A Guide for Assessing Young Children’s Expressive Language Skills Through Language Sampling

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This article serves as a guide for assessing young children’s expressive language skills through language sampling. Semantics, phonology, morphology, syntax, and pragmatics are the essential language code parameters which form a foundation for language assessment. Based on these parameters, the author specifies procedures appropriate for analyzing the language samples of children at varying communication levels. A language development chart summarizing the language skills of children for the prelinguistic through the multiword stages is presented.

Speech-language professionals who have worked with young children recognize the limitations of using standardized tests to measure communicative competence and to plan intervention programs (Blau, Lahey, & Oleksiak-Velez, 1984; Lahey, 1988; McCauley & Swisher, 1984a, 1984b; Thomas, 1989). In the 1980s language sampling became a widely accepted method to gather information about children’s expressive language skills. Language samples may be recorded in a naturalistic setting in which few demands are placed on the child or through a nonstandardized elicitation of particular language behaviors (Thomas, 1989; Wren, 1985). To determine the child’s communication level and intervention goals, the language data are compared to the language skills of children who have not experienced difficulty acquiring language (Lahey, 1988; Miller, 1981).

This paper provides speech-language pathologists a guide for assessing young children’s expressive language through the language sample approach. In turn, the assessment process provides a foundation for planning oral language programs for young children who have communicative disorders.

LANGUAGE ANALYSIS PARAMETERS

When assessing children’s expressive language skills, five interrelated components must be considered: (a) semantics, the meanings of words and utterances; (b) phonology, the sound system; (c) morphology, the word units and bound grammatical inflections which contribute to meaning; (d) syntax, the arrangement of words in sentences; and (e) pragmatics, the use of language in social interaction (Bloom, 1988; Carrow-Woolfolk & Lynch, 1982).

Table 1 lists the primary analyses to consider when assessing the parameters of young children’s oral language. Depending on the level of the child, the clinician answers questions related to each parameter:

Semantics

For children beginning to talk, how many single words are used? What are the semantic roles of the single words? What semantic relations are represented by the 2–4 word utterances? What is the vocabulary diversity? Which words are used incorrectly?

Phonology

What sounds is the child capable of producing spontaneously or imitatively? What percentage of the child’s utterances are intelligible? What are the phonological errors? What phonological processes are apparent?

Morphology

What grammatical morphemes are used? Which are incorrect when considering obligatory context?

Syntax

What is the mean length of utterance (MLU) by morpheme count? What is the frequency distribution of the various utterance lengths? What is the range of utterance lengths? For more advanced children, what grammatical means contributed to the longer utterances? What is the percentage of complex vs. simple sentences? In what ways are the sentences complex? Are word order errors present?
Pragmatics

For children not yet talking, what prelinguistic gestures are used? What nonverbal and verbal turntaking skills are present? How does the caregiver facilitate communicative interaction with the child? What functions are represented in the child’s language? For more advanced children, does the child use linguistic devices which contribute to discourse cohesion such as appropriate referencing in given versus new information? Does the child initiate topics? Does the child maintain topics?

It is important to realize that the language code parameters do not develop separately. Addressing each parameter independently provides a format for (a) forming an assessment plan prior to assessing a child’s language skills; (b) analyzing the language sample; (c) reporting the assessment results; (d) devising an intervention program; and (e) charting progress in ongoing language assessment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pragmatics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proto-performative gestures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reciprocity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent facilitation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Functions, intentions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discourse devices</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Language Analysis Guidelines

In all practicality, from the start it is necessary to decide what information in the language code parameters is important to analyze. For example, less contextual information is needed for phonological and morpho-syntactic analyses than for semantic and pragmatic analyses. Miller (1981) and Lahey (1988) have detailed procedures for collecting, recording, and transcribing language samples. Once a language sample has been obtained and transcribed, along with as much contextual information as deemed necessary, the language data are compared to a developmental model. A summary of oral language development stages which may be used in the language analysis is presented in Table 2. This developmental chart is based on reviews of language development in Bloom and Lahey (1978), Miller (1981), Paul (1981), Prutting (1979), Templin (in Miller,
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage, Age, Major Developments</th>
<th>Language Behaviors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prelinguistic 0–12 months</strong></td>
<td>1. In beginning, parent attributes meaning to infant’s nonintentional motoric and verbal behaviors such as laughing and crying (perlocutionary acts).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nonverbal performatives</td>
<td>2. By 4–6 months parent can distinguish infant’s vocalizations for pleasure vs. attention. Infant pauses for response.</td>
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<td>3. Turntaking begins through interest in give-take games, peek-a-boo, so big.</td>
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<td>4. Deixis of person/place begins with joint focus, a prerequisite for learning reference.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>5. About 9 months and toward end of period infant uses motoric and vocal behaviors intentionally (illocutionary acts).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>6. Prelinguistic communicative functions include attention seeking, greeting, protesting, directing attention to object/event, and requesting action/object/social routine.</td>
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<td>7. Child responds to partner but also initiates.</td>
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<td>8. Communicative behaviors include tugging, pointing, giving, looking, waving, pushing, crying, smiling. These proto-performatives are foundation for emergence of words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prestage I 10–20 months</strong></td>
<td>MLU 0.0–1.0 (morphomes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single words</td>
<td>1. By end of period gestural performatives have gradually progressed to gesture + vocalization/word encoding semantic intentions which have a preplanned effect on partner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semantic intentions</td>
<td>2. At about 13 months child begins to use referential single words (SWs) to communicate propositions intentionally (locutionary stage).</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3. SWs frequently chained in successive utterances.</td>
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<td>4. 13–18 mos. SWs first encode semantic roles of existence, nonexistence, recurrence, negation, location, notice (relating objects to self and movement).</td>
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<td>5. End of period child has many SWs which encode a variety of semantic roles.</td>
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<td>6. Communicative functions of prelinguistic stage now expressed through SWs. Child frequently initiates topics.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Stage I 16–31 months</strong></td>
<td>MLU 1.0–2.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Word combinations</td>
<td>1. 18–24 months at least 50 SWs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Semantic relations</td>
<td>2. Onset of 2-word phrases results from combining learned and new semantic roles.</td>
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<td>3. 18–22 months additional semantic roles include cessation, possession, question, action, attribution. Early Stage I may express all semantic roles, but about 75% of utterances encode existence, recurrence, nonexistence.</td>
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<td>4. Noun phrases (NPs) may include modifiers: my coat, that coat, more milk; serial naming without and.</td>
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<td>5. Verb phrases (VPs) first consist of main verbs unmarked; occasional -ing inflection; occasional particle up or on with verb; auxiliary and copula be typically absent.</td>
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<td>6. Negation (NEG) begins with no, not: no milk, not go.</td>
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<td>8. 18–24 months informative function emerges as well as increased ability to inform about events not present.</td>
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<td>9. Child active in topic initiation. Ability to change topics emerges, as well as increased ability to exchange information in discourse.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>10. Deixis of person/object appears with emergence of pronouns.</td>
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<td>11. Use of imaginative speech, along with symbolic play observed.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Stage II 21–35 months</strong></td>
<td>MLU 2.0–2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammatical morphemes</td>
<td>1. NPs primarily in object position: in that box, look in box; plural s appears; locative in appears.</td>
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<td>2. VPs include stable ing; catenatives gonna, wanna; copula be appears.</td>
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<td>3. NEG continues with no and not but with more words: He no bite you.</td>
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<td>4. Y/N-Q continue with rising intonation; WH-Q routines progress to novel unsolicited Q: What you eat?</td>
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<td>5. End of period can answer Q: Who? What? Where?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>6. Number of different communicative functions increase in multword stage, adding requesting permission/information; clarifying a previous utterance, calling, and acknowledging. Requesting social routine/action and attention seeking decrease, while requesting objects and protesting increase.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Can assist adult in maintaining conversation but has difficulty breaking into conversation.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Stage III 24–41 months</strong></td>
<td>MLU 2.5–3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence modalities</td>
<td>1. NPs include demonstratives this, that, those, these; articles a/the appear; locative on; modifiers include quantifiers, possessives, adjectives; subject NP appears: Doggie eat the meat.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. VPs overgeneralize regular past -ed: I falled down; present tense auxiliary appears: be, can.</td>
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</table>
### Table 2. (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage, Age, Major Developments</th>
<th>Language Behaviors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stage IV</strong></td>
<td>MLU 3.0–3.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>28–48 months</td>
<td>1. NPs show increased use of demonstratives, articles, adjectives, quantifiers, and possessive + noun.</td>
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<td>2. VPs include stable regular -ed; auxiliary be (with -ing) appears; past modal auxiliary could, would appear.</td>
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<td>3. NEG now used with auxiliary be, can, do, did, does, will.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4. Q development complete in Stage IV; Q auxiliaries now include be, can, will, do, and inverted auxiliary in Y/N and WH-Q: Is he going too? Why is he running? When? appears.</td>
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<td>5. 36 months; complex sentence development has begun. Percentage complex sentences by MLU 3.0–4.0, 1–10%. Sentences containing Let me, Let's, Let's get in, Let me in, Let me see; simple infinitive clause (infinitive subject same as subject of sentence): The boy has to eat lunch. Sentences with simple non-infinitive WH-clause marked by what, where, why, how, if: I know what he can play.</td>
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<td>6. Multiword utterances at 36 months show sophistication in expressing communicative functions such as teasing, warning, exclaiming, conveying humor, requesting action/information, responding to requests, acknowledging, commenting, describing, regulating conversation.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Stage V</strong></td>
<td>MLU 3.8–4.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>35–52 months</td>
<td>1. VPs include irregular past, regular 3rd person singular, contractible copula be.</td>
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<td>2. NEG paired with past tense auxiliary be and modals: weren't, shouldn't, couldn't.</td>
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<td>3. Percentage complex sentences by MLU 4.0–4.5, 10–20%. Complex sentences add infinitive clause with different subject: Mommy made this dress for me to wear; relative clause: I know that we should go. This is the dress Mom made (may delete that, which); two clauses conjoined by and: It fell and it broke; conjunction if: We can go if it's not cold; adverbial because fragment: 'Cause it stopped; double embedding: Mom's gonna come to get us; conjoining + embedding: He wants to stay home and he's sick.</td>
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<td>4. 36–54 months vocabulary diversity as measured by dividing total different words by total number of words in 50 utterances to obtain the type-token ratio (TTR), 45–47.</td>
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<td>5. 36–48 months can switch registers to talk to babies and adults, as well as role play; leads to ability to separate form from function in indirect requests, hints, politeness forms.</td>
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<td>6. Recognizes taboo words; uses slang, accents.</td>
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<td>7. Uses contingent queries, restatements, clarification requests to maintain conversation.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Stage V+</strong></td>
<td>MLU 4.5+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41+ months</td>
<td>1. VPs progress with use of contractible copula be, irregular 3rd person singular, and uncontractible auxiliary: contractible auxiliary stable; past tense were, was, have + en.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Percentage complex sentence by MLU 4.5–5.0, 10–20%; MLU 5.0+, over 20%. Complex sentences add gerund: She sees us running; WH-infinitive: You know where to go; unmarked infinitive clauses with help, make, watch, let: Help me pick up the toys, She makes him pick up; adverbials when and because modal: When I was little I had a cat, I want to go because I'm tired; conjunctions so, but at MLU 5.0++; I'm tired but I can wait, Let me go so she can eat.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. Antonyms, synonyms, rhyming ability observed.</td>
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<td>4. More metalinguistic awareness after 40 months of age, increasing during school years.</td>
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<td>5. Deixis of place: proper use of here/there, come/go, bring/take.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>6. At 48 months adept at maintaining topics, using devices to break into conversation, considering both listener and situation when talking to partners.</td>
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</table>

1981), Carrow-Woolfolk and Lynch (1982), Cole (1982), Roth and Spekman (1984), Tyack and Gottlesben (1986), and Wetherby, Cain, Yonclas, and Walker (1988). It must be recognized that such a chart represents an approximate schedule of development and must be updated periodically to reflect current knowledge. An effort was made to synthesize the complex sentence data from Paul (1981) and Tyack and Gottlesben (1986), whose elicitation and MLU calculation procedures differed. Little is known about the specific ages for child pragmatic development. The pragmatic descriptions from Carpenter, Mastergeorge, and Coggins (1983), Frutting (1979), Roth and Spekman (1984), and Wetherby et al. (1988) were inserted into the developmental stages as accurately as possible to show a gradual progression toward competent interpersonal communication. The stage and age ranges listed according to MLU are
based on a study by Miller and Chapman (in Miller, 1981) of 123 middle-class children 17–59 months of age in Wisconsin. Using their ±1 standard deviation figures, along with stage structural analyses, the author has found the Wisconsin data useful for the middle Tennessee area. These observations were also recently supported by Klee, Schaffer, May, Membrino, and Mougey (1989), who reported a relation between age and MLU in 48 preschool children from lower-middle-class families in Nashville, Tennessee.

To review, information pertaining to the language code parameters must be documented. To do so requires making a comparison between the collected language sample and the normal language development stages shown in Table 2. The analytical procedures vary according to the child’s particular communication level. There are steps common for all children who are not talking, and these differ from the steps necessary for evaluating children who are talking.

For children who are not talking (Prelinguistic Stage), the clinician should (a) specify the child’s proto-performative gestures; (b) analyze the turn-taking of the child and parent in parent-child routines; (c) determine the percentage of child responsiveness/nonresponsiveness to the parent’s turn; (d) specify the child’s vocalizations; (e) specify the child’s motor imitation skills; (f) complete the parent-child observation worksheets (Appendices A–B); and (g) specify the parent’s use of facilitation strategies (see Appendix C).

In contrast, for children who are talking, the following analyses should be completed: (a) compute the child’s MLU in morphemes (see Brown’s procedure, in Lahey, 1988, pp. 427–428); (b) designate the frequency distribution of utterance lengths; (c) analyze parent-child reciprocity by calculating the percentage of parent turns vs. child turns; (d) determine the percentage of child responsiveness/nonresponsiveness to the parent’s turn; (e) note the child’s initiation of topics; (f) specify the child’s attentional skills; (g) determine the percentage of nonintelligible utterances; (h) note phoneme productions/errors/processes (see Stoel-Camron, 1988); (i) note the child’s pragmatic functions (see Lahey, 1988, pp. 304–305); and (j) specify the parent’s use of facilitation strategies.

For children talking, there are additional steps depending on the child’s approximate language stage as determined by MLU. The following instructions, which are synchronized with the developmental chart in Table 2, indicate the language behaviors to examine.

For children with MLU 0–1.0 (Pre-Stage I), (a) specify the semantic intentions of the child’s gestures + vocalizations; (b) specify the number of single words (SW); and (c) specify the semantic roles encoded by SWs (see Appendix D).

For children with MLU 1.0–2.0 (Stage I), (a) analyze the child’s emerging semantic relations (see Appendix E); and (b) analyze the use of pronouns, modifiers, main verbs, question intonation, and negation according to structural stage.

For children with MLU 2.0–3.0 (Stages II–III), (a) analyze the semantic relations of the child’s 2–3 word utterances; (b) determine the percentage of grammatical morphemes used in noun phrases (NP) and verb phrases (VP) (see morphological analysis in Miller, 1981, p. 33); and (c) examine negation, questions, and question answering according to structural stage.

For children with MLU 3.0–4.5+ (Stages IV–V), (a) determine the percentage of grammatical morphemes used in NPs and VP; (b) determine the percentage of utterances which are complex sentences; (c) analyze negation, questions, and complex sentences according to structural stage; (d) determine the vocabulary diversity (see Templin, cited in Miller, 1981, p. 42); and (e) examine the child’s conversational ability—topic initiation, topic maintenance, switching codes, indirect requests, and clarification requests.

For children with MLU 4.5+ (Stage V+), (a) determine the percentage of morphological errors in obligatory context of NPs and VP; (b) determine the percentage of sentences which are restricted (see Simon, 1979); (c) determine the percentage of sentences which are complex; (d) note the varieties of sentence complexity; (e) examine the vocabulary diversity; and (f) examine the conversational skills such as discourse cohesion, sequencing ideas, and considering listener and situation (see Loban, 1976).

**Conclusion**

Speech-language pathologists are encouraged to adapt and refine the guidelines, developmental chart, and materials for their particular use. A helpful assessment source may be formed by placing the summarized instructions for each language level in a booklet with category dividers, along with the language code parameter questions, developmental chart, and materials from the Appendices and from the essential references given in this article. Language sampling can be an exciting and manageable approach for assessing young children’s expressive language skills.

**Acknowledgment**

Appreciation is expressed to my colleague, Dr. Bertha Smith Clark, for sharing these materials in workshops dealing with children at risk for language delay.

**References**


APPENDIX A

Parent-Child Observation Worksheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observed Child Behaviors</th>
<th>Birthdate</th>
<th>Child Age</th>
<th>Observation Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Nonvocal**

1. Attention span
2. Eye contact with speaker
3. Joint focus with speaker
4. Receptive language
   - Following directions
   - Pointing to objects/pictures
   - Functional play with objects
5. Proto-performative gestures
6. Communicative intentions
7. Facial expressions
8. Body actions/movements
9. Cooperative behavior
10. Turntaking
11. Activity initiation
12. Social contact initiation for attention/play
13. Social play

**Vocal**

1. Gesture + vocalizations
2. Grunts
3. Single word-like utterances or strings of sounds
4. Vocal responses when parent pauses
5. Attempts to communicate wants vocally
6. Phonemes produced
7. Phonological errors

**Examples from Child Sample**

...
8. Intelligibility judgment
9. Intonation usage
10. Imitation of sound/words
11. Predominant form
   Single words
   2- or 3-word phrases
   Note longest phrase
12. Early morphemes present
13. Semantic categories/relations
14. Pragmatic functions
15. Replies to parent questions
16. Many null responses to parent turn
17. Topic initiations or responses

APPENDIX B

Parent–Child Observation Worksheet

Observed Parent Interational Strategies

Child ___________________________ Birthdate __________ Child Age __________
Parent ___________________________ Observation Date ____________________

Nonvocal

1. Involving child in play
2. Rapport with child
3. Warmth, approval
4. Facial expressions
5. Physical proximity with child
6. Nonvocal responsiveness to child communicative attempts
7. Pauses for child to respond
8. Power balance in interaction
9. Following child interests
10. Nonvocal reinforcement

Vocal

1. Utterance length judgment
2. Child-appropriate prosody
3. Speech clarity
4. Expansion/extensions
5. Topic comments or topic shifts
6. Repetitions of child
7. Reference training
   Verbalizing child actions
   Verbalizing parent actions
   Labeling objects/events
8. Verbal cue/prompt for child to take vocal turn
9. Praise
10. Child content
11. Acknowledgement of child interests
12. Confirmation of child comment
13. Chaining to child response
14. Questions
   Yes/No
   WH-
15. Types of responses to child communicative attempts
APPENDIX C

Parent Language Facilitation Strategies

1. **Natural, positive reinforcement**: Parent gives child object or reacts positively to child’s response, in a manner natural to the communicative context.
   - May be verbal — “good”, “great”, “super” . . .
   - May be physical — a smile, pat, hug, clap . . .
   - May be tangible — giving toy, drink, food . . .

2. **Physical proximity**: Parent is involved in sharing child’s play in close proximity to child. Parent’s face is on general plane with child’s.

3. **Imitation/repetition**: Parent’s exact or partial repetition of child’s word or attempted word.

4. **Expansion/extension**: Parent’s immediate repetition of child’s word(s) but grammatically completing or semantically extending child’s utterance. Encourages conversational chaining.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child:</th>
<th>“Throw ball.”</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent expansion:</td>
<td>“You’re throwing the ball.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent extension:</td>
<td>“Okay, let’s play catch with the ball.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. **Child content**: Parent’s use of vocabulary which is familiar and relevant to child. Parent bases utterances on child’s interests.

6. **Verbal cue/prompt**: Parent’s verbal prompting of child response, such as “Say baby” or “This is a b———” (showing doll).

7. **Pause**: Parent’s use of prolonged pause after a short conversational turn (sometimes takes 9 seconds). Allows child to take a verbal turn, even when child does not have understandable words. Parent encourages a pattern of child turn—parent response—child turn, etc.

8. **Speech clarity**: Parent speaks distinctly with adequate loudness, taking care to pronounce all sentence parts and all word endings clearly.

9. **Warm approval**: Parent exhibits affection and approval of child through facial and/or body expression and confirmation responses.

In a comprehensive study of parent-child interactional behaviors, Russo and Owens (1982) concluded that Strategies 1–5 especially result in high-quality parent language stimulation. Based on their experiences with young children and their parents, Garrard and Clark (1985) added verbal prompt, pause, speech clarity, and warm approval.

APPENDIX D

Semantic Roles (Intentions) Worksheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semantic Categories</th>
<th>Examples from Child Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
1. Existence: this, that, mama, juice, doggie
2. Nonexistence: gone, no-more, all-gone
3. Recurrence: more, ’nother
4. Negation: no, don’t, not
5. Location: here, there, up
6. Notice: hi, see, look, here
7. Cessation: stop
8. Possession: my, mine
9. Question: What’s that?
10. Action: pull, run, go, up off
11. Attribution: hot, big

Note. The above general order has been suggested for the emergence of semantic intentions expressed with single words. Items 1–6 typically emerge at 12–18 months; and items 7–11, 18–22 months (Carrow-Woolfolk & Lynch, 1982).
APPENDIX E

Semantic Relations Worksheet

Examples from Child Sample

Semantic Categories

1. Existence: a, the, that, this, see + Noun
2. Recurrence: more + Noun
3. Nonexistence: all-gone, no + Noun or Verb
4. Agent-Action: mommy pull
5. Action-Object: hit ball
6. Agent-Object: mommy book
7. Action-Locative: put floor pull out
   block in
8. Entity-Locative: baby table
9. Possessor-Possession: Kate sock
10. Attribute-Entity: big ball

In Stage I children begin to combine the semantic roles (intentions) previously expressed with single words. Progressing from two-word combinations to multiword utterances requires an ability to use the same vocabulary to express a variety of meanings (e.g., in mommy hit, hit mommy, mommy hat, and mommy [play] ball, the word mommy is agent, object, possession, and agent respectively). The communicative context is important in interpreting children’s semantic relations (Carrow-Woolfolk & Lynch, 1982).