



HYPERLEXIA

Hyperlexia is a neurobehavioral condition characterized by echolalic responses, that is repeating or mimicking stimuli, even to the point of repeating complete stories, songs, etc. A precocious ability to recognize numbers and letters and read at earlier than average developmental stages is also characteristic of an individual with hyperlexia. Understanding the meaning of spoken language or verbal self-expression is almost non-existent. Knowledge or meaning of a situation appears present, but the words or verbal language to express the meaning from one's consolidation of memory traces of words is not present. An individual with hyperlexia might be able to show someone what he/she wants to express or use words that he/she has heard that have similar meaning to the situation, but can't use his/her words to do so.

Example: 4-year-old Matt, was in my office and kept repeating "Katie wants a toy – Katie wants a toy – Katie wants a toy..." At first, I considered this pure echolalia – repetitive mimicking of what was heard. Soon, I realized that Matt wanted a toy and couldn't express that except for reporting words from a situation he had just heard regarding a toy. Matt's mother was in the office and had just asked his sister if she wanted a toy. Her exact words to her 2-year-old daughter were "Katie wants a toy?" Matt even had the intonation of the question perfectly. We proceeded to give Matt some toys and his anxiety level quickly lessened.

This variable development of language also results in poor development of social ability. It is quite difficult to interact if language is not understood. Children with hyperlexia begin to retreat. As very young children, the behavior often resembles that of autistic-like behavior. As language begins to develop, these autistic-like features decrease. Hyperlexia is not autism. Sensory stimuli, although one's sense of self certainly varies different levels of autistic states.

Interestingly, social cues through gestures, touch, or visual aids appear less limited in the individual with hyperlexia. Hence, repeated association of words with a gesture, touch, or visual aid seems to develop an increased understanding for the spoken word. As language slowly develops, so does social interaction, although usually at a concrete, associative level. The complexities of social nuances can be more difficult for the individual with hyperlexia.

An individual with hyperlexia can increase communication with written words. As written words are associated with meaning, the individual can begin to develop communication with others through this

written mode faster than verbally. As association between the written word and its sound and its meaning is made, the individual can begin to communicate with the verbal word.

We have much to learn and understand about this neurodevelopmental syndrome of hyperlexia, yet one characteristic is for certain; there is a precocious or seemingly overfocused knowledge of their world by sight, taste, smell, and non-verbal sounds which brings meaning to their world before words bring meaning. Making associations with all senses and cueing verbal words with these meanings can increase the development of language and, hence, the individual's relationship with the world around them.

It is important for us to understand that repetitive associations with meaning of stimuli in one's world is highly beneficial. An individual with hyperlexia, receives stimuli at a different rate than that of average development. Hence, repetitive associations are necessary, although the timing/balance, so to speak, of their varied attention to sensory stimuli is also necessary. Efficient timing of stimuli often allows the individual to increase their knowledge and meaning of a particular situation at hand, which then makes the associations of spoken language for that situation increase. Also of importance is that medication, particularly stimulants to the central nervous system, have been quite useful in balancing this inefficient attention and increasing the meaning of stimuli in the individual's world. It is at this point that associations become more effective and, hence, the development of spoken language becomes more effective. Understanding the development of language dictates understanding the development of attention and all areas of perception, including memory, mood and motor abilities. This holistic perspective aids in developing the quality of one's life and self-esteem, which is certainly important to everyone and is paramount for a healthy and happy life.

Hyperlexia is a syndrome that affects one part of a person's life, yet it does not define the person. While it is very important to understand and treat, the ultimate focus is understanding and treating the development of the whole person, not just the disorder.