12-1-2009

A Toddler's Development: Analyzing "One Who Walks Unsteadily"

Valerie Sharie Davis

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.xula.edu/xulanexus

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.xula.edu/xulanexus/vol7/iss1/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by XULA Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in XULAneXUS by an authorized editor of XULA Digital Commons. For more information, please contact ksiddell@xula.edu.
Valerie Shari Davis, Speech Pathology

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Nancy Martino, Speech Pathology

Abstract

On April 19, 2009, for exactly two hours, I observed a twenty-four month old toddler at her home, with parents’ consent, to fulfill an assignment for a Normal Language Development course. The assignment was to observe a child ranging between the infancy stages to three years old. After observing the child, students were instructed to complete a language analysis sample on every word or phrase that the child produced. This sample was conducted by writing down what the child said and comparing it to what linguistic and motor development researchers expected from a child at the approximate age level observed. Once the language sample was completed, differences or “abnormalities” in the child’s development, as compared to what researchers described as normative behaviors, were noted. After the language sample was taken, and the normative and abnormal behaviors were recorded, the observation ended with a statement of whether or not the child was developing normally or if the child was showing early signs of a delay in development. This scholarly note uses Jean Piaget’s theory of development and Roger Brown’s morpheme usage theory to explain the observed toddler’s language development.

Key Terms: Morphological development, Syntactic development, Primitive speech acts, Piagetian Development, Brown’s morphemes

Over the years, researchers have created models and theories about early childhood development. Even though each model and theory varies slightly from the next, most agree that the foundation for successful development starts with the infancy or prelinguistic stage (the stage of development before language abilities are acquired) and the toddler stage. To that end, in addition to the prelinguistic stages of communication, Jean Piaget and Roger Brown developed and analyzed their own theories or models of normal toddler development. Piaget’s model includes the maturation of a toddler linguistically, cognitively, socially, and through motor skills. Brown’s model mainly discusses the linguistic development of a toddler in advanced detail. Both Piaget’s and Brown’s models have been widely accepted as the standards for normal early childhood development.

On April 19, 2009, for exactly two hours, observation was conducted on a twenty-four month old toddler. The toddler was monitored at her home, an environment where she would be most comfortable and behave in normal character. During this time, the twenty-four month old engaged in playing games, coloring pictures, playing with bubbles, and singing popular songs derived from children’s television. Although children who master such tasks appear to be developing normally, parents continue to request more information on their children’s level of
development and the technical terms associated with it. The following are the most relevant questions when assessing a toddler’s language development: Which one of Brown’s stages of morphological and syntactic development characterizes the toddler? If the toddler is not old enough to speak fluently, how can I tell if he/she is developing normally? What is Piagetian cognitive development and how does it relate to toddlers? When should a toddler begin using all of the language components? Is the toddler age appropriate at all levels (cognitively, socially, etc.)? This scholarly note analyzes and answers these questions in the relation to the toddler observed. It serves as a guide for caregivers in assessing normal language development in their children.

Immediately after obtaining their children’s observation results, parents ask for clarity on the information that they have received. A common concern of caregivers is associated with Roger Brown’s stages of morphological and syntactic development. Scott McLaughlin (2006) discusses the five stages of morphological and syntactic development as presented by Brown. Brown identifies the mean length of utterances (average number of sentences) that children should produce at each stage. This observation focuses on the first stage.

The first stage occurs between twelve to twenty-six months of age. It is often characterized by the toddler’s use of first words and simple sentences. For instance, while the aforementioned twenty-four month old was observed, her much older cousin happened to pick up one of the child’s shoes and admire it. The toddler managed to notice that her cousin had the shoe and replied, “Put ee back, put down.” Here she accurately produces a simple declarative sentence. While all of the phonetic sounds may not be correct, the fact remains that the subject and verb agree and are correctly placed within the statement. Two word sentences, much like the one that the toddler produced, are heavily utilized throughout this phase. Aside from creating two word utterances (sentences), toddlers within the first stage should also be able to name and identify common toys and familiar people.

Upon learning that the toddler has entered into stage one of Brown’s morphological and syntactic development, it is important to create an environment that will stimulate the toddler’s ability to develop simple sentences and to name that which is familiar to them. This particular stage is most important because it sets the tone for the language phases that will soon follow. A particular concern that most parents and guardians share is whether normal development can be detected if the toddler is not old enough to speak fluently. The answer can be found by observing the toddlers gestures.

According to many sociolinguists, there are a number of developmental milestones and speech acts that can reveal if a toddler is progressing successfully. Based on research conducted by Dore (1974), primitive speech acts (PSAs) begin as grunts and pointing throughout infancy and can later include a recognizable word. McLaughlin (2006) adds, “Early PSAs may consist of calling or greeting the caregiver, requesting action from the caregiver, protesting an action proposed or initiated by the caregiver, or simply repeating and practicing a response…although their form is primitive, the range of PSAs is similar to those that will be expressed during the second year of life when the child begins to use words and phrases” (p. 209). During observation, the toddler combined both primitive speech acts and recognizable words. For instance, when she noticed that her bubbles were across the room she whined and partially
Toddler’s Development

grunted, then managed to say “bubbles” while pointing, so that her mother would get them for her. Acts such as these are common. It is important for parents to keep in mind that PSAs at the toddler stage do not equate to a delay in development. To summarize, if parents are wondering about their child developing normally, they should monitor even the smallest noise that their toddler makes. If the toddler does not attempt to talk or utilize primitive speech acts or begins using them at one point and abruptly stops, then there is cause for concern. Actions such as these could indicate a delay in development.

According to McLaughlin (2006), in addition to primitive speech acts, there are six developmental milestones that can also be observed for normal development. These milestones include: interest in others, self-awareness, motor milestones, physical, spatial and temporal awareness, purposeful action and use of tools, and expression of feelings. The first milestone refers to a toddler who engages in play with others, although they may be strangers. The second goal, self awareness, corresponds to toddlers who are able to identify some of their body parts and who enjoy looking at their reflections in the mirror. The third sign of development, motor milestones, relates to the toddlers ability to walk without assistance, desire to color or write, and motor movements. The fourth developmental achievement, physical, spatial, and temporal awareness, involves the toddler’s attempt to build with various objects (such as blocks or Lego’s), and to identify everyday objects through the sense of touch. The fifth target for toddler progression, purposeful action and use of tools, incorporates more cognitive action. This particular milestone includes means-end behaviors. For example, if toddlers want a toy or object that is not within their reach, they will use chairs or boxes to reach the coveted item.

The last milestone, expression of feelings, incorporates the toddler’s ability to actively show affection for caregivers or a known person. During this period, the child also demonstrates negative feelings and fear of the dark and the unknown. Although both PSAs and developmental milestones do not always require a toddler to verbalize their feelings or intentions, they present excellent forms of communication. Based on the research of many sociolinguists, even non-verbals are considered to be communication devices. As previously stated, it is the absence of non-verbals and utterances that give reason for concern. Because they are social at this life stage, normally developing toddlers will attempt to communicate by any means.

Epistemologist Jean Piaget’s theory of development can also explain a toddler’s behavior to parents and caregivers. According to Piaget, there are four stages of cognitive adaptation (McLaughlin, 2006, p.92). Each level is age specific and includes benchmark characteristics that should be produced. However, the only period of Piagetian cognitive development that relates to a toddler is the sensory-motor stage. McLaughlin (2006) explains, “During this period, toddlers’ reflexes become differentiated, and they exhibit increased voluntary motor control” (p. 95). As previously mentioned, during the cognitive stage, toddlers commonly engage in means-end behaviors. For example, toddlers may find strategies to help them reach an item that is out of their way. When the observed twenty-four month old toddler discovered that her crayons or toys were too high for her to reach, she would push a chair closer to the objects, climb onto the chair, and obtain the items. She was able to find a solution to her problem simply by using what she saw within her environment. Additionally, it is also common for children in this stage to imitate new actions and to use symbolic play (pretending that one item, a comb or brush for example, is another such as a microphone). In the observation of the twenty-four month old, she did not use
symbolic play; however, she did imitate new actions. When the observed toddler was asked to give a high five after someone demonstrated how to do it, she did so. Immediately following, she went around the room to her father, mother, and cousin saying “five” while holding her hand out for each person to carry out the action. To that end, it is important to help toddlers develop this cognitive stage because it determines their ability to sufficiently reason as they grow to maturity. It is during this first stage that toddlers will develop problem solving skills and their sensory-motor skills become enhanced.

Once guardians and caregivers have been notified of the various evolutions that will occur as their children grow, the next question involves when toddlers should begin using all of the language components. Based on the research provided by McLaughlin (2006), there are four components of language: pragmatics (the use or function of language), syntax (relationship between words in a sentence), phonology (the use of individual speech sounds), and morphology (the use of meaningful units of language). It is common to think that before toddlers are able to use these workings correctly on their own, they must learn the rules about doing so. However, this is not true. Toddlers could possibly begin using components such as phonology and syntax as soon as they begin employing two word utterances. For example, the observed toddler requested that her cousin stop annoying her by saying “leave me ‘lone.”’ In this small and simple sentence, the twenty-four month old mastered two things: she developed a sentence where the subject (you) is understood, and she formulated a sentence containing proper subject/verb agreement. At only twenty-four months old, she has never received any formal schooling, nor has anyone ever explained to her the mechanics of language. She merely created a sentence based upon her own innate abilities. As for phonological usage, she omitted the first syllable from the word “alone” and shortened the word to “lone.” While she did not utilize this particular component correctly, she did manage to place it in the sentence properly. In all, it is common for a normally developing toddler to naturally use language correctly when they formulate sentences. Mistakes, such as the phonological process of syllable deletion, as the toddler exhibited, are equally common but are expected to suppress by age five.

Perhaps the most complex of all language components is morphology. According to Brown (1973), there are fourteen morphemes that toddlers and pre-schoolers will use. However, these morphemes will not appear until stage two (ages 27-30 months) of development. Young toddlers who are in stage one (ages 12-26 months), such as the observed twenty-four month old, will not use these morphemes as frequently, if at all. Thus, in that aspect, one can expect young toddlers to lack this factor of language. Nevertheless, if toddlers have not begun using the morphemes by at least their third birthday, then a delay could be present.

After presenting parents and caregivers with the abundance of information about toddler development, a closing question remains: is my toddler age appropriate at all levels? In order to recognize a normally developing toddler, there are quite a few aspects to consider. However, the most important facets are the ones mentioned within this scholarly note: use of developmental milestones, use of cognitive skills, some use of language components, and overall attempts at some form of communication, whether through primitive speech acts, words or phrases. For example, in the observation case of the twenty-four month old, she attempts to use all of the aforementioned components except for Brown’s morphemes (which do not normally occur until stage two of development). To that end, it can be concluded that she is age appropriate.
The only true way for parents to determine if their toddlers are developing normally is through monitoring the smallest and simplest behaviors of their children. When monitoring their toddlers, the most important concept for caregivers to remember is that the toddler will make mistakes in language use and possibly in displaying cognitive developmental milestones. In other words, it is common for toddlers to formulate sentences that are grammatically incorrect or to use words in the wrong context. As for cognitive development, toddlers may find a way to achieve means-end behavior successfully without any help from caregivers. Other times, even if it is a task that the toddler has completed before, they may not be able to think as quickly to obtain means-behavior. Nonetheless, these mistakes are common and should not be reason for concern.

It is critical for parents to remember that during the developmental periods between birth to five years of age, children are rapidly growing and evolving. Additionally, impulsive evolutions could also represent the child’s ability to acclimate to a new developmental aptitude. That being said, if the toddler is avoiding any aspect of communication, there is an absence of cognitive skills (like means-end behavior), or developmental milestones are not present or insufficient, then most researchers would say that the toddler is not age appropriate. Therefore, sudden changes do not always indicate problems. Rather, these changes are possibly mere indicators of the child entering a new phase of growth and maturity.
References


Acknowledgments
I would like to thank my faculty mentor, Dr. Nancy Martino, for offering to help me through this process and for suggesting that I submit this paper to XULAneXUS. I would also like to thank the members of the XULAneXUS editorial review board for offering ideas and suggestions on how I could make this paper better. Lastly but not least, I want to thank my parents for all their support and my friends for allowing me to come into their home and observe and for cooperating with me as I conducted the observation.