

Why some people can "say" or "talk" more than they can understand and remember.

by

Nathan E. Ory, M.A.

For many people with developmental disabilities, they understand far more than they can express in their own words. Their "receptive" language is better than their "expressive" language. Quite the opposite is often the case for a person who has experienced pre-natal exposure to alcohol. (FASD-fetal alcohol spectrum disorder.)

Most of us evaluate how "smart" another person is by how well they can talk to us about what is on their mind, and what they know. It is often confusing to those who support persons who have had fetal exposure to alcohol that they can talk a blue streak about things they know about, but not seem to understand or remember what other people say to them.

The relatively high expressive ability of a person with FASD is often a reflection of things that they know about from personal experience or have memorized. In these familiar areas the person can talk with great expression.

Things that are of emotional importance are also easily remembered forever. This is why some persons with FASD can look at a picture from some long-ago family event and tell you everything about what they ate, who was there, and what happened that day.

The relatively poor receptive ability of a person with FASD is often a reflection of their distractibility, difficulty in focusing their attention and integrating what is being said, or difficulty in immediate, short-term memory.

If the person is able to frequently repeat or rehearse information, they can get it into their long-term storage. Until they do that they are often unable to process much of what is said to them. This is why you ask some persons with FASD to do something and they pick up on the last two words, and delete the rest of what was asked. This is why some persons with FASD will repeat three words of a ten-word sentence that you ask them to repeat.

Difficulties in short-term memory make it extremely difficult for someone to follow sequential directions. This is why we learn to give persons with developmental disabilities single-step instructions. This is why we learn to use constantly available pictures and lists to overcome problems with immediate memory for spoken language.

The reason why some people can say more words than they can remember or understand is the same reason why you can remember the phone number of your sister, mother, brother-in-law, and work number. These are four, seven digit

numbers. You remember these from your long-term memory that was established with a lot of practice and familiarity.

Could you remember four new seven digit numbers if these were read out to you, 28 digits at once? The answer is no! You may only remember four or five digits of the last seven spoken to you.

The same thing happens to the people we support who are able to say more than they can understand (all at once.) It is just that their limit is often much smaller. They may only be able to take in three or four digits or words at a time. So we find it necessary to use two and three word, single-step directions with some people, even though they are able to talk to us in 12 word sentences when they are describing something that they know well, or are thinking about in the moment.

Often times it is valuable to repeat what you want one person to hear to another two or three people in her environment, before saying it directly to the person you are supporting. This may give her/him time to filter it into their consciousness the third or fourth time they hear it. (Just the same way we repeat a new phone number over and over before we "get it" into our heads.)

Nathan E. Ory, M.A., Registered Psychologist

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