



Helping Children Who Use Echolalia

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Some children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) communicate by using [echolalia](#), which means they copy what they've heard. They may copy words right after they hear them, or they might remember something they've heard before and use it later on. Some echolalia isn't intended to send a direct message to someone, such as when a child plays alone and recites lines from a video. However, much of children's echolalia is communicative and has a purpose.

It can be tricky to figure out what echolalia means, especially if a child echoes something they heard somewhere else in a totally different situation. For example, a child might say "Everybody sit at the table" to ask for a snack at home, because he hears this every day at daycare when it's snack time. But because it's used out of context, this can lead to confusion as his words don't match what he really means.

The key to helping a child who uses echolalia is to figure out the meaning behind the echolalia, and then respond in a way that helps him learn. You can do this by being your child's "detective", and then being his interpreter.

Be a detective – Follow your child's lead

A little detective work can help you figure out what your child is trying to tell you when he uses echolalia. Just like a detective, you'll need to look for clues that let you know the meaning behind your child's message. In order to do this, you'll need to **follow your child's lead**.

Following your child's lead involves:

- **Observing your child and his interests** – Watch your child and notice what he is doing and where he is looking when he uses echolalia. Is he looking at something, touching an object, trying to get your attention,

answering a question, playing alone? Does he seem happy, frustrated, upset, excited? These observations give clues about the context in which your child uses echolalia.

- **Listening carefully to what he says** – It's important to listen to the words your child uses. Does he echo exactly what you say or does he change it a bit? Is he echoing something he heard from a video, from school, or somewhere else? What was said right before your child echoed? Listening carefully will give you more clues about what your child is trying to communicate.
- **Waiting, without talking** – If you never stop and wait during your interactions with your child, you will miss many subtle clues, and your child will not have as many opportunities to send you messages. Waiting patiently for your child to send you a message also lets him know that his message is important to you.

By observing, listening, and waiting for your child when you interact together, you will gather many clues about what your child is trying to tell you. Your observations may reveal that he is playing alone and not sending you a message with his echolalia. But if your detective work reveals that your child is looking at something or trying to get your attention when he echoes, you can use your observations to help you figure out the meaning behind his message.

Research has shown that children who use echolalia benefit when adults follow their lead [1,2]. When adults direct the interaction with a lot of questions and commands, echolalic children tend to repeat what the adults say right away without understanding what they are echoing. However, when adults follow the child's lead, children tend to send messages that show more understanding.

Be an interpreter – Respond to your child's messages

Once you have figured out the meaning behind your child's echolalia, you are ready to respond in a way that will help him learn. This means you'll need to be your child's interpreter. Just as an interpreter translates words into another language, you can interpret your child's echoed words into a message that reflects what he is really trying to say.

Interpreting your child's echolalia involves:

- Saying it for him as he would if he could (from his point of view)
- Giving your child an exact model he can learn from (using correct grammar)

Interpreting a child who uses echolalia means saying it exactly as he would if he could. Sometimes you might need to use the word "I" or "me", as if you were speaking from your child's point of view. This might feel unnatural at first. But by giving your child the words he could use in that situation, it will help him learn how to communicate his message more appropriately next time [1].

Here's an example from the *More Than Words* guidebook [3] of how to interpret echolalia:



Christopher repeats exactly what his father says (echolalia) to answer his father's question.



When his father interprets (saying it for him as he would if he could), Christopher learns a more appropriate way to ask for a drink.

When you interpret your child's message, he may not repeat what you say right away. He's already communicated his message to you, so there's no need for him to say it again in a different way. But because you've shown him what he could have said in that situation, he may use your sentence the next time he wants to communicate the same idea.

By doing some detective work and interpreting your child's echolalia, you will provide language models that show him more flexible and appropriate ways to send his messages. And because you've matched what you said to what your child really meant, it's more likely that he'll remember your model and use it in the future.

The tips in this article are based on strategies from [More Than Words® — The Hanen Program® for Parents of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder](#) or Social Communication Difficulties and the [More Than Words](#) guidebook.

References

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About The Hanen Centre

Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.

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