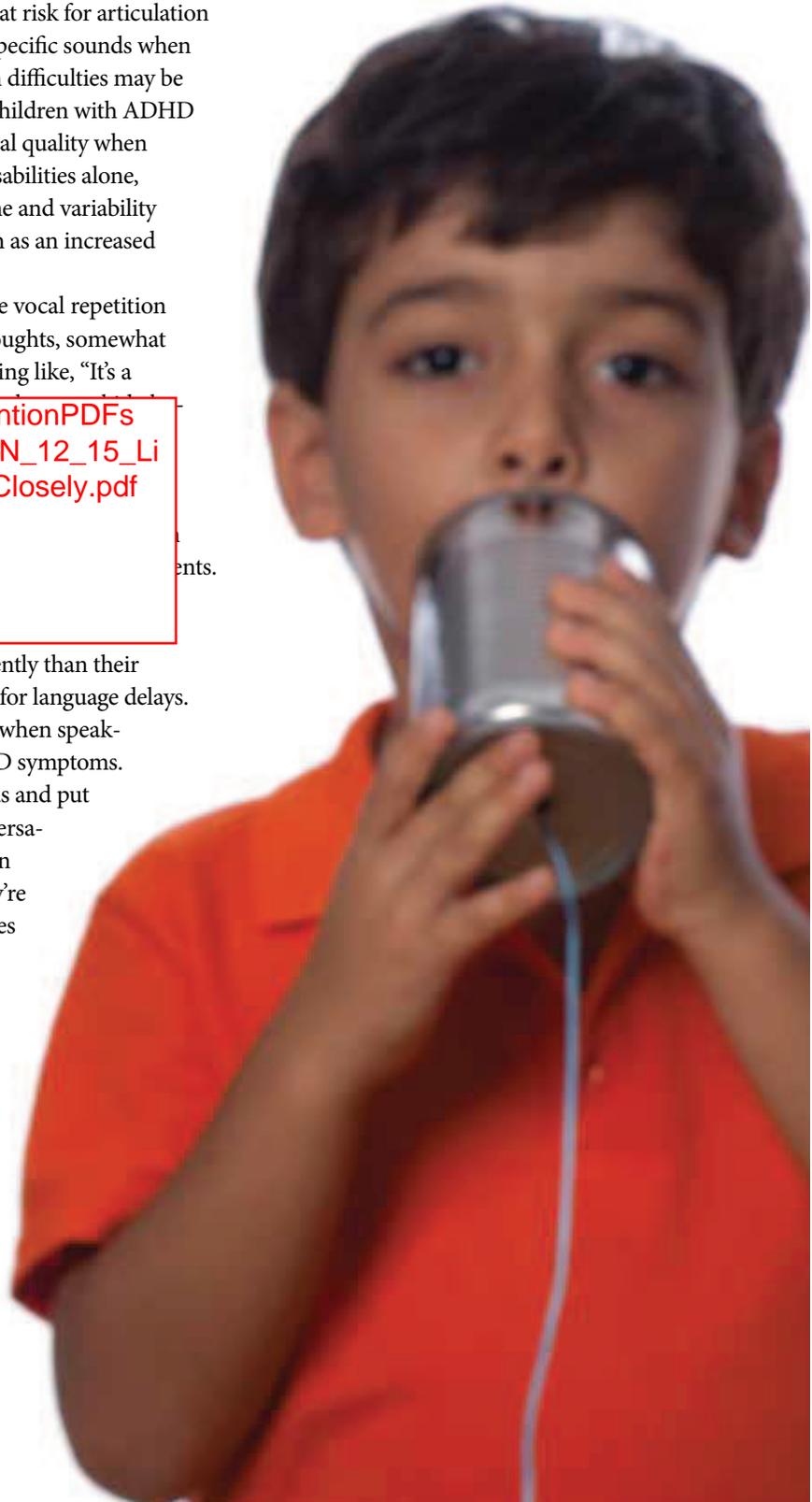
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Language development

Children with ADHD process language differently than their peers. For starters, they have an increased risk for language delays. In addition, they're more likely to get off topic when speaking because of distractibility and related ADHD symptoms. They frequently struggle to find the right words and put thoughts together quickly and linearly in conversation, leading to tangential comments. And even when they have a grasp of good grammar, they're more prone to errors as they compose sentences because of their planning difficulties.

Listening comprehension can also be impaired directly by ADHD, even in the absence of a specific language delay, because

From *Mindful Parenting for ADHD: A Guide to Cultivating Calm, Reducing Stress & Helping Children Thrive*, published by New Harbinger Publications. Copyright© 2015 by Mark Bertin and reprinted by permission. This is the first of a two-part series dealing with with ADHD and mindful communication.



LISTEN CLOSELY

How ADHD Affects Communication

by Mark Bertin, MD



of difficulty processing rapidly spoken language. They have the capacity to understand, but because of their ADHD, they miss details. When listening, they may lose the thread of the conversation and therefore not register vital information. This can result in behavior that seems oppositional, but actually isn't, when requests aren't heard in the first place.

For children with ADHD, paying attention to a single exchange can be especially problematic in groups or noisy situations. Focusing on one person and transitioning attention between speakers is challenging for them. This has social implications and explains why some people with ADHD find it's easier to communicate one-on-one than in a group. For these reasons, children with ADHD may have particular difficulty in distracting classrooms with multiple activities occurring simultaneously, such as several adults leading separate lessons.



In addition, ADHD often makes it hard to manage large clumps of words all at once. While one eight-year-old may be able to hear and understand as many as twelve words without a pause, for an eight-year-old with ADHD seven or eight words might be the maximum. With longer sentences, information starts to drop out. Of course, missing the ending greatly alters the meaning of a sentence like “You can go outside and play with your friends after your homework is done.”

These issues aren't due to problems with the auditory system. The information is received, but executive function impairments cause it to be mismanaged. The brain manager is asleep on the job, jumbling the details of what's being said.

Pragmatic language

Pragmatic language encompasses the social customs around spoken language and nonverbal communication, and core ADHD symptoms can undermine this aspect of communication. Behaviors such as blurting out answers, interrupting, talking excessively, and speaking too loudly break conventions around communication. Among people with ADHD, even those with advanced vocabularies and understanding for their age may experience pragmatic difficulties that get in the way of social fluency.

These difficulties are similar to, but not the same as, those found in children with autism. In autism, the underlying issue is that children don't intuitively grasp the social world, so by definition, they have pragmatic language delays. Unlike children with ADHD, they also have

intrinsic developmental delays in a wide array of social and communication skills.

For children with ADHD, the ability to understand nonverbal language and social interactions typically remains intact. They recognize nonverbal communication for what it is and understand basic rules of communication such as “Wait for your turn to reply.” However, due to distractibility, impulsiveness, or other executive function impairments, they may sometimes fail to follow those rules or to even notice social cues at all.

Keep tally of your talking

According to psychologist John Gottman, in a healthy marriage, positive feedback significantly outweighs negative feedback. The same holds true for almost any relationship. But because children with ADHD require more redirection due to their executive function issues and ADHD-related behaviors,

they often receive ongoing negative, corrective feedback, skewing the ratio toward the negative.

On a busy day as you're trying to get out the door, the entire focus may fall on redirection: “Hurry up, we're going to be late! Did you brush your teeth and put your clothes in the hamper? Where's your jacket? Stop hassling your sister. Quick! To the bus.” During frustrating times, it's all too easy to focus only on what absolutely has to happen. And even the most patient and supportive parent has to coach a child with ADHD through the day, tipping the ratio of feedback toward the negative.

Correction isn't wrong and is frequently unavoidable, and empty praise doesn't carry much weight either. It therefore takes conscious effort to create balance by habitually noticing and praising even small moments of success. Most days you can find at least brief accomplishments, and your child will benefit from hearing about them: “Thank you for getting dressed right away.” “Great job listening.”

Throughout, it's helpful to come back to practicing mindfulness. Everyone's mind gets scattered. We all feel pulled in countless different directions. Negative experiences, such as arguments, often hold our attention long after they pass. When they take over, we can no longer clearly see what's happening in the moment. Mindfulness helps us notice and focus on the positive instead of getting trapped in negativity.

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